Chapter Four

Hamlet: A Prince with a Sword of Darkness
Against the Powers of Darkness

The supernatural in the form of a Ghost seems to be the guiding principle of action in Shakespeare's play The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. A Ghost appearing in the martial attire of Hamlet's father, the late King of Denmark, appears several times just on the stroke of twelve at night, walking the ramparts of the castle of Elsinore. In the play, its first appearance occurs in Act I, Scene i before the watchman's post, where Hamlet's friend Horatio is present with the guards Marcellus and Barnardo. Though Horatio says that "it harrows me with fear and wonder", he dares question it, but the Ghost says nothing and goes away. They feel certain that the Ghost looks exactly like the late King in his armoured attire and an angry frown, at the time of his battle with the King of Norway. When it appears again, Horatio again appeals it to speak - "Stay, illusion: / If thou hast any sound or use of voice, / Speak to me." They even try to strike at it when it seems to be moving off, and finally, as the cock crows, it goes away. Barnardo says: "It was about to speak when the cock crew". They
understand that this spirit of Hamlet’s father who is “dumb to us, will speak to him”. So they decide to acquaint Hamlet with the whole situation.

The meeting between the Ghost and Hamlet occurring in Act I, scene iv, endows Hamlet with the terrible knowledge of truth about his father’s death which seems to synchronise with his own premonition. This knowledge coming from a Ghost which is itself a supernatural force and doubtful origin, urging upon Hamlet an unlawful and unethical task of revenge for his father’s foul murder, ultimately becomes a shining sword of action in the hands of the Prince of Denmark. Hamlet is not sure whether the spirit of action comes from heaven or hell or earth, and realizes that willy-nilly he must undertake to save the rotten state of Denmark:

The time is out of joint. O Cursed Spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.

(I. v. 196-197)

One of the most problematic of Shakespeare’s plays, Hamlet presents a dark universe which depicts an inversion of the normal patterns of life. It is a world where power governs and ethics subside, a universe where brother kills brother, wife dishonours the memory of her dear husband, lover accuses the beloved, and ultimately only dark death emerges victorious. The State of Denmark wherein such vicious, dismal events occur is almost a veritable hell. It is almost “purgatory” on earth and it is such a state of moral
deformity that prompts even a common watchman like Marcellus to express his bewilderment.

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark

(I, v. 90)

Indeed Denmark of this play is an evil world where incest, licentiousness and mistrust prevail. Prince Hamlet, who comes from Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral, finds himself in the midst of the celebration of his mother's wedding with the new King, his uncle Claudius. It is at such moment of crisis that the Ghost of King Hamlet appears. Coming from the nether world, the Ghost draws the false veneer apart to expose to his sensitive son the sores and boils of the state of Denmark.

But the very identity of this Ghost is subject to controversies among critics. The Ghost, which appears in the shape of Hamlet's dead father, is seen only four times in course of this long play, i.e in Act I, sc.i, sc.iv and sc.v and Act III, sc.iv. Yet, the entire action of the play dealing with Hamlet's revenge begins with him and revolves round him. It is for this reason that J.Dover Wilson comments, "The Ghost is the linchpin of Hamlet; remove it and the play falls to pieces" (52).

Hamlet himself fails to decide upon the nature of the Ghost when it first appears and in his bewilderment he calls out:
Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane.

(I. iv. 39-45)

It is, therefore, apparent that Hamlet himself is full of conjecture about the identity of the Ghost. Of course, its close resemblance to his dear parent prompts him to speak to it. Yet, it can never be ascertained that he accepts it at face-value. Rather he, being a philosophical scholar, is full of doubt and misgivings and questions its power to misguide. And it is such an ambivalence on the part of the dramatist regarding the Ghost’s nature that has led to diverse and conflicting critical overviews.

The very first question raised about the Ghost is whether it is a good spirit, sent from above to act as a medieval scourge and rid the world of all evil, or if, on the other hand, it is an emissary of hell who brings death and destruction in its wake. Early critics mostly supported the opinion that the Ghost which calls for revenge and thereby sets an apparently peaceful state into turbulence can certainly not be good. In his essay, "The Embassy of
Death” included in *The Wheel of Fire*, G.Wilson Knight has presented the state of Denmark as a smooth-running community functioning efficiently under the able administration of King Claudius, and Hamlet, on the other hand, comes as a figure of “nihilism and death”. He has had communion with the dead who implores him to remember the past and, therefore, take revenge: “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder”, the ghost fervently urges him. So, Wilson Knight opines that though the Ghost may or may not have been a “goblin damn’d”; it certainly was no “spirit of health”.

Harold Goddard in *The Meaning of Shakespeare* had also postulated the theory that King Claudius was “no villain”, and hence, the Ghost which corrupts Hamlet towards vengeance could certainly not have been a good spirit. Rather, Goddard considered him to represent the spirit of war. L.C. Knights also supported this point of view and presented the Prince and his mission in a negative perspective. According to him, the Ghost’s concentration “had been for a sterile command on death and evil.” The view is carried further forward and established firmly by Eleanor Prosser in *Hamlet and Revenge* where she clearly points out that the Ghost leads Hamlet towards murder and hence is responsible for the terrible outcome.

But such a negative concept about the Ghost only represents one side of the eternal debate. J.Dover Wilson clearly points out:
Caesar at Philippi may be a student’s dream; Banquo at the feast may be a false creation proceeding from Macbeth’s heat-oppressed brain but there can be no doubt, if Dr. Greg will forgive me, about the objectivity of the spectre of king Hamlet. He is a character in the play in the fullest sense of the term. He retains a human heart, for all his stateliness, and there is more than a touch of pathos about his majestical figure. (52)

So, it is evident, that Dover Wilson never really agreed with his contemporary critics who looked upon the Ghost as an entirely negative and evil apparition. Rather, he redefines the “problems of Elizabethan spiritualism” to present it in a clearer light. Wilson’s point may be clarified here. Similarly, Nigel Alexander in “Poison, Play and Duel” discusses the probable nature of Hamlet’s revenge:

The audience knows that Claudius obtained the crown by murdering the King of Denmark. In using the language of divine right to sanction his acts as King, Claudius is also implying the possibility of a divine retribution for the act which made him King. It is then possible to regard Hamlet as the agent of this divine retribution. (53)

But this necessarily leads to the concept that the Ghost, then, is an emissary not of the Devil but rather of God who urges Hamlet towards the act of divine retribution. Stephen Greenblatt, further strengthens this positive orientation when in *Hamlet and Purgatory* he concludes that the Ghost is not
from medieval Hell rather, he looks upon Claudius an embodiment of hellish powers:

 Claudius, with his reechy kisses and paddling fingers, is a paddock, a bat, a gib, and this unclean beast, like the priapic priest of Protestant Polemics, has poisoned the entire social and symbolic system...[ and ] .... This revulsion is not an end in itself; it is the spiritual precondition of a liberated spirit that finds a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, sacrificially fulfils the father’s design and declares that the readiness is all.

(243-44)

If, therefore, the killing of Claudius be a sacrificial rite, then the Ghost who initiates the entire process can certainly not be a negative or dark force.

II

Now, once again, we must return back to Dover Wilson and the objectivity of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Unlike Banquo’s ghost, or the ghosts in *Richard III* or the ghost of Caesar which may be presented as psychological entities lacking physical presence, the Ghost of Hamlet Senior certainly has a visible reality. It is not a false creation of Hamlet’s brain, for he has four witnesses to the sight. In fact, it is the witnesses i.e. the watchmen who originally saw the Ghost, and now Horatio reports the matter to the Prince:
Two nights together had these gentlemen,
Marcellus and Barnardo, on there watch
In the dead waste and middle of the night
Been thus encounter’d: a figure like your father
Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pie,
Appears before them, and with solemn march
Goes slow and stately by them; thrice he walk’d
By their oppress’d and fear-surprised eyes
Within his truncheon’s length, whilst they, distill’d
Almost to jelly with the act of fear,
Stand dumb and speak not to him.

(I. ii. 196-206)

Before Horatio actually describes their encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet confides that he himself sees his father “in my mind’s eye.” This encourages Horatio to disclose how the watchmen saw the Ghost on two nights and then called him to witness. There seems to be a strange telepathy between the Ghost and Hamlet, who reads some special significance in the martial appearance of his father’s Ghost: “My father’s spirit – in arms! All is not well./ I doubt some foul play.” (I. ii. 255-256). He hurries Horatio to take him to the spot for the night-watch. When the Ghost appears, Hamlet eagerly sets aside his initial doubts about its heavenly or hellish nature, wants it to answer his questions and to follow its beckoning call. Along with the two
watchmen Horatio too has serious doubts and fear about the Ghost and tries to prevent Hamlet:

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o’er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness? Think of it.

(I. v. 69-74)

In Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, the Ghost of Hieronimo’s murdered son is an agent of vengeance, pure and simple. So are the Ghosts in Tourneur’s and Chapman’s plays. In Shakespeare’s *Richard III, Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, ghosts appear only as projections of guilty conscience, and not as primary motivators of action. In *Hamlet* the ghost performs this very function. A remarkable fact is that the Ghost in *Hamlet* is unlike the ghosts we find in other Elizabethan Drama, even other Shakespearean plays. However the common Elizabethan attitude to ghosts is reflected in words and phrases used by the watchmen and Horatio, and even Hamlet. The comments they make about the Ghost encountered by them are – “this thing”, “this dreaded sight”, an “illusion”, a “spirit of health or goblin damn’d”, capable of assuming “some other horrible form.” Thus it is
questionable if Hamlet is sincere when he expresses doubts about the Ghost’s identity. C. S. Lewis says:

I take him to be perfectly sincere. He believes while the thing is present: he doubts when it is away. Doubt, uncertainty, bewilderment to almost any degree is what the Ghost creates not only in Hamlet’s mind but in the minds of the other characters. Shakespeare does not take the concept of ‘Ghost’ for granted, as other dramatists had done. In his play the appearance of the spectre means a breaking down of the walls of the world and the germination of thoughts that cannot really be thought: Chaos is come again. (Lewis in Lerner: 70 – 71)

But ultimately the matter is resolved conclusively, when, having encountered the Ghost and conversed with it for a long time, Hamlet declares:

Touching this vision here,

It is an honest ghost that let me tell you.

(I. v. 143 - 144)

So it is evident that the Ghost is visible to a number of characters in the play thereby establishing its credibility. However critics persist in questioning if the Ghost comes from heaven or hell. Again, if it is hell, then whether it is the Protestant hell or Catholic Purgatory. When the Ghost speaks to Hamlet, he refers to his own abode in a mysterious language:

But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood.

(I. v. 13-22)
The image here is that of a Christian hell which is too terrible for a living man to hear of. Yet, for all its horror, the place is one of penance and not of limitless punishment where "hope never comes, that comes to all". The Ghost, therefore clarifies:

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg'd away.

(I. v. 9-13)
Now, according to the Cathecism of the Catholic Church, Purgatory may be denoted as "purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the
joys of heaven”. Thus deciphered, the Ghost appears to be a penitential soul undergoing purgatorial purification as a preparatory process in its upward journey towards the Christian Heaven. And such a Ghost, as visualized by the dramatist, can certainly not be evil. But again there exists a conflict among critics regarding the religious inclination of the play; whether it represents a “world view” which is primarily Protestant or Catholic. Firstly, as Dover Wilson points out:

Moreover, they [Hamlet and Horatio] are students of a University renowned for a particular school of theology. They have been studying together at the university of Wittenberg, Luther’s University, the very cradle of the reformation. They are in fact Protestants, and the point has no small bearing upon our interpretation of the play. (Wilson: 68)

Critics have repeatedly tried to draw an analogy between Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the life and preaching of Luther. Dawn Amott made such an attempt in “Hamlet’s Salvation and Luther’s Justification by Faith”. Again, in “Lutheran Hamlet” Raymond Waddington reflected repeatedly upon Hamlet’s “conversion”. Shakespeare’s Denmark was, therefore, as Dover Wilson points out, like Elizabethan England which was being strongly influenced by the incoming currents of Protestantism.
Moreover, the play has an obsessive connection with the theme of “repentance” which constitutes a major bulwark of Lutheran dogma of Protestantism. Hamlet fails, in his indecision to immediately fulfill the command of the Ghost, and this failure leads him to repentance time and again. This unfulfilled cause makes him utter in frustration:

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing - no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn’d defeat was made. Am I a coward?

(II. ii.561-566)

Not only does Hamlet himself repent but his soul-searing words make his mother repent too, and she cries out in anguish:

O Hamlet, speak no more.
Thou turn’st my eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

(III. iv. 88-91)
In fact, the entire play is so crafted by Shakespeare that he even makes the arch-villain Claudius repent. When all by himself, the King cries out in frustration:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't –  
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,  
Though inclination be as sharp as will,  
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,  
And, like a man to double business bound,  
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,  
And both neglect.  

(III. iii. 36-42)  

He would like to repent for his sins, but like Marlowe's Faustus, repentance does not come easy to him, and he evades true repentance on false pleas:

What then? What rests?  
Try what repentance can. What can it not?  
Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?  

(III. iii. 64-66)  

It has already been noted that the Ghost of Hamlet's father reports having been confined in purgatorial fires, because "the foul crimes done in my days of nature" require to be purged by burning. This seems to be one of the reasons for the Ghost's anger against Claudius.
In spite of harping constantly on the theme of Protestantism, critics feel that the Ghost in Hamlet does not come from Protestant hell, but rather belongs to Catholic Purgatory. A.C. Bradley is the earliest critic of the 20th century to argue in favour of a purgatorial Ghost and looks upon the spirit of Senior Hamlet as a soul come from Purgatory. Dover Wilson also feels in the same vein and argues "...and the Ghost is Catholic: he comes from Purgatory" (70). Similarly, Roy Battenhouse considered Senior Hamlet's Ghosts to be a Catholic spectre. Lily B. Campbell and G. Wilson Knight both agreed, in their own fashion, with the central concept of a purgatorial Ghost. But the most spectacular argument in favour of a Ghost from purgatory was provided by Stephen Greenblatt in *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Greenblatt points out that Shakespeare's Hamlet presents a preoccupation with "a cult of the dead". To establish the purgatorial origin of the Ghost, he argues, that there exists an allusion to the Medieval legend of "St. Patrick's Purgatory" (73-101). This is highly relevant because in course of the play Hamlet comments:

Yes by Saint Patrick but there is, Horatio,

And much offence too. Touching this vision here,

It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you.

(I. v. 142-144)
Obviously there exists a close relation between the concept of the Ghost being “honest” and the oath by St. Patrick, as Harold Jenkins points out:

To seek a particular source for this belief is to ignore the very great fame of St. Patrick’s Purgatory, in an Irish cave, much visited by pilgrims. The story was that all who spent a day and night there would both be purged of their sins and have visions of the damned and the blest. (224)

So if the Ghost of Senior Hamlet comes from Purgatory where it was undergoing “purgation”, it cannot possibly be an evil spirit or “Goblin damned”. Rather, it appears to be an “honest ghost” or “spirit of health”. This concept, however convincing, brings us face-to-face with another important question relating to the Ghost’s instruction to Hamlet. In clear, unambiguous terms the Ghost declares:

*So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear.*

(I. v. 7)

It has been given out to the public in Denmark that King Hamlet Senior died of snake bite while he was sleeping in the orchard. Thus Claudius, His younger brother, has lawfully succeeded to the throne and married the elder brother’s wife. The Ghost now discloses the truth to Hamlet:

*Ghost* ................................................

The serpent that did sting thy father’s life

Now wears his crown
Hamlet. O my prophetic soul! My uncle!

(I. v. 39-41)

Again, we find that Hamlet had vague premonitory suspicion about his father’s death, which is now confirmed by the Ghost’s disclosure. Thus Claudius’s kingship is the result of usurpation which, though clear to Hamlet, cannot be publicly and lawfully proved. The Ghost becomes almost a character when he expresses his anger and hatred against the treacherous Claudius (“that incestuous, that adulterate beast”) who by the magic of his witty words has also seduced “the will of my most seemly-virtuous queen”. So the Ghost provokes Hamlet to take quick revenge upon Claudius and cleanse the royal bed of incest, but he prohibits any action against the Queen who is to be left to the thorns of her conscience. He is very specific in his injunctions to his son:

O horrible! O horrible! Most horrible!

If thou has nature in thee, bear it not,

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damned incest.

But howsomever thou pursuest this act,

Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive

Against thy mother aught Leave her to heaven,

And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her

(I. v. 80-88)

This theme of revenge was a constant pre-occupation of Renaissance drama. Catherine Belsey in her essay “Revenge in Hamlet” refers to Hieronimo’s revenge (The Spanish Tragedy), and the revenge sought for in Titus Andronicus, Antonio’s Revenge and The Revenger’s tragedy. Revenge, as per Belsey, arises out of a desire for “justice”. It is the ruler’s duty to deliver justice, but when the ruler himself turns out to be the culprit, then it becomes imperative for the revenger to act, which is often a political and moral necessity. And it is here that Renaissance drama looks upon revenge as an act of divine retribution. It is in this vein that Hamlet questions:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon –
He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother;
Popp’d in between the election and my hopes;
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz’nage – is’t not perfect conscience
To quit with this arm? And is’t not to be damn’d
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(V. ii. 63-70)

Now Hamlet never looks upon his father merely as an affectionate parent but also as an able ruler. At repeated intervals Hamlet refers to his father but
almost always the addresses allude to his kingly status. Thus he is “so excellent a King, that was to this/ Hyperion to a satyr” (I. ii. 139-140); again he calls him “The king my father?” (I. ii. 191).

Finally, when the Ghost appears and Hamlet’s bewilderment reaches its zenith, his voice reverberates:

I’ll call thee Hamlet,  
King, father, royal Dane.

(I. iv. 44-45)

After being informed of his father’s murder by the treacherous Claudius, Hamlet acknowledges his bond of filial loyalty to his father and to the late lawful King, so that he unhesitatingly embraces the task of revenge and of its speedy fulfillment:

Haste me to know’t, that I with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love  
May sweep to my revenge

(I. v. 29 – 31)

But even after learning everything about Claudius’s villany, Hamlet seems not to “sweep” to the revenge, but rather to be “systematically and studiously avoiding the task” (Holderness: 46).
In Hamlet’s eyes the crime of Claudius is both fratricide and regicide. The Second crime of murdering the reigning King calls for retribution and justifies the violence demanded against Claudius. Hamlet looks upon revenge as an act of holy justification of punishment of regicide. But this means for him the role of avenger driving everything before him in the fury of revenge and becoming “bloody, bold and resolute”. And this is what he hesitates to be, and finds himself indulging in soliloquies after soliloquies – words, words, words, - searching in his own nature for the causes of his delay:

This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder’d,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a – cursing like a very drab,
A scullion! Fie upon’t! Foh!

(Il. ii. 578 – 583)

In order to force Claudius into clear confession of his crime, Hamlet arranges for the staging of a play “The Murder of Gonzago or The Mouse-trap”. The plan succeeds. Hamlet finds Claudius offering prayers in a mood
of penitence, and he refuses to a penitent Claudius and send him to heaven—
"Why, this is hire and salary and not revenge" (III. iii. 79). But he still continues to vacillate and kick off from the act of revenge. The Ghost's commandment in the earlier scene was double-edged—"Remember me!" and "Revenge!" It is not clear whether remembering and taking revenge are a continuous process of action. But since Hamlet delays taking revenge, the Ghost visits him again in the Queen's closet giving another commandment— "Do not forget!" (III. iv. 110)—and specifically telling him that the purpose this visitation "is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (III. iv. 111). The Queen angrily asks him "Have you forgot me?" and Hamlet replies in a stinging tone—"No, by the rood, not so;/ You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife;/ And would it were not so, you are my mother" (III. iv. 14-16). But he stills fails to act positively. Meanwhile Claudius goes on taking action and plotting against Hamlet, who is sent off to England along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (the latter two carrying Claudius's secret letter to the King of England with a request to execute Hamlet). Hamlet's failure to act torments his soul. So when he sees young Fortinbras venturing all he possesses, his own lack of activity torments him. In utter despondency he cries out:
How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge. What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.

(IV. iv. 32-35)

Comparing himself to the delicate but resolute Prince Fortinbras, Hamlet feels lacking in many measures, both as a son as well as a subject:

How stand I then,
That have a father kill’d, a mother stain’d,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Where on the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

(IV. iv. 56-66)

So Hamlet resolves, henceforth, to make revenge his priority. However, this does not mean that he accepts the injunction of the Ghost in entirety. Rather, he evaluates the command of the Ghost and even takes
recourse to the device of a play-within-a-play to ascertain whether Claudius is the actual villain or not. In a soul-revealing soliloquy Hamlet comments:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I’ll have grounds
More relative than this. The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.

(II. ii. 594-601)

Having laid the plot to test the conscience of King Claudius, Hamlet points out to Horatio:

If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imagination are as foul
As Vulcan’s stithy.

(III. ii. 80-84)

Obviously, Hamlet’s sense of justice does not allow him to condemn his uncle outright. So, it cannot really be ascertained that he takes up the mantle
of revenge merely at the instigation of the Ghost. On hearing of his father’s
murder he might have been inflamed momentarily to declare:

Haste me to know’t, that I with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge.

(I. v. 29-31)

But later on, this very Prince, takes cautious steps to ascertain whether the
words of the Ghost are actually true or not. Hence, we cannot really agree
with Eleanor Prosser’s comment (Hamlet and Revenge) “....the command to
murder is as malign as we sense it to be, and Hamlet is responsible for his
descent into savagery” (252). Hamlet ascertains the guilt of Claudius
through his own investigative mechanism which proves the account of the
Ghost to be the truth. And truth cannot really be evil and this absolves the
Ghost of any blame of being evil or instigating evil. Hence the Ghost, as
projected in Hamlet, cannot be called a dark force in actuality. Rather, it was
the body politic of Hamlet’s Denmark or Shakespeare’s England – where
brother contrived to kill brother or incest occurred, which can really be
called “dark”.
Robert Speaight in *Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy* analyses the atmosphere of Hamlet’s Denmark to point out:

Shakespeare, let us note, begins not in the centre but on the circumference.

His opening is masterly – he never achieved a finer – and Hamlet does not appear in the first scene at all .... It was because what mattered primarily to Shakespeare was Denmark as the microcosm of a general corruption; a world more essentially flawed than any he had depicted hitherto. (11-12)

As if to stress this point the tragic hero Hamlet is constantly referring to the “out of joint” state of Denmark. For him “Denmark’s a prison” and it is:

A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o’ th’ worst.

(II. ii.245-247)

Moreover, a kingdom is known by the king who rules over it. As Hamlet’s words point out, the Senior Hamlet had been a valiant ruler, a loving husband, and in fact, absolutely superior to his “mildew’d” brother, the present King Claudius. He is a Godly father as is evident from a series of hyperbolic images, used by Hamlet, as he angrily explains to his mother:

See what a grace was seated on this brow,
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.

(III. iv. 55-62)

These associations have been referred to by Martin Scofield in The Ghosts of Hamlet to point out the extent of Hamlet's filial piety:

This association of his father with the gods helps to account for the strongly compelling nature that Hamlet feels in the ghost's command. It is filial piety in a very strict sense. (114)

And hence, Hamlet can never accept his uncle's Kingship in place of his Godlike father. Even prior to the revelations made by the Ghost about the heinous murder, Hamlet has no love lost for his uncle. Rather, the drunken revelry of the night celebrating the new ruler displeases him:

The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swagg'ring upspring reels;
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.

(I.iv.8-11)

A kingdom which has such a King at its head can be nothing but a "prison house" to the gentle and sensitive Prince. Of course, any king, in Shakespeare's day, could seek refuge under the "divine right" doctrine and King Claudius also does so. When Laertes comes charging Claudius, furiously demanding explanation for his father's death, the Queen and the guards are scared, but Claudius remains unperturbed and says:

What is the cause, Laertes,
That thy rebellion looks so giant like?
Let him go, Gertrude. Do not fear our person
There's such divinity doth hedge a king
That treason can but peep to what it would,
Acts little of his will.

(IV. v. 120-125)

But it is to be remembered that this much acclaimed divine right concept had not stopped Claudius from hatching a treasonous plot against his own brother, King Hamlet Senior. Claudius himself had earlier admitted:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to Heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't –
A brother's murder.

(III. iii. 36-38)
So the ruler himself is a hypocrite, a veritable "dark force" and hence his kingdom can be nothing short of hell. It is a "poisoned" world, and as if to suggest this the act of poisoning occurs repeatedly in the play. Reina Green makes an in depth study of this issue in "Poisoned Ears and Parental Advice in Hamlet". The Ghost first refers to an act of poisoning when he reports to Hamlet:

Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment, ......

(I. v. 59-64)

By poisoning a ruler, Claudius poisons not only the king but also the nation. Actually Claudius's false report about the King's death by snakebite carries a symbolic meaning – the whole country believed the report and accepted a venomous villain as the divinely ordained King:

- so the whole ear of Denmark

Is by a forged process of my death

Rankly abus'd –

(I. v. 36-38)
Therefore, the action of the play (through reported speech) begins with an act of poisoning and also ends with several acts of poisoning. The Queen drinks of a poisoned chalice and dies and both Hamlet and Laertes get killed by an envenom’d steel, the sword supplied by Claudius for their duel. In his death throes Laertes’s conscience awakens and he voices out the final confession –

Hamlet, thou art slain.

No medicine in the world can do thee good;

In thee there is not half an hour’s life.

The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,

Unbated and envenom’d. The foul practice

Hath turn’d itself on me. Lo, here I lie,

Never to rise again. Thy mother’s poison’d.

I can no more. The King – the King’s to blame.

(V. ii. 319-326)

So, it is a world where poison rules. The noble youth like Hamlet tries to change the picture but has to pay dearly for it. He acts as God’s scourge but the “dark forces” of this human realm claim his life too.

However, the darkest aspect of this dark society of Denmark is the infidelity and incest thriving therein. Even before encountering the Ghost, Hamlet condemns his mother’s hasty re-marriage to his uncle as incest:
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears – why, she –
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer – married with my uncle,
My father's brother -- but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married -- O most wicked speed! To post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

(I. ii. 147-157)

Harold Jenkins has pointed out that incest formerly included the union of a woman with her husband's brother (189). That is why the Ghost also implores Hamlet not to tolerate such incestuous relationship:

If thou has nature in thee, bear it not,
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.

(I. v. 81-83)

The incest occurred not just after the death of Senior Hamlet but, as critics have pointed out that an incestuous relation probably existed between the Queen and Claudius even in the lifetime of King Hamlet. R.W.Desai in his
essay "Hamlet and Paternity" included in his collection *Shakespearean Latencies* makes an exhaustive study of the possibility of Claudius being Hamlet’s biological father. Desai argues:

Throughout the play Hamlet’s tone and the play’s imagery suggest the presence of an element of uncertainty as to his paternity, a factor that if granted would inevitably play its part in acting as a restraining force on his taking swift revenge on Claudius for the murder of King Hamlet, who would then be his uncle. (219)

It is probably for this reason that Gertrude does not oppose Claudius’s bypassing of Hamlet to the throne of Denmark and Claudius spontaneously declares:

> For let the world take note
> You are the most immediate to our throne,
> And with no less nobility of love
> Than that which dearest father bears his son
> Do impart towards you.

(I. ii. 108-112)

Here, Claudius appears to be speaking in earnest, alluding to his actual relation with Hamlet. The Queen too, supports this train of thought when she informs Hamlet:

Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

(III. iv.8)
Further argument in support of Hamlet's illegitimacy is offered by Steve Sohmer in "Certain Speculations on Hamlet, the Calendar, and Martin Luther." Here Sohmer relates a number of dates hinted at by Shakespeare to point out that Hamlet was born prior to the marriage of Senior Hamlet and Gertrude. The date of the royal marriage may be taken to be alluded in the wedding between the Player King and Queen in "The Mousetrap":

Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round
Neptune's salt wash and Tellus' orb'd ground,
And thirty dozen moons with borrowed sheen
About the world have times twelve thirties been
Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands
Unite commutual in most sacred bands

(III. ii. 150-155)

Proceeding by the number of suns and moons, we may ascertain that at the time of Senior Hamlet's murder, he had been married to Gertrude for 29 years and 69 days. But the gravedigger ascertained Hamlet to be 30 years old on 2nd June, i.e. 243 days after the murder of King Hamlet. So on that particular date Hamlet's parents had been married for 29 years + (69 + 243) days = 29 years + 312 days. But if Hamlet is 30 years old he must have been 29 years + 365 days old. So he was born 53 days before the marriage of his parents and hence was an illegitimate child.
A world where even the Queen and the King are guilty of promiscuity, where there is doubt about the legitimacy of the royal blood, cannot hold out to be a human society worthy of reverence. Rather, it is a dark world ruled by the multiple “dark forces”. And against all this stands Hamlet and his “Godly father” in the shape of the royal Ghost. So the Ghost as presented by Shakespeare can never be relegated as a “dark force” – rather, it appears to be a heavenly spirit of retribution which stands against the actual dark forces of society and calls for the purging of the evil elements from its body politic. Thus we find that the Ghost of Hamlet’s father “serves as a catalyst” for hamlet’s final actions which leads to his own tragic death, but at the same time positively stem the rot in the state of Denmark. In this play the Ghost which seems to be emotionally responsive and even to be the initiator of its prime action becomes almost a full – fledged dramatic character.
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