

This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Notes and Queries* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version, “An Allusion to Purgatory in *Hamlet*”, *Notes and Queries* 57.3 (2010): 379-380, is available online at: <http://nq.oxfordjournals.org/content/57/3/379>.

AN ALLUSION TO PURGATORY IN *HAMLET*

An apparently overlooked allusion to Purgatory is found in the fourth act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet is brought before Claudius to divulge where he has hidden the body of the slain Polonius (IV.iii.16–36).¹ ‘Now Hamlet, where's Polonius’, the king demands. The situation of being summoned for interrogation before a king bears a definite and thus possibly deliberate similarity to Martin Luther's before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the 1521 Diet of Worms, to which Hamlet proceeds to allude in his bewildering reply to the king's question.² The allusion is clearly anti-Catholic in import, implicitly denouncing the Diet as a ‘convocation of politic worms’, presided over by the worm who is the ‘only emperor for diet’. At the same time, Hamlet's words seem to reflect Protestant satire of the Catholic Eucharist, in which the ‘king’ was liable to undergo precisely such ‘progress through the guts of a beggar’ as that of which the prince speaks, or worse.³ Claudius – much to the amusement,

¹ Citations are from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, updated edn (Cambridge, 2003).

² As suggested by Raymond B. Waddington, ‘Lutheran Hamlet’, *English Language Notes*, xxvii (1989), 27–42. The allusion to the Diet of Worms was first recognized by Samuel Weller Singer, *The Text of Shakespeare Vindicated from the Interpolations and Corruptions Advocated by John Payne Collier Esq. in His Notes and Emendations* (London, 1853), 266.

³ Waddington was apparently the first to interpret this as a ‘grotesque literalization’ of the Eucharistic sacrament, but believed that the allusion was to the Lutheran doctrine of Real

one presumes, of the wiser sort – gets none of it: ‘Alas, alas’, ‘What dost thou mean by this?’ He repeats the question: ‘Where’s Polonius?’ ‘In heaven’, answers Hamlet: ‘send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i’th’other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby’. The literal meaning is perfectly clear, but surely here also more is meant than meets the king’s ear: if Polonius is neither in Heaven nor in Hell, there is still, in Catholic doctrine, one remaining option – the ‘lobby’ of Purgatory.

No allusion is recognized in this ‘lobby’ in the critical editions, nor in Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory*, the most extensive study of this aspect of the play, yet such an allusion undeniably fits the logic of Hamlet’s reply, while the appropriateness of referring to Purgatory as a lobby is self-evident and the double entendre wholly in line with the preceding wordplay on ‘worms’ and ‘diet’. The requisite meaning is attested: in fact, some of the earliest examples cited in the *OED* for ‘lobby’ in this sense of ‘waiting-place or ante-room’ (sense 2a) are Shakespearean: *2 Henry VI*, *Hamlet*, and *Timon of Athens*. As for parallels and analogues, here is the patron of the King’s Men in his 1609 *Premonition*, inverting the Catholic view and referring to Purgatory as the Devil’s ‘anti-chamber’:

I am sure there is a Heauen and a Hell, *præmium & pœna*, for the Elect and reprobate:

How many other roomes there bee, I am not on God his counsell. *Multæ sunt mansiones in domo Patris mei*, saith CHRIST who is the true Purgatorie for our

Presence: see Waddington, ‘Lutheran Hamlet’, 28–30. Stephen Greenblatt more plausibly reads it as a ‘grotesquely materialist reimagining’ of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, adducing similar examples from Protestant satirists: see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2001), 136–62, and Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, 2002), 240–4.

sinnes: But how many chambers and anti-chambers the Deuill hath, they can best tell
that goe to him⁴

More such examples could probably be found, but the simplicity of the analogy between Purgatory and a lobby or antechamber makes this a less important matter.

As far as the broader context is concerned, an allusion to Purgatory fits seamlessly into what is already known to be a curious cluster of anti-Catholic allusions put into the mouth of an alumnus of Luther's Wittenberg: the first to a major event in Reformation history, here clearly presented in an anti-Catholic perspective, and the remaining ones to two major elements of Catholic doctrine denied by Protestants and commonly ridiculed in Protestant satire. Recognizing the allusion also clarifies the import of the remaining two lines of the dialogue between Hamlet and Claudius: upon being told that Polonius is to be nosed out in the lobby, Claudius orders his men to 'Go seek him there'. Only moments after having effectively told the king to go to Hell ('seek him i'th'other place yourself'), Hamlet responds with what must now be seen as another veiled threat: 'A will stay till you come'. If the 'lobby' is to be taken only literally, then this is not a particularly pregnant reply: there is, to be sure, a grim humour in noting that Polonius is not going anywhere, but one expects more from the anticallously disposed prince and his methodical madness. Once, however, the 'lobby' is recognized as an allusion to Purgatory, an additional implication is also found in Hamlet's 'A will stay till you come': namely, that Polonius' soul has more time to spend in the 'lobby' than Claudius has left to live, and that the king's soul, once the revenge is executed, will join it there.

The big question here, of course, is how does all this contribute to our broader understanding of a play drenched in the religious concerns and controversies of the day, a

⁴ James I, *An Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance ... Together with a Premonition of his Maiesties, to all most Mightie Monarches, Kings, free Princes and States of Christendome* (London, 1609), 43.

play set into motion by an apparition claiming to be a purgatorial spirit. On the one hand, the 'lobby' allusion clearly shows that the prospect of Purgatory has never left Hamlet's mind and that the apparition has succeeded in compelling the prince to consider the possibility of there being more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in the philosophy he was taught at Wittenberg. On the other hand, the allusion is obviously derisive and the morbid suggestion of 'nosing out' Polonius in the 'lobby' – especially when viewed in the immediate context of a sequence of such anti-Catholic allusions – is hardly indicative of belief, let alone reverence, on Hamlet's behalf. How, then, is it to be taken, and how does it relate to the rest of the play? Surely a more thorough consideration of Hamlet's 'lobby' must lead to such broad interpretive questions, but this is not the place to ask them: suffice it to say that the recognition of an allusion to Purgatory at IV.iii.34 in several respects clarifies and raises further interest in what was already, especially as far as the religious dimension of the play is concerned, an exceptionally intriguing passage.