

## WHY THE DANE WAS MELANCHOLY

**Hamlet in Purgatory**  
Stephen Greenblatt  
Princeton University Press, \$29.95, 314 pp.

### Edward T. Oakes

**M**y spiritual director tells the following tale: Several years ago a Jesuit seminarian was appearing in a college production of *Hamlet* and gave this "ghostly counselor" (as spiritual directors used to be called) complimentary tickets to see the play. As he left the theater, my ghostly counselor (an apt title that, considering the plot) said to his companion, "What a Catholic play that was!" For what struck him immediately as a playgoer new to *Hamlet* was how much the plot hinges on the taken-for-granted realities of purgatory, confession, automatic departure to hell for suicides, and the like.

In effect, Stephen Greenblatt's latest book *Hamlet in Purgatory* has taken on the challenge of defamiliarizing the most famous play in Western literature by placing it in its proper theological setting. Because many critics and directors have imposed on *Hamlet* a Freudian Oedipal interpretation, modern readers and theatergoers have tended to lose sight of the true matrix of the tragedy, the only setting that allows it to make sense: the framework of Christian, specifically late-medieval Catholic, eschatology.

Greenblatt's astonishing work of historical reconstruction, however, in no sense wishes to take its place with those scholars who recently have been trying to claim Shakespeare for Catholicism. Greenblatt's purpose is not so narrowly biographical or confessional, which

should not be surprising in a scholar known as the *doyen* of the New Historicists. This school of literary criticism grew up largely in reaction to the earlier predominance of the so-called New Criticism. New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, insisted that all literary works, especially poems, were self-contained artifacts ("well-wrought urns") that existed independently of their respective authors and could thus be interpreted without any reference to the author's life or psychology.

An inevitable reaction to such extremism was bound to set in. On one side, vaguely deconstructionist critics like Paul de Man and Stanley Fish stressed the inevitable tensions in any text that prevented one single authoritative or "hegemonic" reading. But simultaneously another school was emerging, New Historicism, which insisted that no text could ever be understood outside of its historical context. Heavily influenced by the New Left Marxism of the seventies and eighties, the New Historicists were tempted to attribute all literary greatness to heavy-handed social forces of dominance, oppression, patriarchy, and other such demons in the postmodern *Confessor's Manual*.

Only lately has a reaction to that exaggeration made itself felt. Critics like Harold Bloom and Frank Kermode have both recently published books (reviewed in these pages) either lamenting the New Historicism (Bloom) or at least insisting that the time has returned when the critic must advert more to the poem itself so as to convey to the reader the texture of the text (Kermode).

I rehearse this history of twentieth-century literary criticism to highlight the remarkable nature of Greenblatt's achievement. For while he must definitely rank as the most influential and knowledgeable of all the New Historicists, he now shows himself in this book as something more, much more. Early on, he seems to admit the justice of

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Bloom's and Kermode's anxieties when he allows that his only aim is to immerse himself in *Hamlet's* “magical intensity.” “It seems a bit absurd,” he goes on to say, “to bear witness to the intensity of *Hamlet*; but my profession has become so oddly diffident and even phobic about literary power, so suspicious and tense, that it risks losing sight of—or at least failing to articulate—the whole reason anyone bothers with the enterprise in the first place.”

But despite that concession, Greenblatt is at heart a historian, and so he almost immediately adds: “I believe that nothing comes of nothing, even in Shakespeare. I [want] to know where he got the matter he was working with and what he did with that matter.” And he frankly admits that at times his interest in the historical background gets the better of him, so that he almost has to yank himself back to the play. Fortunately, all the author's digressions pay off. For when he gets to *Hamlet* itself in the last chapter, Greenblatt has taken the reader on a *tour d'horizon* of remarkable fascination and erudition, setting out all the anxieties about the afterlife that beset the medieval mind. Greenblatt is right: the material he has excavated fascinates in its own right. Medieval penitential manuals, accounts of ghosts from purgatory, scholastic analyses of the church's celestial “treasury of merit” at the disposal of the pope, and, above all, lurid depictions in illuminated manuscripts of suffering souls undergoing purgative torments (many reproduced as plates and halftones here)—all of this makes for absorbing reading.

Nor must the reader ever forget that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1600, that is, at a time when the Catholic cause in England would by no means have seemed so forlorn as finally became obvious in John Milton's day. In a way, that uncertainty about Catholicism's fate was *Hamlet's* own tragedy too: born in the Lutheran country of Denmark and shipped off by his father to study in Luther's own university town of Wittenberg, the Prince of Denmark could no more rid himself of his Catholic worldview in Lutheran Elsinore than could Shakespeare in Eliza-

bethan England. No wonder Hamlet's whole world seemed to him to have gone awry! Something *was* rotten in the state of Denmark; and that dry rot was being caused by the collapse of Catholic eschatology under the ferocious and relentless assault of Protestant divines. (Greenblatt makes clear that no Catholic doctrine—not the Real Presence, not the primacy of the pope, not Mariology—so roused the ire of Protestant polemicists as did the doctrine of purgatory.)

Thus, Greenblatt disputes those interpretations that hold that the ghost is not Hamlet's father but a demon come to tempt the prince to a deed evil in itself. Instead, he insists that Shakespeare is clearly signaling both the genuineness of the ghost and its provenance when it admonishes Hamlet to "remember me," which is standard liturgical language for remembering the souls in purgatory. Thus when Hamlet says, "conscience doth make cowards of us all," he is not bravely refusing to violate the moral law against revenge and murder, but is violating the dictates of justice by yielding to the temptations of a Protestant conscience.

What are modern readers to think of all this, whether they be believers or not, Catholics or Protestants? What is the ecumenically sensitive Christian to make of a Catholic *Hamlet*? Greenblatt's answer is quite arresting. As he rightly points out, to rob the faithful of the premise of purgatory is thereby to relegate a deeply felt experience to the realm of the irrational and inexplicable:

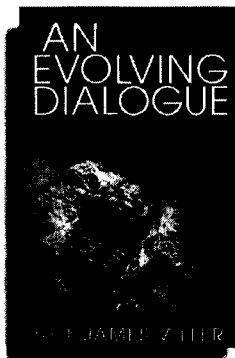
Anyone who has experienced the death of a close friend or relative knows the feeling: not only the pain of sudden, irrevocable loss but also the strange, irrational expectation of recovery. The telephone rings, and you are suddenly certain that your dead friend is on the other end of the line; the elevator door opens, and you expect your dead father to step out into the hallway, brushing the snow from the shoulders of his coat. These are not merely modern feelings; in fact it is startling that we continue to have them so vividly, since everything in the

contemporary world works to suppress them.

That work of suppression began with Luther's protest and was already well underway by 1600. In a sense, for Greenblatt the Elizabethan theater ended up filling the void left by the expulsion of purgatory from England's official religion—as Shakespeare well knew. In fact, Shakespeare made the purgatorial role of theater explicit at the end of *The Tempest* when Prospero turns directly to the audiences with this farewell:

Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;  
And my ending is despair  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.  
As you from crimes would  
    be pardoned be,  
Let your indulgence set me free. □

Edward T. Oakes, S.J., has just translated Josef Pieper's *The Concept of Sin* (Saint Augustine's Press).



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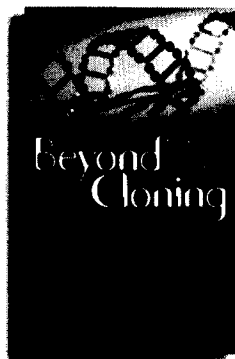
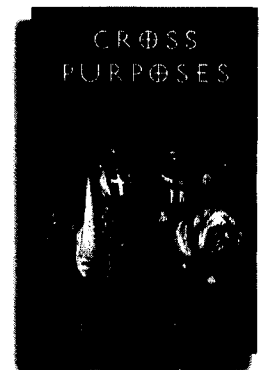
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