Walking Dead
April Lodge

University of Huddersfield

Abstract

Contemplation of the nature of human existence has troubled humanity for centuries. ‘To be or not to be’ is the question and it is one over which we continue to toil. This article returns to Shakespeare’s Hamlet to assess various types of ghostliness in order to suggest that ghosts provide a new way of understanding the essence of Being. The theoretical application of deconstruction will offer an examination of opposing ideas, such as presence and absence, as a means to discuss how they are connected. Ghosts are more than simply an entity that is ‘other-worldly’. They occupy a physical space in the world and in their simultaneous state of life and death allow us to re-define the terms in which we discuss our own reality as humans. This article only considers ghostliness within Hamlet. However, there is scope to examine the ways in which a corporeal understanding of ghosts affects the way we perceive the protagonist’s existence in the genre of revenge tragedy as a whole. Hamlet is alive in his pursuit of vengeance, yet fated to die upon the exaction of it. It is in this sense we can consider his Being as that of a corporeal ghost, which in turn creates new ways to articulate our human experience of life.

Key Words: deconstruction, Hamlet, hauntology, ghostliness, philosophy, spectrality, revenge

This article will argue that ghosts can be corporeal through an analysis of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, proposing that the eponymous protagonist can be considered as a ghost and that in his deconstructive state of existence he can bring about revolutionary changes in the state of Denmark. Beginning with the definitions of a spectre from, first, the writing of Jacques Derrida and then from Rodolphe Gasché, the article will consider the ghostliness of various scenes in the play. First of all, a quote from Derek Attridge based on the exteriority of the ghost of the King in the first Act will demonstrate how, in Hamlet, the ghost occupies a physical space in the world. This initial ghost acts as a catalyst to the subsequent actions of the play and gives rise to other types of ghosts; including the corporeal ghost of Hamlet, the spirit of revolution and the ghost of the
undecidable. I will then go on to demonstrate the deconstructive nature of a ghost’s existence, as it is simultaneously visible and invisible in the scene between Hamlet and his mother.

Deconstruction is a term coined by Derrida which will be used as a theoretical approach throughout this article. Derrida recognises that binary opposites are hierarchical and that one side is given a privileged status over the other. For example, in the binary of life and death, life is ascribed a superior status to death. Deconstruction allows us to consider the ways in which these binaries are not completely oppositional but in fact overlap, thus destabilising the binary and removing the bias that characterises it. The binaries this article sets out to examine are life and death, presence and absence.

Following an examination of the recognised ghost of the play, the article will continue by arguing that Hamlet himself is a corporeal ghost. Through an analysis of Ophelia’s ghostly encounter with Hamlet, paralleled with the meeting he and Horatio have with the ghost of the King, the article will show how after his meeting with the ghost Hamlet himself has become a spectre. By thinking of Hamlet as a corporeal ghost our certainty and understanding of life and death and presence and absence is deconstructed in such a way that we can question our experience of human existence. The article will re-examine the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy based on the idea that Hamlet, as a ghost, has been sent away to England with his death warrant signed and yet manages to reappear on stage in a graveyard in Act 5. The article will also suggest there is another ghost in the play, which is the ghost of the undecidable, and that the audience can momentarily bear witness to the presence of this invisible ghost in the prayer scene. Finally, the article will look at the tragic conclusion of Hamlet at which the ghosts that have been so pivotal to the action and course of the play are laid to rest. In arguing that Hamlet exists as a corporeal ghost, the article will illustrate that the conventional ways in which we understand or explain life and death are not as opposed as we might think. Consequently, this brings about a new way of considering our own existence that is not bound up in the notion that life is superior to death. This will lead us to consider that Hamlet, as a text, is itself a ghost through the timeless way in which it continues to haunt the English language, which makes it a pertinent source to argue that ghosts can in fact be corporeal.
1. What is a Ghost?

The first step towards arguing for Hamlet’s existence as a corporeal ghost is to define what we mean when we refer to a ghost.¹ In the opening pages of *Specters of Marx* Derrida offers the following definition: ‘the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit’ (2006: 5). Derrida illustrates here the complexity of understanding a ghost, as a ghost is both alive and dead, present and absent. It occupies a physical place in the world and is therefore ‘carnal’, but it does not have a bodily existence in the same sense that a human does, and he therefore positions it as a ‘becoming-body’. The deconstructive nature of the ghost questions the superior position of life by being simultaneously alive and dead. A deconstructive analysis of ghostliness raises questions on our understanding of life and death and encourages us to articulate it in new ways.

Another important concept Derrida formulates that will be useful when discussing *Hamlet* and ghosts is that of ‘hauntology’. With his usual playfulness, Derrida creates this term, which, if pronounced as Derrida would with a French accent, is a homophone for ‘ontology’. Ontology, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is ‘that department of metaphysics which relates to the being or the essence of things’ (2004: 824). The term hauntology combines ontology with the idea of ghosts: as the ghost is associated with death, hauntology not only is concerned with the nature of existence but also begins to ‘comprehend [...] the discourse of the end’ (Derrida 2006: 10). Hauntology considers how being and existence in the present are also haunted by the spectres of the past. As these ghosts have died and returned to the realm of being they bring with them teleological and eschatological ends, thus combining life with death and placing the past alongside the present. The chronological disruption and ontological paradox brought about by ghosts are characterised by Derrida’s term hauntology.

Rodolphe Gasché also gives a detailed definition of a ‘specter’; he argues that the ghost is associated with light due to its etymological derivation from the Latin word *spectrum*, saying that the spectre results from the ‘decomposition and refraction of sunlight’ (2012: 155). However, Gasché also recognises that the ghost is a deconstructive figure, despite being a thing of the light it is also associated with darkness: ‘the specter is a being tied to the night’ (2012: 155). Gasché’s definition is also useful when we place

---

¹ In this article the term ghost and spectre will be used interchangeably, as is the practice of Derrida and Gasché.
Hamlet in its historical context; the play would have been performed in the open-roofed theatre of The Globe in broad daylight, yet the opening scene takes place at night. The contradiction between light and darkness would have had literal significance to the audience, adding to the philosophical exploration in the play of the contrast between light and dark, presence and absence, life and death. As well as suggesting this contradictory understanding of a spectre, Gasché states in his definition that a ghost ‘possesses a disappearing, ephemeral existence, more dead than alive’ (2012: 155). However, the ghost is not always necessarily more dead than alive but can also be more alive than dead. This is the case in Hamlet where Hamlet is a corporeal ghost and is doomed, as his father’s ghost is: ‘for a certain term to walk the night’ (Shakespeare Hamlet: I. 5. 10), until he can exact vengeance against his uncle which will result, ultimately, in his own death.2

2. The Dead Walking

One way to argue that ghosts are corporeal in Hamlet is to turn to the first appearance of the ghost in the play. The stage direction reads ‘Enter Ghost’ (Ham. I. 1. 38), as Attridge notes: ‘Shakespeare exteriorizes the ghost in the first scene’ (1995: 224). An actor playing the part of the ghost walks on stage; therefore the ghost initially has a physical presence. Attridge also describes the ghost as a ‘borderline creature’ (1995: 225) suggesting that a ghost does not just appear as an image, as Gasché indicates in his definition, but that it has a corporeal existence. The ghost is more than a spectral image that is produced by one imagination it is a physical being seen by multiple witnesses in the first scene of the play. However, once the ghost has left the stage Marcellus says: ‘It faded on the crowing of the cock’ (Ham. I. 1. 156), which contrastingly implies that the ghost is affiliated with the light as Gasché’s definition stated. Deconstruction can be used as a means to understand these competing ideas, the ghost is both a corporeal presence and an image-like spectre that can walk onto the stage and fade away from it. To complicate matters further, the paradoxical entity of the ghost (that is simultaneously being and non-being) is not only presented as a visible entity but, later in the play, is also invisible. The first scene presents us with a physical ghost, the ghost of Hamlet’s father, which walks onto the stage and is witnessed by Marcellus, Barnardo and Horatio. Yet later in the play when Hamlet visits his mother in her chambers, the ghost appears

2 From this point on I will abbreviate Shakespeare’s Hamlet to Ham. in the references and provide the Act, Scene and line numbers.
physically on stage yet is seen and heard only by Hamlet. In this scene the ghost is concurrently visible and invisible, and deconstruction allows us to comprehend this paradoxical coexistence. When the ghost enters Gertrude’s chamber, Hamlet speaks to it and Gertrude asks Hamlet: ‘Alas, how is’t with you, / That you do bend your eye on vacancy / And with th’incorporal air do hold discourse?’ (Ham. III. 4. 112–13). Shakespeare uses this scene, in which Hamlet interacts with the ghost but Gertrude is unaware of its presence, to demonstrate the deconstructive duality of the ghost. The ghost is at once visible (to Hamlet) and invisible (to Gertrude); it is present and absent as the spectre is not constrained to adhere to one fixed side of these binaries. It is the ghost’s deconstructive capacity that allows Hamlet to see the ghost while Gertrude cannot.

3. Ghosts in the Flesh

After examining both the visible and invisible encounters with the recognised ghost of the play, that of Hamlet’s father, we have developed a basis from which to argue for the various ways in which the protagonist is himself a ghost. An analysis of Ophelia’s encounter with Hamlet will begin to reveal Hamlet’s ghostliness. This will be followed by a re-assessment of the famous ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy in light of the view that deems Hamlet a corporeal ghost. Following this an analysis of the prayer scene, supported by quotations from Derrida, will outline another ghost in the play, the ghost of the undecidable.

In Act 2 Scene 1 Ophelia recounts to her father a distressing visit she has received from Hamlet; she exclaims, ‘[M]y lord, I have been so affrighted’ (Ham. II. 1. 73). She then goes on to explain how a ‘[p]ale’ Hamlet came into her chamber looking as though he had been ‘loosed out of hell’ (Ham. II. 1. 78–80) and without speaking grabbed her by the wrist and stared at her face whilst making sounds ‘so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being’ (Ham. II. 1. 92–93). Hamlet is the walking dead, and this silent encounter with Ophelia depicts his ghostly return to haunt the woman he loves. Following Hamlet’s conversation with the ghost, where he is given the task of avenging his father’s death, Hamlet is a dead man walking. He cannot carry out his task without it resulting in his own demise. The scene that Ophelia recounts to her father shows Hamlet as a corporeal ghost, he is alive but destined to die. His visit to Ophelia is a ghostly one, but one with the difference of corporeality.

On learning Horatio has seen the ghost of his father, Hamlet asks Horatio if the ghost is ‘[p]ale, or red?’ Horatio replies, ‘Nay, very pale’ (Ham. I. 2. 231–32). When Ophelia
later remarks on Hamlet’s pale countenance when she and he met, the audience can associate this with the earlier paleness of the ghost seen by Horatio; Shakespeare thus offers the audience a means of identifying the spectre in the later scene through the parallel between these ghostly encounters. Another instance of this spectral identification in the later scene can be found in Ophelia’s observation that, as well as having an appearance that is ghostly pale, Hamlet looks as though he has been ‘loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors’ (Ham. II. 1. 80–81), which again harks back to the earlier ghost scene on two counts: although he is not a ghost released from hell, the origin of the ghost of the father is questionable: ‘Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell’ (Ham. I. 4. 41); whilst Hamlet, in Ophelia’s eyes, looks as though he could ‘speak of horrors’, the ghost of Hamlet’s father does return to speak of one particular horror, that of his murder by his brother.

By making these associations between the return of the ghost of Hamlet’s father and Hamlet’s visit to Ophelia we can recognise Hamlet’s own spectrality in this scene. However, Hamlet is a ghost in a sense different from that in which his father is a ghost: although Hamlet is a spectre, he is a corporeal one; Ophelia pronounces, ‘He took me by the wrist’ (Ham. II. 1. 84). Despite being a silent, pale-faced spectre Hamlet is corporeal; he can touch people and interact with the world. Ophelia’s comment of how Hamlet’s sighs seemed to ‘end his being’ remind us of Hamlet’s earlier retort to his mother, ‘Nay it is, I know not “seems”’ (Ham. I. 2. 76). At the start of the play Hamlet can be certain of the distinction between what is present and what is absent. However, following his encounter with the ghost he is no longer convinced by the metaphysics of presence (that is the privileging presence over absence), as he can no longer be certain of what is and is not. Hamlet’s being as he knew it has ended. He is no longer certain of reality, which leaves him as a ghost himself, haunted by the task that his father has set him and destined to die at the end of the play. The spectacular ghostly return of the recently dead King Hamlet and the protagonist’s ghost-like encounter with Ophelia are not the only spectral visitations that Shakespeare offers us: there is yet another from Prince Hamlet in Act 5. After discovering that Hamlet has (albeit unintentionally) murdered Polonius, King Claudius decides to send Hamlet away to England (Ham. IV. 3. 40–46); unlike us, Hamlet is, of course, unaware that the King’s ‘sovereign process’ is the ‘present death of Hamlet’ (Ham. IV. 3. 61–63). After Hamlet has been sent away, as it seems, to his death, we next see him appear, as if by a miracle, on stage in a graveyard, a miracle elucidated
when he recounts his journey to England to Horatio and explains how he surreptitiously discovered a letter bearing the command that his ‘head should be struck off’ (Ham. V. 2. 25). Yet, in a sense, Hamlet is already dead; Horatio’s companion in the graveyard is a revenant. Having witnessed both the ghost of his father and his own death warrant, Hamlet, says Derrida in his essay ‘The Time is Out of Joint’, has ‘seen the impossible and he cannot survive what he has survived’ (1995: 36); Hamlet cannot survive but his existence continues as a corporeal ghost. Just as the ghost of Hamlet’s father identified himself earlier, not in response to Horatio’s question, ‘What art thou […]?’ (Ham. I. 1. 45) but to Hamlet himself: ‘I am your father’s spirit’ (Ham. I. 5. 9), so Hamlet, as a spectral entity, now feels it necessary to identify himself in the graveyard: ‘This is I, / Hamlet the Dane’ (Ham. V. 1. 246). In Specters of Marx Derrida notes the necessity for people to ‘ontologize remains’ (2006: 9) in order to commence the work of mourning. Denial that Hamlet is in fact a ghost stems from his corporeality, we know what space he occupies, and there is no need for the audience to ontologise his remains, as his self-proclamation gives us a satisfactory understanding of his existence and bypasses the work of mourning. However, this prevents us from looking further into a hauntological understanding of Hamlet, who has just been sent to death and resurfaced in a graveyard.

By returning to Act 3 Scene 1 at this point and examining the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, where Hamlet muses extensively on death, we can gain a new understanding of both the famous soliloquy and the nature of Hamlet’s existence in the play. In the speech Hamlet draws parallels between death and sleep ‘to die: to sleep — / No more,’ (Ham. III. 1. 59-60). If death is ‘to sleep no more’ then it is pertinent that, as he tells Horatio, when Hamlet is travelling to England, there is in his heart ‘a kind of fighting / That would not let [him] sleep’ (Ham. V. 2. 4–5). Hamlet cannot sleep as he is destined to live in a death-like state of corporeal ghostliness. Elsewhere in the soliloquy Hamlet asks ‘who would bear the whips and scorns of time’ (Ham. III. 1. 69), which brings to mind Hamlet’s earlier phrase and one Derrida with which himself is preoccupied: ‘the time is out of joint’ (Ham. II. 1. 186). The arrival of the ghost at the beginning of the play prompts Hamlet to make this statement; the ghost disrupts the chronology of the play as, in terms of hauntology, it brings the past alongside the present, thus deconstructing any logical understanding of time.

In his essay ‘The Time is Out of Joint’ Derrida notes that ‘is’ is ‘the third person singular present indicative of the verb to be’ (Derrida, 1995: 24). Time and being are
inextricably linked. Our understanding of what it means to exist is bound up with our understanding of a linear chronology of time. The ghost disturbs our understanding of time as well as of being. When Hamlet questions ‘who would bear the whips and scorns of time’ (Ham. III. 1. 69), we can therefore consider the ways in which Hamlet, as a ghost, defies the constraints that time places upon him. As he is a spectre, Hamlet haunts the play without giving a term to his mourning and without setting himself a strict time limit for exacting the vengeance that his father requests of him. After questioning why people suffer ‘To grunt and sweat under a weary life’ (Ham. III. 1. 76), Hamlet suggests that man might himself ‘his quietus make / With a bare bodkin’ (Ham. III. 1. 74–75). Why does Hamlet not simply commit suicide? He suggests it here and already in Act 1 Scene 2 he has wished that the ‘Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter’ (Ham. I.2. 131–32). At the start of the play it is because God has forbidden it, later it is because of ‘the dread of something after death’ (Ham. III. 1. 77). Hamlet’s personal fear of the unknown as opposed to denial on religious grounds is what later prevents him from taking his own life.

The most telling suggestion that Hamlet is a ghost that we learn in this speech is that death is ‘[t]he undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns’ (Ham. III. 1. 78-79). However, Hamlet’s father does return; he returns as a ghost in search of vengeance. Similarly, Hamlet travels to an undiscovered country, he is sent away with his signed death warrant to England. Hamlet also returns from the undiscovered country, as his ghostly existence continues in his quest for revenge. Hamlet comes back from England and is next seen again in the graveyard talking to the Sexton; as the gravedigger sings to the dead skulls he unearths, he also converses with Hamlet, the living dead. Hamlet lives as a ghost, he is both doomed to die and cursed to live until he has attained his unfinished business in killing Claudius, at which point he will be able to die and his ghostly presence is no longer necessary.

4. Bearing Witness to the Ghost

After looking at the ghost of the dead walking (Hamlet’s father) and the walking dead (Hamlet himself), it is now time to make visible the invisible ghost of the play. Hamlet has an opportunity to murder the king whilst he is praying, and he refuses to do it. The following analysis of this ‘prayer scene’ in the context of Derrida’s writing on the ghost of the undecidable will help to illuminate this invisible ghost. First of all it is important to define what we mean by the ghost of the undecidable. In his essay on ‘Force of Law’
Derrida states that ‘[t]he undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost — but an essential ghost — in every decision’ (1992: 24). In order to make a difficult decision one must go through the ordeal of the undecidable, and Derrida describes this necessary uncertainty as a ghost. The ghost of the undecidable deconstructs the opposition between yes and no. The prayer scene in *Hamlet* allows the audience to bear witness to the coexistence of certainty with uncertainty in the ghost of an impossible decision.

Left alone at the end of Act III Scene 3, the King guiltily begins to pray, giving voice to his crimes as he does so. While Claudius is thus engaged, Hamlet enters behind him, declares, ‘And now I’ll do it’ (*Ham. III. 3. 74*) and, as he prepares himself to kill his stepfather, draws his sword. At this moment in the play as Hamlet hovers behind Claudius with the sword raised above his head, ready to bring it down on him and kill him, the ghost of the undecidable presents itself, and Hamlet reconsiders murdering Claudius whilst he is praying, as he does not want ‘[t]o take him in the purging of his soul / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage’ (*Ham. III. 3. 85-86*). Hamlet goes from decided action (drawing the sword to kill Claudius) to uncertainty and inaction (talking himself out of killing Claudius and sheathing the sword). Through a deconstructive analysis we can see how this moment in the prayer scene combines the presence of the action of raising the sword with the absence of inaction. Although intangible, the act of faltering brings together presence and absence in a process of deconstruction that the ghostly provides. The ghost of the undecidable is present and visible in the raised sword but at the same time is invisible, and no tangible object can be pointed to and labelled as a ghost.

This discussion of spectrality within the play leads to an analysis of the spectrality of the text itself. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida notes: ‘A masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost’ (2006: 20-21). Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has itself become a ghost through its enduring reputation; for example the phrase ‘To be or not to be’ is recognised worldwide. Just as a ghost is timeless, the play itself is timeless and continues to haunt the English language in the twenty-first century. ‘The ghost is as much event as object’ (Attridge, 1995: 224), which is certainly the case here. The timeless text of *Hamlet* has moved beyond being a physical object and is now an event that has haunted the whole of the English language and continues so to do. *Hamlet* acts like a ghost in the way it haunts the very language we use and, in this sense, is a ghostly event as Attridge suggests the ghost can be.
Hamlet is a play filled with ghosts. Although they are often sidelined and cast aside as a strange supernatural phenomena, ghosts are actually integral to the plot and actions in the play, as an analysis of the various types of ghostliness that Shakespeare uses throughout the play helps us to understand. Had the ghost of Hamlet’s father not returned from beyond the grave to set Hamlet the challenging task of murdering his own uncle, then Hamlet would have stuck with the decision he made before learning the true nature of his father’s death; that being: ‘But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue’ (Ham. I. 2. 159). Instead the ghost acts as a catalyst to the plot, giving Hamlet motive to break his silence and take action against his uncle. Without the ghost of the undecidable interrupting Hamlet as he is about to take his revenge the play would be over before Act 4 even begins.

Our protagonist Hamlet himself is a revolutionary ghost, he is a walking dead man, haunting the play to bring about the necessary changes for the state. Hamlet is simultaneously living and dead, and this brings the very nature of being into question: in his paradoxical state of existence Hamlet is an agent of revolution. Revolution is itself a spirit untouchable yet present, and in Hamlet the state of Denmark is on the cusp of revolutionary change. With young Fortinbras and his army, and Laertes and his mob of protestors, the monarchy is about to change hands. We can also identify Fortinbras as a ghost as he also haunts the play; although he is rarely present on stage, his name spectrally recurs, and he is a haunting threat to Claudius throughout the course of the action. The spirit of revolution, as a spectral presence in the play, is given a corporeal actuality through the actions of Fortinbras. Hamlet also acts as an agent to the spirit of revolution; as a ghost himself Hamlet is not bound to life but as a being neither living nor dead can propel the spirit of revolution to the logical endpoint of the play. The death of Claudius during the play’s final scene brings about advantageous changes to Denmark.

5. The End

This leads us to consider the denouement of Hamlet. The command of his father’s ghost, that Hamlet ‘[l]et not the royal bed of Denmark be. / A couch for luxury and damned incest’ (Ham. I. 5. 82) acts on him like a curse, since the vengeance to which Hamlet commits himself will ultimately result not only in his killing the King, his uncle, but also

---

3 The spirit of the revolution is apparent from the uneasy commencement of the play. Horatio explains to Marcellus and Barnardo the reason they are on watch is due to anxieties over young Fortinbras gathering an army against Denmark to reclaim the land his father has lost (see Ham. I. 1. 94–105).
his own death. In his chapter on ‘Hamlet and the Living Dead’, Christofides examines the final scene of the play and insightfully proposes that:

revenge takes us to a liminal point between life and death [...] close to death, still alive but fatally poisoned, [Hamlet] delivers justice from a place neither living nor dead (2012: 63)

In order to be the agent of the spirit of revolution and the minister of death Hamlet must himself be a ghost. However, Hamlet not only is a ghost in the final scene of the play in order to take his revenge but also has been a ghost throughout the majority of the play, since his own encounter with the ghost of his father. Derrida in his essay ‘The Time is Out of Joint’ says:

one must stop believing that the dead are just the departed and that the departed do nothing. One must stop pretending to know what is meant by “to die” and especially by “dying.” One has, then, to talk about spectrality (1995: 30).

Both King Hamlet the father and Hamlet the son have been haunting the play. Death is not a barrier to the spectres in Hamlet, as, regardless of their state of existence, be that spirit or corporeal ghost; they walk the stage and interact with the living in order to bring about revolutionary changes in the world. Once those revolutionary changes are achieved the ghosts are no longer required. By the end of the play, the corporeal ghost of Hamlet has, in killing Claudius, carried out the task for which he has been kept in his ghostly state; this allows Hamlet finally to achieve the peace of death, and his ghost is thus laid to rest.

In arguing that ghosts can be corporeal, as we see the protagonist is in the play, the certainty of our knowledge of reality and unreality, of life and death, of presence and absence, is deconstructed. The ghost is more than a liminal entity that strangely appears then disappears; it is an integral part of the play and necessary for our understanding of it. Hamlet needs the ghost of the King to appear in order that it acts as a catalyst to the action that follows; it requires Hamlet himself to act as a ghost and an agent of revolutionary change. As the ghost of the undecidable surfaces, a ghost is also an absent presence in every difficult decision, as we saw in the prayer scene. In his analysis of the ghost scene in Hamlet Derrida recognises Barnardo’s ‘irrepressible desire for identification’ (2006: 11) of the ghost. In arguing for corporeal ghosts we are in part falling into the trap of the metaphysics of presence, that is, privileging presence over absence, in what Derrida terms our ‘irrepressible desire’ to identify the unknown. However, in its examination of the ways in which ghosts are simultaneously both alive and dead and present and absent, the deconstructive analysis considers not only the opposing sides of these binaries in order to contemplate the ways in which they coexist.
but also that neither is superior to the other, thus dispelling any privilege of presence in favour of deconstruction. This article has shed light on our understanding of the terms we use to discuss life and death and has engaged with applying those terms to *Hamlet* in order to gain a new way to understand spectrality.

We have also considered the ghostliness of *Hamlet*, as the text itself is a ghost. Certain phrases from the play have been adopted into our contemporary idiom, such as ‘method in the madness’ and ‘every dog has his day’; through these Shakespeare is present in the twenty-first century. However, the idiomatic expressions we use today have been contracted down, and the original phrases: ‘Though this be madness yet there is method in’t’ (*Ham*. II. 2. 202–03) and ‘The cat will mew and dog will have his day’ (*Ham*. V. 1. 281) are not used as they were originally written. *Hamlet* is both present in our modern language, through the adoption of phrases from the play, but is also absent as these phrases have been transformed from their original wording. In this way *Hamlet* is both present and absent and is a spectre that haunts the English language.

Discussing ghosts in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has led us to consider the nature of human existence and the notion of ghostliness. We are all the walking dead, alive for a time but destined to die one day. Ghosts are corporeal, as all people are ghosts. Our work of marginalising ghosts of the spirit is a work of easing our own conscience. The spectre acts as a reminder of our own ghostliness; in attempting to keep ghosts distinct from ourselves we simply try to distance ourselves from the dead, privileging ourselves as living beings over ghosts when in fact we are one and the same. Our only understanding lies in the hauntological difference between the dead walking and the walking dead.

**Bibliography**

**Primary text**


**Secondary texts**


