

“THE DREAD OF SOMETHING AFTER DEATH” – THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN SHAKESPEARE’S *HAMLET* AND SOME MEDIEVAL DREAM
VISIONS AND GHOST STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The present article tries to answer the question whether it is possible to think of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a dream vision in which the Ghost plays the role analogous to the Dreamer’s supernatural guide, which is the situation we meet with in medieval dream visions, such as Chaucer’s *The book of the Duchess*, or *The Pearl*. It seems that such an interpretation is possible, even though it should be approached cautiously because medieval ghosts and dead souls, and other supernatural phenomena, not only in dream visions, usually function as a means to solve, or at least alleviate, a crisis, whereas in *Hamlet* the Ghost comes rather to exacerbate it, and make it more tragical. To prove this point, the author makes comparisons not only between *Hamlet* and dream visions, but also some medieval ghost stories, and the thirteenth century romance *Havelok the Dane*, which is based on a narrative pattern not very different from that of *Hamlet*. Another problem examined in this article is that of the extent to which we can talk of the motif of reduplication and monstrous double as a leitmotif in *Hamlet*, and also in some of its analogues. Some comments and ideas by Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom are made use of in this context.

The topic of the present paper is a little paradoxical. Strictly speaking, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is clearly not a dream vision, nor are there any dream visions inside it. And yet the motif of sleep and dream figures in it very prominently, the play is permeated with it, we might even say. It all starts with Bernardo’s words, at the beginning of Act 1, scene 1: “get thee to bed, Francisco” (I.1.7), goes through Hamlet’s dreamlike seeing his father in his “mind’s eye” (I.2.185), and ends with the famous words of Horatio, from Act 5, scene 2, addressed to Hamlet just after the latter’s death: “Good night, sweet prince; and flights of

angels sing thee to thy rest!” (V.2.341-342).¹ My aim is, consequently, to investigate to what extent, in spite of all objections that can be raised to this idea, it makes sense to talk of *Hamlet* as a dream vision. By a dream vision, I mean a literary phenomenon that, I think, should be associated with the later Middle Ages, and is represented by such 14th c. poems as Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, *House of fame*, *Parliament of fowles*, by the anonymous *Pearl*, by Langland’s *Vision of Piers*, *the Ploughman*, and by the French 13th c. allegorical poem *Roman de la rose*, or even Dante’s *Divina commedia*. In all of them, we have to do with a Dreamer, who visits a more or less fantastic world, and profits from the assistance of some kind of guide, or guides, who are permanent residents of that world. The connection with ghost stories is naturally much more self-evident but it does not seem to have been sufficiently investigated.

Hamlet of course is commonly called a dreamer, the melancholy temper he seems to embody is typically connected with a dreamy disposition. What is particularly interesting, however, is that the way he learns about the manner of his father’s death is clearly reminiscent of the mythological dream vision, told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (and re-told by Chaucer in *The book of the Duchess*), in which Halcyone, the wife of Ceyx, a king of Thessaly, sees, in a dream, her dead husband who informs her about his death (by drowning) and about the manner of his dying:

Under that form, but pale like a dead man, naked, he stood before the couch of the wretched wife. His beard seemed soaked with water, and water trickled from his drowned locks. Leaning over the bed, tears streaming from his eyes, he said, “Do you recognize your Ceyx, unhappy wife, or has death too much changed my visage? Behold me, know me, your husband’s shade, instead of himself. Your prayers, Halcyone, availed me nothing. I am dead. No more deceive yourself with vain hopes of my return. The stormy winds sunk my ship in the Aegean Sea, waves filled my mouth while it called aloud on you. No uncertain messenger tells you this, no vague rumour brings it to your ears. I come in person, a shipwrecked man, to tell you my fate. Arise! Give me tears, give me lamentations, let me not go to Tartarus unwept”

(Bulfinch 1994: 89-90).²

The similarities are easy to spot, in both stories the ghost of the dead relative, that of the husband or the father, appears to remove the doubts of the bereaved wife or son, with the obvious difference that Hamlet has no doubts concerning the fact of his father’s death, but only the nature and circumstances of that

¹ The quotations from *Hamlet* will be taken from: Shakespeare, William – Bernard Lott (ed.) 1993. *Hamlet*. Harlow, Essex: Longman. The numbers of the acts, scenes and lines refer to this edition.

² The passage provided is in fact a faithful translation from Book XI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

death. Both ghosts call on their beloved ones to take some action, again with the difference that Ceyx wants his wife merely to start her lamentations, while the ghost of Old Hamlet tries to spur his son to revenge. As a result of the ghost's intervention Hamlet starts having suicidal thoughts, while Halcyone actually tries to commit suicide by jumping into the sea from a high cliff, although the merciful gods change her, at the last moment, into a bird. This is naturally reminiscent of Ophelia's, Hamlet's lover's, suicidal death by drowning, which follows on her discovery that her beloved no longer loves her and is, moreover, responsible for her father's unaccountable death, which altogether could easily amount to her seeing Hamlet as no longer alive, at least from her point of view.

The story of Halcyone (or Alcyone) and Ceyx lacks the sensational and scandalous dimension of Hamlet's story, even though Ceyx's death is represented as the supreme god Zeus's revenge for Ceyx's and Halcyone's blasphemous habit of calling each other by the names of Zeus and Hera to suggest that the immortal gods can envy them their happiness (see Graves 1960: 163-165).³ The echoes of this story in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could function as an ironical context bringing out the lack of conjugal love between Old Hamlet and Gertrude. From the point of view of the myth of Halcyone and Ceyx, the ghost of the deceased husband should have appeared to the grieving wife of the victim, rather than to his son.

Geoffrey Chaucer uses Ovid's story about Ceyx and Halcyone in his early poem entitled *The book of the Duchess*. Its function there is to be a foil for the main dream vision in which the Dreamer meets the Black Knight who is mourning for his young wife, which, as most commentators claim, is a tribute paid by the poet to his patron's, John of Gaunt's, love towards his prematurely dead French wife Blanche. Both Chaucer and Shakespeare introduce then significant changes to the Ovidian theme. The original story of a wife grieving for the tragically deceased husband is changed by Shakespeare into the story of a son afflicted by the death of his father, and by Chaucer into the story of a husband mourning for his wife. In both cases the female protagonist is replaced by a male one. The Black Knight, unlike Halcyone, knows perfectly well that his beloved is dead, it is the Dreamer, also a male figure, who has doubts concerning this point. These doubts are a kind of psychological torture for the Black Knight, and he has to dispel them with the stark and painful statement: “She ys ded”:

³ Ovid does not mention the problem of the couple's (Ceyx and Halcyone's) guilt, but he provides the story of Dedalion, Ceyx's brother, and his daughter Chione killed by the goddess Diana for claiming that she was more beautiful than the goddess. Dedalion commits suicide out of grief and is changed into a bird of prey.

“Sir,” quod I, “where is she now?”
 “Now?” quod he, and stynte anoon.
 Therwith he wax as ded as stoon
 And seyde, “Allas, that I was bore!
 That was the los that here-before
 I tolde the that I hadde lorn. ...
 “Allas, sir, how? What may that be?”
 “She ys ded!” “Nay!” “Yis, be my trouthe!”
 “Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!”

(1298-1310) (Benson 1989: 346).⁴

The Black Knight shows here some impatience with the obtuseness of the Dreamer who apparently cannot understand the rather obvious, albeit metaphorical, allusions to the wife’s death that the Black Knight has already made. This may be reflection of the behaviour of the mythological Ceyx’s ghost, who has to appear and insist on the fact of his own death to dispel the wife’s vain hopes and delusions. The Black Knight’s “She ys ded” is then an echo of Ceyx’s “I am dead”, or in the language of the original:

nil opis, Alcyone, nobis tua vota tulerunt!
 occidimus! falso tibi me promittere noli!

(XI, 661-662).⁵

Your prayers, Halcyone, availed me nothing.
 I am dead. No more deceive yourself with vain hopes of my return

(Bulfinch 1994: 90).⁶

And in Chaucer’s words from *The book of the Duchess*:

For, certes, swete, I am but ded.
 Ye shul me never on lyve yse

(204-205).

In fact, the person who speaks here is not Ceyx himself, not even Ceyx’s ghost, but Morpheus, the god of dreams, and a son of Somnus, called “the King of Sleep” (see Bulfinch 1994: 88). Morpheus has the power to imitate closely any person he chooses to impersonate. In this case it does not seem to matter much that Halcyone sees what might be called a phantom of a phantom of her

⁴ The quotations from *The book of the Duchess* will be taken from Benson’s edition (1989) and the numbers of the lines refer to this edition.

⁵ See the Latin version of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* available at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid/ovid.met11.shtml>.

⁶ Bulfinch’s book contains quotations from original texts (translated into English), as here from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, often without any references or any information as to the person of the translator, presumably the translator is Thomas Bulfinch himself.

husband, but we have here clearly to do with the problem of the true identity of ghosts. As Hamlet says “A dream itself is but a shadow” (II.2.255), and he clearly is two minds about how seriously he should treat the Ghost of the father. He does not hesitate to call him “the fellow in the cellarage” (I.5.151) and “old mole” (I.5.162), and, in the scene of swearing an oath after the conversation with the Ghost, Hamlet seems anxious to find a place for himself and his friends where the Ghost’s voice is not heard, as if it this could bring bad luck. And it was a popular superstition that a contact with ghosts, or fairies, does indeed bring bad luck and often heralds a prompt death of the person who had such a contact. As Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant put it: “Generally speaking, it is unhealthy to meet a ghost” (1996: 430), and it is equally unhealthy to disturb their peace and interfere in their occupations.⁷

As we remember, the ghost of Old Hamlet calls on his son to take revenge on his sinful brother. From the point of view of the most typical of medieval ghost stories, it is a little strange. Medieval ghosts are usually Christian ghosts, which means, among other things, that they are interested in reducing the burden of their sins, and not in increasing it, and inciting somebody to a bloody revenge can hardly escape being qualified as a rather serious sin from a Christian point of view. So, for example, the ghost in the story called *The burning spear*, related by the eleventh-century German monk Otloh of St Emmeram, appears to his sons in order to call on them to return to a monastery the lands that he had unjustly taken away from it. The father’s ghost in this story shows very graphically how much he has to suffer in the Otherworld for having committed this sin, even though we have to assume that he is a Purgatory spirit because the moment his sons do their father’s bidding he is released from torment (Joynes 2006: 26-37). If he were an infernal ghost, nothing would have helped him, since, as theologians put it, the souls suffering in Hell “are separated from all possibility of happiness” (Livingstone 1996: 235). This seems to be the case of Old Hamlet’s ghost, which is why he calls on his son to actually add another sin, that of a bloody revenge, to a load of his father’s sins that is already heavy enough. One might imagine that an infernal ghost is past caring about such matters, if nothing can help him, so also nothing can make his plight worse, and a successful revenge, plus the sight of Claudius undergoing the infernal torments, might bring Old Hamlet a momentary relief, or even something approaching a grim happiness.

But such an interpretation is clearly false in view of the following fragment of the Ghost’s soliloquy:

I am thy father’s spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,

⁷ See the story of “Pennard Castle fairies” in Alexander (2006: 213-214).

And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away

(I.5.9-13).

Thus, it can hardly be denied that the Ghost is, or at least thinks himself to be, a Purgatory spirit whose punishment is only temporary, and who, therefore, must worry about his reputation,⁸ of course if he cares for his ultimate salvation, and there is no reason to suppose that he does not. When he speaks about “foul crimes” he clearly does not have in mind the crimes committed by other people, or his brother’s crime, but rather his own crimes,⁹ and it is they that must be “burnt and purged away” (I.5.13). Later the ghost of the old king complains as follows:

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatched.
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled;
No reckoning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head

(I.5.74-79).

The above seems to show beyond any doubt that Old Hamlet was a Christian, and even a rather old-fashioned Christian, that is a Roman Catholic, as he expressly refers, in the word “unaneled”, to one of the sacraments abolished by the Protestant churches, including the Church of England, namely to the Extreme Unction, and treats it as being on a par with the sacrament of the Eucharist, mentioned here in the form “unhouseled”, and recognized by both the Catholics and a majority of the Protestants, and the sacrament of the Penance, alluded to in the word “disappointed”, which the Protestants also usually retained, though not necessarily in its Catholic form (see Livingstone 1996: 390, 452 and 526). Naturally, the fact that it is the ghost of the Old Hamlet, rather than Old Hamlet in his mortal form, that is speaking here may be interpreted as either meaning that the old king remained a traditionalist in the matters of religion even after his death, or that he discovered the value of traditional Christian forms having been punished, in the Otherworld, for failing to attend to them. The latter possibility is made more probable by his self-presentation as a very sinful man, who

⁸ This raises an interesting theological question whether a human being, or rather a human soul, can commit a sin even after his or her death, for example, while walking the earth in the capacity of a ghost, and be punished for it, for example, by an extended stay in the Purgatory. I haven’t so far found any information on this point.

⁹ In the play, we do not learn anything about Old Hamlet’s mortal sins or crimes, but it was probably clear enough for at least a substantial part of Shakespeare’s Renaissance, post-Machiavellian, audience, that they were almost part and parcel of the job of a king.

therefore was also probably, though not necessarily of course, rather negligent of his religious duties. In this case, the Ghost’s speech could be read almost as a sermon admonishing the audience about the terrible consequences of such negligence. Surely, if Old Hamlet went to confession and received the Holy Communion fairly frequently and regularly, as the, especially post-Tridentine, Catholic Church encouraged people to do, the consequences of Claudius’s bloody deed, in this respect, would not, in all probability, have been so serious.

In this context, it is a little strange that neither the Ghost, nor anybody else in the play, including the Prince of Denmark, remembers that vengeance was forbidden both in the Old (Leviticus 19: 18) and in the New Testament (Romans 12: 16-19), and that the idea of revenge is never explicitly questioned in *Hamlet*. If the play were written from an anti-Catholic point of view, one might suspect here a satirical intention of showing a man who cares very much, perhaps too much, about various religious rituals, and forgets about the basic rules of Christian conduct prescribed by the Holy Writ. The Ghost would be thus a representative of the old religion, with all its apparent strengths and real weaknesses, as seen from the perspective of the new religion. But of course such an interpretation is rather difficult to accept, especially if we bear in mind that the viewer and the reader of *Hamlet* is clearly invited to share the Ghost’s (and Hamlet’s) interpretation of the play’s central crime, and, according to this interpretation, a bloody revenge is the only correct response to that crime.

Naturally, I am aware that the roots of the Ghost in *Hamlet* are hardly Christian. Even though no such figure appears in Saxo’s account of Amleth’s story, which is the oldest source of the play and most probably based on legends from Scandinavia’s pre-Christian past, there are some extremely vengeful apparitions in Seneca’s plays, notably in *Agamemnon* (the ghost of Thyestes) and in *Troades* (the ghost of Achilles), and the influence of Seneca on Elizabethan drama is well known. The ghost of Thyestes is probably the most similar of Seneca’s ghosts to the Ghost in *Hamlet* in that he also urges his son (Aegisthus) to kill the king (Agamemnon), who, even though he is not Aegisthus’s uncle, is a son of Atreus, who indeed is Aegisthus’s uncle (and Thyestes’s brother), and it is Atreus whom Thyestes hates the most, since Atreus murdered Thyestes’s three sons and tricked him into eating their bodies, so Agamemnon is to die first of all because of his father’s crimes.¹⁰ In spite, however, of these connections, it is impossible to deny that the Ghost in *Hamlet* speaks in many ways like a Christian, so his quasi-pagan commitment to the idea of revenge must appear a little incongruous.¹¹

¹⁰ The similarity between Old Hamlet’s ghost and Seneca’s “vengeful spirits” is briefly mentioned by Harold Jenkins in the introduction to his edition of *Hamlet* (see Jenkins 2001: 93-94).

¹¹ Another mysterious matter is how the Ghost knows who killed him, or even that he was killed

In *Hamlet*, we find, in fact, some other scenes that are reminiscent of dream visions. Let us listen to Ophelia, who is describing her beloved Hamlet, who suddenly appears in her eyes as a transformed creature, as if he were his own ghost,¹² or as if he were leading two parallel existences:

OPHELIA My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
 Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
 No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
 Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle;
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
 And with a look so piteous in purport
 As if he had been loosed out of hell
 To speak of horrors – he comes before me

(II.1.76-83).

We might try to look at it from the point of view of another medieval text, namely the thirteenth-century Middle English romance of *Havelok the Dane*, whose structural similarity to *Hamlet* is well known,¹³ and we may reflect on a passage from it where Havelok's newlywed wife discovers, at night, her husband's "second nature". This is not, to be sure, strictly speaking a dream vision, and yet it is a night vision, and it reveals the hero's very special, if not exactly supernatural, status:

On the nith, as Goldeborw lay,
 Sory and sorwful was she ay,
 For she wende she were biswike [betrayed]
 That she were yeuen un-kyndelike.
 O nith saw she ther-inne a lith,
 A swithe fayr, a swithe bryth,
 Al so brith, al so shir
 So it were a blase of fir.
 She lokede north, and ek south,
 And saw it comen ut of his mouth

by anybody at all, since, as he himself states, he passed away in his sleep. It may easily be assumed that he learned about the manner of his own death from some authority in the Otherworld, at any rate, unlike the Ovidian Ceyx, the Ghost in *Hamlet* does not seem to have any first hand knowledge on this matter.

¹² The similarity between the Ghost's appearance and behaviour and those of the young Hamlet in Ophelia's chamber was noticed by Frank Kermode (2001: 110).

¹³ The story tells of the dispossessed Havelok, prince of Denmark, and his marriage to Goldborough, the dispossessed daughter of King Athelwold of England. Havelok is brought up at Grimsby by the eponymous fisherman Grim and becomes kitchen boy in the household of Godrich, the treacherous guardian of Goldborough. His noble origins are twice declared, once to Grim and once to Goldborough, by a mystical light that shines over his head. At the end all three return to Denmark, defeat and hang Havelok's usurping guardian Godard, and reclaim the throne (see Drabble 2000: 458).

That lay bi hire in the bed:
 No ferlike thou she were adred!
 Thouth she, “Wat may this bimene?
 He beth heyman yet, als y wene:
 He beth heyman er he be ded!”
 On hise shuldre, of gold red
 She saw a swith noble croiz;
 Of an angel she herder a uoyz

(1247-1264).¹⁴

Unlike Ophelia, who does not know how to interpret her partner’s strange behaviour, Goldborough was given very little freedom of interpretation, the serviceable angel declares that her husband, whom she used to despise on account of his alleged low birth, is in fact nobly born and is, moreover, destined to become a king of both Denmark and England. Small wonder that Goldborough is overjoyed:

She was so fele sithes blithe
 That she ne mithe hire ioie mythe;
 But Havelok sone anon she kiste
 And he slep and nouth ne wiste.
 Hwan that aungel hauade seyde,
 Of his slep anon he brayde,
 And seide, “Lemman, slepes thou
 A selkuth drem dremede me nou:

(1277-1284).

Her situation resembles that of Lady Macbeth from another play by Shakespeare. Like Lady Macbeth, she quickly becomes enthusiastic about her husband’s prospective career, but she does not have to resort to any lawless measures, it is enough that she endorses her husband’s actions consisting, however, mainly in a revenge on his usurping uncle Godard, who unjustly deprived Havelok of the throne that was legally his. Goldborough then takes part in Havelok’s vengeful plans, and takes part in his expedition against Godard. She of course probably realized that Havelok’s search for justice, coincides with her own, so she makes use of her husband’s career to boost her own, as she also was deprived of her patrimony, and has to unseat her treacherous “protector” Godrich, in one way or another. In *Havelok* and *Hamlet*, we find then the use of a supernatural motif to further the cause of revenge.¹⁵

¹⁴ The quotations from *Havelok the Dane* will be taken from French and Hale’s edition (1964) and the numbers of the lines refer to this edition.

¹⁵ It should not, however, escape our notice that revenge in *Havelok the Dane* is not the central issue, it is rather a by-product of the much more easily justifiable intention to rectify the wrongs committed by both usurpers: Godrich and Godard, neither of whom is in fact respon-

Also Ophelia's sighting of the informally dressed Hamlet may be thought of as serving this purpose – it diverts Polonius's attention from Hamlet's real intentions and obsessions. But it is clear enough that Ophelia's perceiving, in a realistic mode, another side of Hamlet's nature remains in an ironical relation to Goldborough's seeing, in a magical mode, the second bottom of Havelok's nature. The latter vision is, so to speak, life-enhancing, constructive, and luminous, while the former is life-diminishing, destructive, and dark. For Goldborough, it is something to pin her hopes on, and it leads to a period of intensive political cooperation between the spouses; while, for Ophelia, it is a premonition of the severe crisis of her relationship with the Prince of Denmark, it is, in fact, a vision of a demonic Hamlet in which he appears as a spirit "loosed out of hell", that is somebody quite similar to his own father's ghost. He himself senses his dark nature, as can be seen in the following words addressed to Ophelia:

HAMLET I am myself indifferent honest. But yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in

(III. 1. 123-127).

As a true spirit "loosed out of hell", Hamlet speaks here as if he were already a damned soul, and, in the scene mentioned above, he is unable to say a word, which again is quite characteristic of ghosts. In Ophelia's words, given in reply to her father's question "what said he?":

He took me by the wrist, and held me hard. ...
 Long stayed he so.
 At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
 And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
 He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
 That it did seem to shatter all his bulk,
 And end his being

(II. 1. 86, 90-95).

Not only is he speechless here, but on the point of dying because so deep is the sigh that he heaves, even though it is also possible that Ophelia exaggerates a little. Hamlet's behaviour in this scene is quite closely analogous to that of his father's ghost when seen, by the guarding soldiers, on the battlements of Elsinore still before the ghost's momentous meeting with his son. In Horatio's words:

sible for the (entirely natural) death of their original kings and overlords: Athelwold and Birkabeyn, the kings of England and of Denmark respectively.

Thrice he walked,
By their oppressed and fear-surprised eyes, ...
And I with them the third night kept the watch, ...

(I. 2. 200-201, 206).

Then comes Hamlet’s question: “Did you not speak to it?”, and Horatio’s reply:

My lord, I did;
But answer made it none. Yet once methought
It lifted up its head, and did address
Itself to motion, like as it would speak;
But even then the morning cock crew loud

(I. 2. 213-216).

The two scenes share the motif, typical of folktales, of threefold repetition, and that of an inability, or difficulty, to express oneself in words, which points to the supernatural character of both Hamlets, young and old.

In a story from *Gesta Romanorum*, entitled “The demon’s castle”, we find the following vision of a spectral lady supposed to be the daughter of a man who inadvertently, and without real intention, wished her to be taken by the devil when she was still a child, and who then never ceased looking for her and calling her name:

Suddenly he was swept by a violent blast of wind, and a tall woman stood before him. Her eyes were staring, and her skin was stretched tight over her bones and sinews. With her wild appearance, she seemed to be completely unaware of anything around her: indeed, she was unable to speak, and could scarcely be considered human at all

(Joynes 2006: 204).

Also the female ghost, in the French verse the thirteenth-century *Lay du trot*, taking part in a miserable cavalcade of women and men, who, when alive, refused “to serve Love”, and now have to “undergo tremendous pain” as a punishment, answers the questions of a curious mortal knight by saying: “‘I will tell you as best I can,’ she replied, ‘but because my speech is impeded, I will have to tell you quickly’” (Joynes 2006: 192). In a fourteenth-century fragmentary English tale of the Monk of Byland, called “The haunting of Snowball”, we see an apparently infernal ghost (referred to as “it”) who is complaining about his sufferings in a conversation with a tailor called Snowball, and we discover that “while it was speaking to him, it seemed to be almost on fire, and he could see through its mouth into its interior, so that it was forming its words in its intestines and not speaking with its tongue” (Joynes 2006: 168-169). Medieval ghosts display then, often though by no means always, various forms of speech impediment, as a result they often have to be admonished and molested by those mortals who dearly wish to obtain any information from them.

Hamlet, indeed, is a regular butt of such attempts, almost everybody around him, including Ophelia, Polonius, Queen Gertrude, Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, want to sound him out about his feelings and intentions, just as he wanted to wrest the whole truth about his father's murder from the Ghost. To ward off such attempts Hamlet pretends to have gone mad, which enables him to reply to intruders and busybodies, not to mention the spies in Claudius's pay, in a quizzical and ambiguous way. A model of this situation in early English literature is the character of the Black Knight from Chaucer's *The book of the Duchess* who is pestered by the Dreamer, an alter ego of the poem's author, for the whole truth about the, exceedingly painful to the Knight, matter of his young wife's death. Chaucer's man in black is in many ways a sombre, morbid, and embittered figure, but also a paradoxical and oxymoronic one, who seems to derive pleasure from suffering:

For whoso seeth me first on morwe
 My seyn he hath met with sorwe,
 For y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y. ...
 In travayle ys myn ydelness
 And eke my reste; my wele is woo,
 My good ys harm, and evermoo
 In wrathe ys turned my pleyng
 And my delyt into sorwyng. ...
 My wyt ys foly, my day ys nyght,
 My love ys hate, my slep wakyng,
 My myrth and meles ys fastyng

(595-597, 602-606, 610-612).

The Black Knight resembles of course a conventional courtly lover, also torn between the contrary feelings of pleasure and pain, but the point is that he is not, strictly speaking, a lover, the object of his love having disappeared, which is why he can become an embodiment of a melancholy man hiding a painful secret, the Prince of Denmark's foreshadower.

Talking about Shakespeare's use of language in *Hamlet*, and about the structure of the play, Frank Kermode observes the following:

The doubling also affects the structure of *Hamlet*. There are pairs of characters: Cornelius and Voltimand, the ambassadors who speak (together) only ten words; the indistinguishable Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The play-within-the-play is an uneasy double of *Hamlet*, and the Dumb-show of the play-within-the-play. The role of revenger is doubled (by Laertes and by Fortinbras). And the chronographies of the opening scene (Bernardo's and Horatio's) form brackets for the whole of it. Laertes has a double departure and a double blessing from his father ... Compulsive duplication occurs everywhere, sometimes simple and vacuous ... So doubling is a principal characteristic of the language of *Hamlet*

(Kermode 2001: 102).

I would add to the above mentioned pairs of characters, displaying the disquieting twin-like characteristics, also both Hamlets, young and old, they both are, or become, mysterious and enigmatic figures who clamour ineffectually for revenge. But it seems that a more profound transformation, which I would call “the ghost contagion”, is taking place here. Various characters are from the beginning, or become in the course of the play, self-absorbed, or obsessed with themselves, and with the problem of death, and also figures whose speech gives pain to themselves and to others. This is increasingly true of Hamlet, but also of Ophelia and King Claudius. Talking in terms of traditional superstitions, which we have already discussed, if you see a ghost, you will soon become one, or like one, yourself. In *Hamlet*, this happens sometimes even before you die, and often takes the form of a real or supposed madness, although the actual death in such cases is also afoot. Naturally, the very idea of duplication, or re-duplication, is inherently connected with the problem of the ghost, and the problem of dream visions. Ghosts represent a human being’s “monstrous double”, and they are of necessity “revenant ghosts”, or, as Hamlet could have put it “travellers returning from the undiscovered country”,¹⁶ that is from a world that is parallel to ours, whereas traditional dream visions contain usually two characters that are the author’s alter egos, that is the dreamer, and, less obviously, the dreamer’s supernatural guide.

It is remarkable that Harold Bloom in his book *Shakespeare: The invention of the human* notices the fact that, in *Hamlet*, unlike in Shakespeare’s most likely source, the protagonist and his father bear the same name, but then he suggests, a little surprisingly, that there is really nothing behind that fact, or rather, that it has a purely ironic significance since the two Hamlets are poles apart in everything that matters:

With fascinated and (fascinating) cunning, Shakespeare did not follow his source by naming Hamlet’s father Horwendil but gave father and son the same name, the name borne by Shakespeare’s own (and only) son. Peter Alexander ... notes ... that the Ghost is a warrior fit for Icelandic saga, while the prince is a university intellectual, representative of a new age. Two Hamlets confront each other, with virtually nothing in common except their names. The Ghost expects Hamlet to be a version of himself, even as young Fortinbras is a reprint of old Fortinbras. Ironically, the two Hamlets meet as if the Edda were encountering Montaigne, the Archaic Ages faces the High Renaissance, with consequences as odd as any we might expect

(Bloom 1999: 387).

¹⁶ It is certainly another of *Hamlet*’s mysteries that, in his famous soliloquy, the Prince claimed that such “travellers” did not exist (see *Hamlet* III. 1. 80), even though he himself, quite recently, had seen one. It may be certainly an argument in favour of the theory saying that Hamlet did not really believe in the truth of the Ghost’s statements, or even in the reality of the Ghost himself.

I do not intend to claim that there is not a world of difference between Old Hamlet and his son, and yet it seems to me that Bloom is overstating his case in claiming that they do not share with each other anything apart from their name. As has been shown in this study, the young Hamlet also has certain ghost-like aspects, and, *pace* Bloom, there is no evident generation gap between the two since the play's eponymous hero never openly questions his father's world view, or the moral foundation of the father's call for revenge. Apart from this, the argument that the Ghost represents, in contrast to Hamlet, some hoary and barbarous past does not seem to square with some of the Ghost's statements. Not only does he speak, as we saw above, as a Christian, but he also makes allusions, like a man with a humanistic education, to classical mythology:

I find thee apt;
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
Wouldst thou stir in this

(I.5.32-34).

and, more importantly, he admonishes his son to be merciful towards his mother: "nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught" (I.5.85-86), which shows him to be considerably less barbarous than his son, who does not hesitate to subject his mother to brutal psychological tortures. The Ghost's last intervention, in the scene of the stormy conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude in Act III, scene 4, has clearly two purposes, one is to remind the prince of his obligation to revenge, but the other is to make him more considerate towards his mother. There is no denying of course that, despite all this, the Ghost's stubborn and stern insistence on being avenged makes him sound, especially to the modern ears, rather like a visitor from the dark ages, but then is not the young Hamlet almost equally old-fashioned and medieval in his *memento mori* reflections related to the "Alas, poor Yorick" soliloquy (Act V, scene 1, lines 166-196), after his conversation with the Grave-diggers? If *Hamlet* has some features of a medieval dream vision, then the Dreamer, that is the prince of Denmark, must rely quite heavily on his supernatural guide, in this case the Ghost, just like the Dreamer in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* relies on the Black Knight, or the Dreamer in the same author's *House of fame* relies on the talking (and talkative) eagle, or Dante (as a dreamer) relies on Virgil in *Divina commedia*. As has already been shown here, Hamlet has some problems with recognizing the authority and the identity of the Ghost, but ultimately he lets himself be guided by the Ghost. The fact that the Ghost does not appear in the last two acts of the play may be interpreted as an indication that Hamlet, after killing Polonius, is quickly becoming a perfect executor of the Ghost's bloodthirsty designs, almost his double, so Old Hamlet's monitoring presence is no longer needed.

As for the spirit of duplication, it is clearly visible also in *Havelok the Dane*, where we have two kings, two usurpers, and two victims of those usurpers, victims who, in due time, become husband and wife, and both play the role of avengers, also the noble character of Havelok, and the mystical light his body emits, is revealed twice, first to Havelok’s foster father, Grim, and then to his wife, Goldborough. Chaucer’s *The book of the Duchess* is an important, though admittedly rather remote, analogue to *Hamlet* in that it contains a model of a melancholy man, and also because it shows us two pairs of characters obsessed with the problem of death: Ceyx with his wife Alcyone, and the Black Knight with the Dreamer. *Hamlet* is certainly a play which in many ways is rooted in medieval traditions, among other things, in the tradition of the dream vision, and the ghost story.

It is certainly not the case that *Hamlet* shares many features with dream visions, and yet his dramatic conversation with the Ghost can easily be compared to such dream visions as Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, and also the anonymous 14th c. poem *The Pearl*. In the latter poem, the situation is reversed, a living father encounters his deceased child, who is clearly a denizen of Heaven, rather than of Purgatory, like Old Hamlet’s Ghost. But both the little Pearl, and Old Hamlet try to explain, to their living relatives, in what situation they have found themselves when transported to the Otherworld. Pearl tries to put her bereaved father’s mind at rest, and convince him, which is not easy, that she leads a perfectly satisfying spiritual existence in Paradise, while Old Hamlet attempts to achieve, also with considerable difficulty, the very opposite, namely, to horrify his son by an account of his father’s terrible murder and his sufferings in the afterlife, so as to awaken that son’s strong resolve to avenge him, even though it is far from clear how should this revenge assuage, or shorten, the father’s Purgatorial tortures. Thus, Old Hamlet plays, to some extent, a typical role of a supernatural guide¹⁷ who discloses to the chosen earthling some of the truth about the sojourn of a soul in the Otherworld. In this respect, he may be compared not only with *The Pearl*, but also with the character of Virgil in Dante’s *Divina commedia*, which, of course, is also a dream vision. As we could also see, when comparing *Hamlet* to *Havelok, the Dane*, the visions that in many other works serve the hero’s interests, in *Hamlet* function as harbingers of doom, and elements in the process of the hero’s victimization and of his own victimising of those around him.

¹⁷ J. A. Cuddon, in his dictionary, says the following in the entry concerning dream visions: “A common figure of these works is the guide: Virgil in Dante’s *Divina commedia*, an angel in the 12th c. *Vision of Tundale*” (Cuddon 1998: 243).

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