HAMLET IN PURGATORY

DENNIS TAYLOR
Boston College


* 

Hamlet in Purgatory is a remarkable landmark in the recent scholarship on Shakespeare and Catholicism. This is not because Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare was a Catholic. Consistent with his previous writings, he sees Shakespeare as using Catholic elements only for their theatrical value. But what Greenblatt concedes is remarkable – if ‘concedes’ is the right word in regard to what is no longer a very controversial proposition. For Greenblatt is well within the bounds of mainstream Shakespeare criticism. He is the editor of the Norton Shakespeare, and a founding father of modern Renaissance new historicism. It is newsworthy, therefore, when he makes concessions that would have been surprising ten years ago. This is precisely what he does in this important, empathetic account of the Catholicism in Shakespeare’s plays. He writes, for instance, that “there is a clear implication to be drawn from this document [John Shakespeare’s Catholic will]: the playwright was probably brought up in a Roman Catholic household in a time of official suspicion and persecution of recusancy” (249). He also notes that this “implication [that Shakespeare was raised a Catholic] has found support” in the Lancaster scholarship (312 n. 60). More broadly too, Greenblatt acknowledges the claims of contemporary revisionist Reformation historiography: “Many historians agree with Christopher Haigh’s summary view that ‘[f]or much of the reign of Elizabeth, the Church of England was a prescribed, national Church with more-or-less Protestant liturgy and theology but an essentially non-Protestant (and in some respects anti-Protestant) laity’” (309 n. 51).

The focus (and best part) of the author’s exploration of Shakespeare and Catholicism is his account of the Purgatory controversy that divided Catholics and Protestants. This dispute centered on the burning contemporary questions, what do we do about our beloved dead; do they exist in some form; and can we do anything for them? To the last, Reformation-era Catholics said ‘a lot,’ and Protestants said ‘nothing at all.’ Emotionally,
Greenblatt identifies with the Catholic view, not because of its theology, but because it accords with his (and many of our own) desires to keep up a community with the dead. For the Protestants, in denouncing Purgatory, cut off Englishmen and women from their buried forefathers. Intellectually, on the other hand, Greenblatt takes a Protestant or secular view of this issue. Purgatory for him illustrates “the way that fables seize hold of the mind, create vast unreal spaces, and people these spaces with imaginary beings and detailed events” (33). Here he reflects John Donne, whom he quotes: “Men that make God himself of a piece of bread, may easily make Purgatory of a Dream, and of Apparitions, and imaginary visions of sick or melancholic men” (cited 45).

For Greenblatt, Hamlet in particular is powered by the initial appearance of King Hamlet’s ghost, in all his Catholic regalia, and by Hamlet’s attempt to stay true to the ghost (“Remember me”), which presumably means holding on to some notion of Purgatory, in which the ghost temporarily resides “for a certain term” (Hamlet 1.4.10). Greenblatt goes quite far toward agreeing with the traditional Catholic reading of Hamlet’s ghost. He discusses the theme of purging, the Catholic last rites, the “rest, perturbed spirit” prayer (Hamlet 1.5.183), and the invocation of Saint Patrick; he also connects “hic et ubique” (Hamlet 1.5.156) with a Catholic prayer for the dead, Avete, omnes animae fideles, quorum corpora hic et ubique requiescunt in pulvere (235). His conclusion is that Hamlet comes closer to representing Purgatory as a frightening reality “than any other play of this period” (236).

Greenblatt’s approach to Hamlet likewise accords with his critical admission early on that “my profession has become so oddly diffident and even phobic about literary power … that it risks losing sight of … the whole reason anyone bothers with the enterprise in the first place” (4). But in joining the sixteenth-century Protestant playwright Simon Fish in the rejection of Purgatory as a fable, Greenblatt undoes the power he has evoked. Thus, there is a curious flattening out in the latter parts of the book, and Greenblatt is webbed in by his standard assumptions (e.g., that Shakespeare simply used Purgatory as a subject for good theater). The important historical religious controversy between Catholics and Protestants, typified in the problem of praying for the dead, is largely forgotten after the book’s first section. Similarly, Greenblatt’s review of other Shakespeare ghosts muddies the argument about King Hamlet’s ghost, because these other spirits are from a variety of traditions, pagan, classical, mythic; and about these Catholics and Protestants might have had the same view. Indeed, his review of other ghosts pushes Greenblatt’s argument in the direction of being just