

Ghosts, Hobbes, and Hamlet

1 Dates

English politics

1. Elizabeth I 1533–1603
2. reign of James I 1603–1625
3. reign of Charles I 1625–49
4. English Civil War 1642–51
5. reign of Charles II 1660–85

Literature and philosophy

1. Shakespeare 1564–1616; *Hamlet* written about 1599–1601
2. Descartes 1596–1650; *Meditations* written 1640–11
3. Hobbes 1588–1679; *Leviathan* written 1649–51

2 Hobbes ch. 45: relics of the religion of the gentiles

2.1 Demonology

“(A) This nature of sight having never been discovered by the ancient pretenders to natural knowledge; much less by those that consider not things so remote (as that knowledge is) from their present use; it was hard for men to conceive of those images in the fancy, and in the sense, otherwise, than of things really without us ... [There is -m]g] one general appellation of them, DEMONS. As if the dead of whom they dreamed, were not inhabitants of their own brain, but of the air, or of heaven, or hell; not phantasms, but ghosts; with just as much reason, as if one should say, he saw his own ghost in a looking-glass, or the ghosts of the stars in a river; or call the ordinary apparition of the sun, of the quantity of about a foot, the demon, or ghost of that great sun that enlighteneth the whole visible world: (B) and by that means have feared them, as things of an unknown, that is, of an unlimited power to do them good or harm; (C) and consequently, given occasion to the governors of the heathen commonwealths to regulate

this their fear, by establishing that DEMONOLOGY (in which the poets, as principal priests of the heathen religion, were specially employed or revered) to the public peace, and to the obedience of subjects necessary thereunto; and to make some of them good demons, and others evil; the one as a spur to the observance, the other, as reins to withhold them from violation of the laws. (*Leviathan*, 45.2)”

2.2 Images

“Another relic of Gentilism is, the *worship of images*, neither instituted by Moses in the Old, nor by Christ in the New Testament; nor yet brought in from the Gentiles; but left amongst them, after they had given their names to Christ. Before our Saviour preached, it was the general religion of the Gentiles to worship for gods those appearances that remain in the brain from the impression of external bodies upon the organs of their senses, which are commonly called ideas, idols, phantasms, conceits, as being representations of those external bodies, which cause them, and have nothing in them of reality, no more than there is in the things that seem to stand before us in a dream. And this is the reason why St. Paul says, *we know that an idol is nothing*: Not that he thought that an image of metal, stone, or wood, was nothing; but that the thing which they honoured, or feared in the image, and held for a god, was a mere figment, without place, habitation, motion, or existence, but in the motions of the brain. (*Leviathan*, 45.10)”

Digression on images contains this tidbit:

“But in a larger use of the word image, is contained also, any representation of one thing by another. So an earthly sovereign may be called the image of God: and an inferior magistrate, the image of an earthly sovereign. (*Leviathan*, 45.17)”

2.3 Saints

“The canonizing of saints, is another relic of Gentilism: it is neither a misunderstanding of Scripture, nor a new invention of the Roman Church, but a custom as ancient as the commonwealth of Rome itself. (*Leviathan* 45.34)”

2.4 Etcetera

“The heathens had also their *aqua lustralis*, that is to say, *holy water*. The Church of Rome imitates them also in their *holy days*. They had their *bacchanalia*; and we have our *wakes*, answering to them: they their *saturnalia*, and we our *carnivals*, and Shrove-Tuesday’s liberty of servants: they their procession of *Priapus*; we our fetching in, erection, and dancing about *May-poles* ... if a man would well observe that which is delivered in the histories, concerning the religious rites of the Greeks and Romans, I doubt not but he might find many more of these old empty bottles of Gentilism, which the doctors of the Roman Church, either by negligence or ambition, have filled up again with the new wine of Christianity, that will not fail in time to break them. (*Leviathan* 45.38)”

3 Hobbes ch. 47: *cui bono* from ‘vain philosophy’?

“To this head, I refer also all those doctrines, that serve them to keep the possession of this spiritual sovereignty after it is gotten. As first, that the Pope in his public capacity cannot err. For who is there, that believing this to be true, will not readily obey him in whatsoever he commands?

Secondly, that all other bishops, in what commonwealth soever, have not their right, neither immediately from God, nor mediately from their civil sovereigns, but from the Pope, is a doctrine, by which there comes to be in every Christian commonwealth many potent men,

(for so are bishops,) that have their dependance on the Pope, and owe obedience to him, though he be a foreign prince; by which means he is able, (as he hath done many times) to raise a civil war against the state that submits not itself to be governed according to his pleasure and interest. ...

Eighthly, by the canonization of saints, and declaring who are martyrs, they assure their power, in that they induce simple men into an obstinacy against the laws and commands of their civil sovereigns even to death, if by the Pope's excommunication, they be declared heretics or enemies to the Church; that is, (as they interpret it,) to the Pope. ...

Tenthly, by the doctrine of purgatory, of justification by external works, and of indulgences, the clergy is enriched.

Eleventhly, by their demonology, and the use of exorcism, and other things appertaining thereto, they keep (or think they keep) the people more in awe of their power.

Lastly, the metaphysics, ethics, and politics of Aristotle, the frivolous distinctions, barbarous terms, and obscure language of the Schoolmen, taught in the universities, (which have been all erected and regulated by the Pope's authority,) serve them to keep these errors from being detected, and to make men mistake the *ignis fatuus* of vain philosophy, for the light of the Gospel. (*Leviathan* 47.5–16)"

3.1 The kingdom of fairies

"... from the time that the Bishop of Rome had gotten to be acknowledged for bishop universal, by pretence of succession to St. Peter, their whole hierarchy, or kingdom of darkness, may be compared not unfitly to the kingdom of fairies; that is, to the old wives' fables in England, concerning ghosts and spirits, and the feats they play in the night. And if a man consider the original of this great ecclesiastical

dominion, he will easily perceive, that the Papacy is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof: For so did the Papacy start up on a sudden out of the ruins of that heathen power. (*Leviathan* 47.21)”

3.2 What are presbyters?

“The presbytery” (e.g. 47.4) is a reference to the Presbyterian Church, more specifically, the Church of Scotland which played an important role in causing the English Civil War (1642–51).

4 Protestant views on ghosts

James I (*Daemonologie* in *Works* (1616) I.i, p. 95)

“... that it was not the spirit of *Samuel* [that Saul saw -mjg], I grant: In the proving whereof you need not to insist, since all Christians of whatsoever religion agree upon that: and none but the mere ignorants, or Necromancers, or Witches doubts thereof. And that the devil is permitted at sometimes to put himself in the likeness of the Saints, it is plain in the Scriptures where it is said, that *Satan can transform himself into an Angel of light.*”

Hobbes (*Leviathan* 2.8)

“From this ignorance of how to distinguish dreams, and other strong fancies, from vision and sense, did arise the greatest part of the religion of the Gentiles in time past, that worshipped satyrs, fawns, nymphs, and the like; and now-a-days the opinion that rude people have of fairies, ghosts, and goblins, and of the power of witches. For as for witches, I think not that their witchcraft is any real power; but yet that they are justly punished, for the false belief they have, that they can do such mischief, joined with their purpose to do it if they can: their trade being nearer to a new religion than to a craft or science. And for fairies, and walking ghosts, the opinion of them has I think

been on purpose, either taught, or not confuted, to keep in credit the use of exorcism, of crosses, of holy water, and other such inventions of ghostly men. Nevertheless, there is no doubt, but God can make unnatural apparitions: But that he does it so often, as men need to fear such things, more than they fear the stay, or change, of the course of nature, which he also can stay, and change, is no point of Christian faith. But evil men under pretext that God can do any thing, are so bold as to say any thing when it serves their turn, though they think it untrue; it is the part of a wise man, to believe them no further, than right reason makes that which they say, appear credible. If this superstitious fear of spirits were taken away, and with it, prognostics from dreams, false prophecies, and many other things depending thereon, by which, crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience.”

5 Hamlet

Horatio warns Hamlet not to follow the ghost (I.iv)

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles [juts out] 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?

Compare King James's description of what the devil does when appearing as a ghost. (James, *Daemonologie* in *Works* (1616), III.ii, p. 126)

“It [the devil's purpose] is to obtain one of two things ... The one is the tinsell of their life, by inducing them to such perilous places at such time as he either follows or possesses them, which may procure the same.”

“Tinsell” means “the condition of being ‘lost’ spiritually; perdition, damnation.”¹

Hamlet addresses the ghost (I.iv)

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned,
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 with thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane.

Hamlet planning to stage the play (II.ii)

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
To 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—

Hamlet to Horatio ...

... right before the play (III.ii)

If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy [forge, smithy]

¹ tinsel, *n.*¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (1989). Retrieved October 3, 2007, from <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

October 2

Ghosts, Hobbes, and Hamlet

... and right after the play (III.ii)

O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word
for a thousand pound