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## HAMLET AND THE SOUL-SLEEPERS

Vladimir Brljak

The article argues that the soliloquy, 'To be, or not to be,' in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is informed by soul-sleeping: the belief that on its separation from the body at death, the soul enters an unconscious state typically described as sleep or a sleep-like stupor, in which it remains until wakened and joined with the resurrected body, and then assessed at the last judgment. The doctrine was advocated in some of Luther's works of the 1520s and 1530s and found acceptance among some early English Protestants, but was destined to be repudiated by later Protestant orthodoxy, and was universally condemned by mainstream Protestant thinking of Shakespeare's day. The article surveys the history of this heterodoxy in England, demonstrates its continuing significance in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, elucidates the references to the doctrine in Hamlet's soliloquy, and discusses their relevance to the broader understanding of the religious subtext of the play.

### *Introduction*

Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy is one of the best known and most minutely scrutinized passages in all of English literature. In spite of its iconic familiarity, however, or perhaps precisely because of it, an important element in this soliloquy has managed to go unnoticed: namely, that its vision of the afterlife is informed by a particular doctrine of Christian eschatology, and moreover, one condemned as unsound by the Church of England Reformed orthodoxy of Shakespeare's (1564–1616) day. The doctrine in question is that of soul-sleep: the belief that on being detached from the human body at death, the soul assumes an unconscious state, usually described as 'sleep' or a sleep-like torpor, in which it remains until reawakened at the last judgment. Although condemned by mainstream Protestant thinking, soul-sleeping maintained a degree of presence among dissident groups and

individuals in Shakespeare's England, and was presented in numerous contemporary publications as a serious and widespread threat to the orthodox Christian faith. It would, therefore, have been familiar to anyone with a reasonable grasp of the religious controversies of the day, and references or allusions to the doctrine in imaginative literature and drama would not have fallen on deaf ears.

'To be, or not to be' is a case in point. Once recognized to be informed by the soul-sleeping eschatology, the soliloquy takes on a very different outlook, with important implications for our broader understanding of the religious subtext of the play. As further discussed below, the doctrine's presence is particularly explicit in the Q1 version, describing how one is 'awaked' from the 'dream of death' to be 'borne before an everlasting judge' (Q1, 7.118–9), but is also detectable in the canonical Q2/F text, where the 'sleep of death' may be interrupted by such 'dreams' as 'must give ... pause' to one's scruples (Q2/F, 3.1.73–5).<sup>1</sup> Although the former is easily misinterpreted as presenting an orthodox vision of the afterlife, and the latter as denying its existence altogether, both these received views disperse once the prince's words are seen in the light of this eschatological heterodoxy. They are given detailed attention in the second half of this article, following a survey of the presence and status of soul-sleeping in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, indicating the context for this hitherto overlooked reference to the doctrine in Hamlet.<sup>2</sup>

### *Soul-sleeping in Shakespeare's England*

According to traditional Roman Catholic belief, the human soul was immortal and maintained a continued conscious existence after its separation from the body at death, arriving immediately to one of five places or states in the afterlife, to abide there until the general resurrection: heaven, hell, purgatory, the limbo of the fathers (emptied during Christ's 'harrowing of hell'), and the limbo of unbaptized infants. For some three centuries leading up to the Reformation, purgatory had played a key role. This is where the majority of

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Shakespeare's works are cited parenthetically from Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, with the exception of *Hamlet*, cited from the three-text edition by Thompson and Taylor in Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*. The three early texts are designated by the abbreviations Q1 ('First Quarto,' 1603), Q2 ('Second Quarto,' 1604–05), and F ('Folio,' 1623); as the differences between Q2 and F versions of the soliloquy are insignificant for the present argument, I will be quoting Q2 but designating such quotations as 'Q2/F.'

<sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge, the reference is unrecognized and thus unacknowledged in previous scholarship, including the extensive commentary on the soliloquy compiled in Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (ed. Furness), and Shakespeare, *Hamlet Works*, as well as in other modern editions.

Christian believers—those who had not committed any great sins, but were not entirely free of lesser ones either—could hope to find themselves, and from where, having atoned for these lesser sins, they would be admitted into heaven. Mainstream Protestants eliminated purgatory and the limbos but retained the rest of this traditional scheme: separated from the body, the immortal soul assumed immediate conscious existence in either heaven or hell. This was both the stated opinion of the most prominent English divines and the view most readily adopted in the popular imagination of Shakespeare's day. William Perkins's (1558–1602) influential *Golden Chaine*, the first edition of which appeared around the time Shakespeare was beginning his career in London, affords a good example of the former. 'The death of the Elect,' Perkins writes,

is but a sleepe in Christ, whereby the body and soule is severed. The body, that after corruption it may rise to greater glorie. The soule, that it being fully sanctified, may immediatlye, after departure from the bodye, be transported in the kingdome of heauen . . . Soules being once in heaven, remaine there till the last day of iudgement, where they partly magnifie the Name of God, and partly doe waite, and praye for the consummation of the kingdome of glorie, and full felicitie in body and soule . . . The death of the Reprobate, is a separation of the body and the soule: of the bodie, that for a time it may lie dead in the earth: of the soule, that it may feele the torments of hell, euen vntill the time of the last iudgement: at which time the whole man shall be cast into the most terrible and fearefull fire of hell.<sup>3</sup>

The more popular reflection of this scheme may be illustrated from the anonymous satirical pamphlet, *Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie*, where the Devil assumes the form of the celebrated clown and comedian Richard Tarlton (d.1588), and attempts to convince the anonymous narrator that he is Tarlton's ghost, returned to this world from purgatory.<sup>4</sup> The narrator's response, however, is soundly orthodox:

Ghost thou art none, but a very diuel (for the soules of them which are departed) if the sacred principles of Theologie bee true) never returne into the world againe till the generall resurrection: for either are they placst in heaven, from whence they come not

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<sup>3</sup> Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, S3v–4r, V5r.

<sup>4</sup> *Tarltons Newes*, B1v–2v

to intangle themselves with other cares, but sit continually before the seate of the Lambe singing *Alleluia* to the highest, or else they are in hell: and this is a profound and certain Aphorisme, *Ab inferis nulla est redemptio* [there is no redemption from hell]: upo[n] these conclusive premisses depart from mee Sathan the resemblance of whom soever thou dost carry.

To which the Devil replies:

as soon as I heare the principles of your religion, I can say, oh there is a Caluinst: what doe you make heauen and hell *Contraria immediata* [direct opposites], so contrarie, that there is no meane betwixt them, but that either a mans soule must in post haste goe presently to God, or else with a whirlwind and a vengeance goe to the diuell? yes, yes my good brother, there is *Quoddam tertium* a third place that all our great grandmothers haue talkt of, that *Dant* hath so learnedly writ of, and that is Purgatorie.

Needless to say, the weight of such authorities does not prevail with the Protestant narrator, who can ‘but smile at the madde merry doctrine of my friend *Richard*.’ Souls go to either heaven or hell, and they do so immediately after their separation from the bodies. These are ‘conclusive premises,’ drawn from ‘sacred principles.’

This same rigid binarism, however, which made the scheme so effective in combating purgatory and the rest of the traditional eschatology, raised problems at more sophisticated levels of theological analysis. If souls went ‘immediatlye’ and ‘post haste’ to either heaven or hell, then what precisely was the point of the last judgment? The Bible taught of a great reckoning that would take place at the end of days, but if the dead were already saved or damned, then what was there to reckon? Surely no clerical errors were to be expected when the books of life and death were opened before the great white throne. This problem in fact applied to the traditional eschatology as well, since the souls in purgatory, in spite of undergoing their punishments, were essentially saved, although here there would at least be a definite progression from the intermediate to the final state. But if the souls were, to all intents and purposes, already judged, and would remain where they already were, then how was the last judgment anything more than ‘a kind of eschatological rubber-stamping’?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 223.

The doctrine of soul-sleeping, adopted by a minority of Protestants on the Continent as well as in England, was one of the attempted solutions to this problem.<sup>6</sup> In the literature, this doctrine is referred to as ‘psychopannychism,’ ‘psychosomnolence,’ or ‘hypnopsychism,’ and is usually subsumed under the heading of ‘mortalism,’ of which two further variants are then distinguished: ‘thnetopsychism,’ according to which the soul temporarily dies with the body until both are resurrected at the last judgment, and still more radically, ‘annihilationism,’ denying the resurrection of the body as well as of the personal soul and allowing only impersonal immortality, the restoration of the life essence to its divine source. Although not without rationale—all three doctrines depart from the orthodox teaching on the soul—the grouping is problematic. In accepting it, modern scholars really accept a polemical strategy adopted early on by the opponents of these perceived heresies, which obscures fundamental differences between the three positions.<sup>7</sup> The received terminology is also fraught with inconsistencies and I will avoid it wherever possible, denoting the doctrine reflected in Hamlet’s words (unconscious existence of the immortal personal soul between death and the last judgment) by the self-explanatory term ‘soul-sleeping.’<sup>8</sup>

As the mildest of the three heresies, soul-sleeping fulfilled some of the same tasks as the more radical alternatives: it dispensed with purgatory, affirmed the importance of the last judgment, and accommodated biblical passages which seemed to deny conscious post-mortem existence. Unlike them, however, it preserved the continued immortality of the personal soul. The earliest Reformer to adopt the doctrine was Martin Luther (1483–1546), who advocated forms of it in a number of works of the 1520s and early 1530s.<sup>9</sup> Although

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<sup>6</sup> Major studies include Burns, *Christian Mortalism*; Ball, *Soul Sleepers*; Juhász, *Translating Resurrection*. See also inter al. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 223–5; McDowell, ‘Dead Souls’; Sugg, *Smoke of the Soul*, 207–9; Pope, ‘An Collins.’

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *A Confession of Fayth, Made by Common Consent* [= The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566], ch. 7 [7], condemning in the same breath those who ‘cast doubt upon the immortality of souls, or who say that the soul sleeps or is a part of God’; cf. *Creeds and Confessions*, vol. 2, 469. For a modern text-critical edition (‘Confessio Helvetica posterior’, ed. Emidio Campi) of the original Latin, see *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* [= RB], vol. 2/2, 284, lines 18–19, and n. 63 there for further references.

<sup>8</sup> The term ‘mortalism’ applies properly only to ‘annihilationism’ (and even here only the immortality of the personal soul is denied), but only partly to ‘thnetopsychism’ (which denies only the soul’s continued immortality), and not at all to soul-sleeping (which denies only the soul’s conscious post-mortem existence). Burns’s and Ball’s use of ‘soul-sleeping’ to cover both ‘psychopannychism’ and ‘thnetopsychism’ is incoherent for the same reasons. ‘Psychopannychism,’ moreover, is a misnomer, deriving from the original title, *Psychopannychia*, of Calvin, *An Excellent Treatise*, where it signals Calvin’s own orthodox position rather than the heresies he undertakes to refute. See Tavard, *Starting Point*, 9: “‘Psychopannychia’ is a composite Greek word formed by combining the noun ψυχή (soul) and the feminine adjective παννύχια (active all night long), meaning therefore something like “soul awake at night.”’ ‘Hypnopsychism’ and ‘psychosomnolence’ are unrecorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but have technical meanings elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> See Juhász, *Translating Resurrection*, 164–83.

Luther later reverted to the orthodox position, his early views found supporters in England, where positive statements of the doctrine appear in the testament of William Tracy (d.1530), later printed with commentaries by William Tyndale (c.1494–1536) and John Frith (1505–1533) and reused by other early English Protestants, where Tracy hopes for the ‘resurrectionn of bodye and soule,’ and believes ‘that in the last daye I shall ryse owte of the erth / and in my flesh shall se my sauour’; Frith’s *Disputacyo[n] of Purgatorye*, allowing that the souls of the wicked were already in hell, but appointing those of the faithful to an intermediate place of peaceful rest, ‘And as touchinge thys poynte where they rest / I dare be bolde to saye they are in the hande of god / and that god wolde that we shulde be ignorau[n]te where they be / and not to take vppon vs to determine the matter’; a sermon by Hugh Latimer (c.1485–1555) which speaks of the ‘departed’ who ‘now sleep in the sleep of peace ... patiently looking for that that they clearly shall see when God shall be so pleased’; and a passage in the first (1549) Book of Common Prayer where those ‘departed hence from us’ are said to ‘reste in the slepe of peace’ until ‘the day of generall resurreccion.’<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, however, soul-sleeping was destined to remain outside Protestant (including Lutheran) orthodoxy, and would be increasingly associated with radicals, especially the Anabaptists. One consequence of this is the scarcity of further positive statements until the seventeenth century, yet throughout the intervening period negative testimony of the doctrine’s presence appears in the form of continuing attacks in the works of orthodox English authors and English translations of orthodox Continental works. The trail begins in 1526, when Henry VIII (1491–1547) accuses Luther of teaching ‘that there is no purgatorie / but y<sup>t</sup> all soules shall slepe tyll the daye of dome.’<sup>11</sup> In 1529, Thomas More (1487–1535) repeats the charge: ‘they now affirm (& specyally Luther hym self) that souels vnto doomyes day do nothyng els but slepe.’ In including Tyndale in his charges, More also opens the specifically English chapter in the controversy.<sup>12</sup> Tyndale responded, defending Luther’s view insofar as it negated Roman Catholic eschatology, but professing himself agnostic about the intermediate state and urging More not to treat the matter as an article of

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<sup>10</sup> See Tracy et al., *Testament*, A3r and passim (Tyndale is ambivalent about the doctrine and Tracy’s allegiance to it, *ibid.*, B2r–v, while Frith more confidently endorses it and also attributes it to Tracy, *ibid.*, C1r–v); Frith, *A Disputacio[n]*, i2r; Latimer, *Sermons*, vol. 1, 40; *Book of Common Prayer*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Henry VIII and Luther, *Copy of the Letters*, E2v.

<sup>12</sup> More, *Supplycacyon of Soulys*, I1r; More, *A Dyaloge*, S4v.

faith.<sup>13</sup> More was unappeased and accusations continued.<sup>14</sup> The same charge was also levelled at Tyndale by a fellow Protestant émigré, George Joye (1490×95–1553), who entered unauthorized alterations into his 1534 revision of Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament to counteract this perceived heresy, initiating an exchange now exhaustively researched in Juhász’s study. Other figures persecuted on this among other counts include Richard Bayfield and James Bainham, executed in 1531 and 1532, respectively, ‘For there is no soule they saye / but in some place of rest they lye styll and slepe full soundely / and slepe shall they saye tyll Gabryels trumpe a wake them and call them vppe erely, to ryse and recorde theyr apparence byfore our sauour at the generall daye of dome’; Latimer, summoned in 1532 to subscribe to a set of articles which mandated ‘That the holy apostles and martyrs of Christ, being dead, are in heaven’; and Frith, who at the time of his execution in 1533 still maintained that ‘no sayntes soule came in heuen before the day of dome / but in the meane season reposed hym selfe he wiste not where.’<sup>15</sup>

Thus soul-sleeping was a matter of considerable controversy in the early days of the English Reformation, first between Reformers and Roman Catholics and then also amongst the Reformers themselves. Things then quiet down for a decade or so (or at least the evidence does, possibly due to this initial wave of persecution).<sup>16</sup> But the matter resurfaces in the later 1540s, apparently in response to the growing presence of the Anabaptists, but also evangelicals like George Wishart (c.1513–1546), executed for preaching, among other things, ‘that the soule of man shall sleepe to the later daye of iudgement, and shal not obteine lyfe immortall vntyl that daye.’<sup>17</sup> In 1546 and 1548, Tracy’s testament, with the commentaries by Tyndale and Frith, is printed again in two editions of *Wycklyffes Wycket*.<sup>18</sup> In 1549, a sermon by Latimer shows him unshaken in his heterodoxy, although his sarcasm in broaching this ‘great clerkly question’ now also indicates a firm conviction of its irrelevance. Where was the soul of Jairus’s daughter if it was neither in heaven nor hell, much less in purgatory?—“I

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<sup>13</sup> Tyndale, *An Answer*, K1r, O9v–P1r: ‘If ye soules be in heuen in as greate glorie as the angels aftir youre doctrine / shewe me what cause shulde be of the resurreccion’; ‘Uvhat god doeth with them, yt shall we know when we come to them.’

<sup>14</sup> More, *The Co[n]futacyone*, H4r; More, *The Second Parte*, Q1r–v; More, *The Apologye*, q1r–v.

<sup>15</sup> More, *The Apologye*, q1r–v; Latimer, *Sermons*, vol. 2, 218; Gardiner, *A Letter of a Yonge Gentyman*, B6v.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 224, claims that support for soul-sleeping from ‘a number of English evangelicals’ continued ‘through the early part of the 1540s,’ but cites only a single example, from 1541, when John Forsett preached for, and William Hubbardine against, the doctrine in Salisbury. See also Davis, ‘Lollardy and the Reformation,’ 48.

<sup>17</sup> *The Tragical Death*, E8v–F1r.

<sup>18</sup> Tracy et al., *Wycklyffes Wycket*; Tracy et al., *Uvicklieffes Wicket*.



cannot tell; but where it pleased God it should be, there it was.” Is not this a good answer to such a clerkly question. I think it be: other answer nobody gets at me; because the scripture telleth me not where she was.’<sup>19</sup> The orthodox response seems to have been immediate: in 1546, soul-sleeping is refuted at some length by William Hugh (d.1549); in 1548 and 1549, two further extended refutations are made available in translations of anti-Anabaptist treatises by Bullinger (1504–1575) and Calvin (1509–1564); in 1552, following criticism by Martin Bucer (1491–1551), the ‘slepe of peace’ passage is removed from the new edition of The Book of Common Prayer; in 1553, article 40 of the Forty-Two Articles explicitly condemns the doctrine:

Thei which saie, that the soules of such as departe hens doe sleepe, being without al sence, fealing, or perceiuing, vntil the daie of iudgement, or affirme that the soules die with the bodies, and at the laste daie shalbe raised vp with thesame, doe vtterlie dissent from the right beliefe declared to vs in holie Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

Alien from Roman Catholic no less than orthodox Protestant doctrine, soul-sleeping continued to be condemned under Mary I (1516–1558). Refutations appeared in works of repatriated Roman Catholic divines and people were burnt at the stake for believing that ‘the soules departed do straightwayes go to heauen or to hell, or els do sleep till the day of dome, so that there is no place of purgation at all.’<sup>21</sup>

The doctrine is not explicitly condemned in the Thirty-Nine Articles (1571), which some have suggested to indicate that it was no longer considered a serious threat. ‘Anxieties about the issue were receding in the second half of the sixteenth century,’ Peter Marshall writes, ‘though a number of authors of death treatises and funeral sermons continued to take side-swipes at the “sleepy-heads.”’<sup>22</sup> Clearly the argument is not baseless: if the Forty-Two Articles (1553) included an explicit condemnation, as did comparable documents beyond

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<sup>19</sup> Latimer, *Sermons*, vol. 1, 550.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh, *The Troubled Mans Medicine*, H2r–7r; Bullinger, *An Holsome Antidotus*, N5v–P3v; Calvin, *A Short Instruction*, H2v–L4r; Whitaker, *Martin Bucer*, 52; *Articles Agreed* [art. 40] – cf. *Documents*, ed. Bray, 309-10, and RB 1/3 (ed. G. Bray), 247, lines 1–5.

<sup>21</sup> Foxe, *Seconde Volume of the Ecclesiasticall Historie*, NNNn5r–6r. Cf. Christopherson, *An Exhortation*, Z6r; Smith, *The Seconde Parte*, E3r–5v.

<sup>22</sup> Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 225; cf. Ball, *Soul Sleepers*, 61–2.

England, such as the Scots Confession (1560)<sup>23</sup> or the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), then why do the Thirty-Nine Articles fail to do so? However, any claim of the doctrine's decreasing relevance still warrants serious reconsideration. Throughout the decades leading up to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, numerous Protestant authors, Continental and English, continue to write against soul-sleeping in a variety of works, many of which enjoyed considerable popularity in the period: theological treatises, biblical commentaries, creeds, sermons, devotional works, demonologies, heresiographies, concordances, pamphlets, philosophical poetry like John Davies' (*bap.*1569–1626) *Nosce teipsum*, and even, as further discussed below, such major literary works as Edmund Spenser's (1552?–1599) *Faerie Queene*.<sup>24</sup> Viewed purely in terms of their length, many of these are indeed 'side-swipes,' but this is more plausibly interpreted as reflecting the consolidation of the orthodox position than the decreasing importance of the subject, especially since several publications do offer such extended treatments as match or indeed surpass those previously available: notably the 1581 complete English translation of Calvin's *Psychopannychia*, the *summa* of Protestant anti-'mortalism,' but also those in the cited works (n. 23) of Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), Thomas Becon (1512/13–1567), Niels Hemmingsen (1513–1600), Zacharias Ursinus [Baer] (1534–1583), John Woolton (*c.*1537–1594), and Simon Harward (*fl.*1572–1607).

Alongside this chorus of condemnations, one also finds warnings of the doctrine's proliferation in late sixteenth-century England. According to the translator of the *Psychopannychia*, mortalist ideas

hath possessed and poysoned at this day, the hartes and mindes of a great number, here at home within this land, not onely of the godlesse, and ignoraunter company, but euen of too too many of some of those which make a great and glorious glittering outvvard shevv, of being fauourers of the glorious Gospell of our Sauour and redeemer Christ Iesus.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See *Creeds and Confessions*, ed. Pelikan and Hotchkiss, vol. 2, 397–8; cf. text critical ed. by Ian Hazlett, 'Confessio Scoticana 1560', in RB2/1, 270, lines 1–13 and notes 463–77 there.

<sup>24</sup> See inter al. Avienus, *Propositions and Principles*, R2v–3r;; Becon, *The Sycke Mans Salve*, Ii6v–Kk5v; Becon, *The Gouvernaunce*, Ee5v–6r; Bilson, *The Svrvey*, S3v, Ccc4v; Bullinger, *Fiftie Sermons*, Nnn4v; Bullinger, *A Hyndred Sermons*, Hh7r; Calvin, *Excellent Treatise*, A2v; Chardon, *A Sermon Preached*, B6r–8r; Davies, *Nosce teipsum*, L1v; Harward, *A Discovrs*, K3v–M4r; Hemmingsen, *Faith of the Church*, G2r–5r; Hooker, *Lavves of Ecclesiastical Politie*, D1v; Jewel, *A Defence*, Fff3r; Luther, *An Exposition*, T4r–v, T7v; Perkins, *An Exposition*, L4v–6v; T. W., *A Concordance or Table*, E8v; Ursinus, *Svmme of Christian Religion*, Tt2r–7v; Woolton, *A Treatise*, L4v–6v; Zwingli, *A Briefe Rehersal*, I2r.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *An Excellent Treatise*, A2v.

Similar claims appear elsewhere: the heresy ‘hath growen strong in many places’; it ‘doth crepe and spreade . . . in cittie and contrey.’<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, by the 1570s mainstream English polemicists seem to have forgotten all about Luther’s soul-sleeping—‘I neuer harde,’ writes William Fulke (1536/7–1589), ‘any man of credit note him thereof, who is wel knowne to haue been of a cleane contrary iudgement’—even as Luther’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, openly endorsing the doctrine, appeared in English translation, and Tyndale’s *Answer* and Frith’s *Disputacio[n]* were reprinted as works of *worthy Martyrs, and principall teachers of this Churche of England*.<sup>27</sup> If soul-sleeping was a genuine threat, would such publications be tolerated? The truth is thus probably somewhere in the middle: a degree of genuine presence did remain but was also exaggerated for polemical purposes. It is this polemical representation of the doctrine, however, that is of greatest significance to a reader of *Hamlet*. The degree of the actual acceptance of soul-sleeping beliefs in England around 1600 may be debatable, but there can be no doubt whatsoever that a playwright of this period could draw on a prominent contemporary discourse which claimed, rightly or wrongly, that such beliefs indeed were present and that they constituted a genuine and widespread threat to the orthodox Protestant faith.

Another aspect of the anti-soul-sleeping discourse relevant to its appropriation in *Hamlet* is its participation in what I have elsewhere termed the ‘Puritan-Papist topos’: a polemical strategy, well-established in mainstream Church of England polemic by the late 1590s, and powerfully reaffirmed at James’s accession in 1603, which equated the two confessional extremes as the twin enemies of the orthodox English Protestant. I believe that this perspective in fact governs the whole of the religious subtext in *Hamlet*, and in any case, the words of the clown Lavatch in *All’s Well That Ends Well* leave no room for doubt about Shakespeare’s familiarity with the topos: ‘For young Chairbonne the puritan and old Poisson the papist, howsome’er their hearts are severed in religion, their heads are both one: they may jowl horns together like any deer i’th’ heard’ (1.3.51–55). In such contexts, it should be noted, the label ‘Puritan’ extends to all Protestant nonconformists regardless of their mutual differences. The Anabaptists, with whom soul-sleeping was most frequently associated, are in fact an excellent example of this pattern: by the 1570s, they are grouped together with ‘Puritans’; by the 1590s, the terms are used almost interchangeably; by 1603–05, the date of

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<sup>26</sup> Marlorat, *A Catholike Exposition*, N2r; Payne, *Royall Exchange*, C3r.

<sup>27</sup> Fulke, *Tvvo Treatises*, G5r–v; Luther, *Exposition*; Tyndale et al., *The Whole Workes*, title page.

the *Hamlet* quartos, they are explicitly conflated.<sup>28</sup> Thus soul-sleeping is not just dismissed as a radical Protestant but, in this particular sense, ‘Puritan’ heresy, analogous to the heresy of purgatory maintained at the other end of the confessional spectrum. Usually this analogy is latent or implied, but often enough it surfaces in explicit form: ‘some wil say,’ Bullinger writes, ‘that the soules departing from the bodies . . . sleepe vntill the last daye of Iudgement. You shal find othersome contending that soules cannot come into heauen, vnlesse they be perfeatly purified with clensing fire, which they call Purgatorie . . . . But both of these thinges doe I denie and vtterly denie.’<sup>29</sup>

It is often hard to see what moderate early-modern Protestants found so objectionable about a doctrine which retained both the continued immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body, preserved the subjective immediacy of reward and punishment, solved the problem of the intermediate state, did this on a reasonable footing of scriptural authority, and could be safely defused as indifferent. Logically, the doctrine made sense and the stakes were not that high anyway; but logic, it would seem, had little to do with it. To begin with, soul-sleeping was often guilty by association. The distinction between this and the more radical ‘mortalist’ heresies, which truly denied the immortality of the soul, was well-established in advanced controversy on these matters, yet in most other contexts, deliberately or not, the soul-sleepers were more likely to be lumped together with the soul-butchers than given a hearing in their own right. The doctrine was also difficult to reconcile with such biblical passages, among others, as the account of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:25), Christ’s promise to the thief later in the same gospel, ‘*to day shal thou be with me in Paradise*’ (Lk. 23:43), or Paul’s ‘*desiring to be losed & to be with Christ*’ (Phil. 1:23).<sup>30</sup> Yet orthodox commentators were no less tried by the favourites of the sleepers: ‘His breath departeth, & he returneth to his earth: then his thoughts perish’ (Ps. 146:4), ‘the dead know nothing at al’ (Eccl. 9:5), ‘And if Christ be not raised . . . they which are a sleepe in Christ,

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Whitgift, *An Answerel*, Ee3v: ‘al Papists, Puritans, Anabaptists, and what other sects soeuer in England’; Nash, *The Vnfortvnate Traueller*, D3r: ‘Heare what it is to be Anabaptists, to be Puritans, to be villaines’; Powell, *The Catholikes Sypplication*, B1v, n. 15: ‘Puritane, is a name proper vnto the Anabaptists and Famelians’; Ormerod, *Pictvre of a Puritane*, which ‘firmly prooue[s], that the Puritanes doe resemble the Anabaptists, in aboue fourescore seuerall thinges’ (title page).

<sup>29</sup> Bullinger, *Fiftie Sermons*, Nnn4v. See also d (n. 23) places in Becon, *The Gouvernaunce*; Bullinger, *Hvndred Sermons*; Woolton, *A Treatise*; Avienus, *Propositions and Principles*; Chardon, *Sermon Preached*; Harward, *A Discovrse*.

<sup>30</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the first English printing of the Geneva Bible: *The Bible and Holy Scriptvres*. On Shakespeare’s familiarity with the Geneva Bible, see Shaheen, *Biblical References*, 38–48.

are perished' (1 Cor. 15:17–18), and so forth. With so many, and so diverse, biblical references to death and the afterlife, scriptural evidence alone could not settle the matter.

Perhaps most importantly, soul-sleeping was offensive to the traditional sense of Christian ethics: the deeply ingrained, almost instinctive feeling, evidently unaffected and perhaps even strengthened by the abolition of purgatory, that only *immediate* reward in heaven was sufficiently rewarding to the godly, and *immediate* punishment in hell sufficiently punitive to the wicked. Were the wicked to be spared from punishment until the end of days? Was one to lead a pious life only to undergo the same fate? Apparently there was little use in objecting that to the souls themselves this vast span of time would pass almost instantaneously; that 'the dead lye there accompting neyther dayes nor yeares, but when are awaked, they shall seeme to have slept scarce one minute.'<sup>31</sup> No less firmly rooted were traditional notions of local heaven and hell, with all the accompanying tradition accumulated over the centuries. When Christopher Marlowe's (*bap.*1564–1593) Mephistopheles says that 'Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed / In one self place,' this may reflect a spiritualizing 'reformation of hell' underway at this date, yet the image that captured the popular imagination was still that of a horned and cloven-hoofed monster rising from that most crudely local of all hells, the one beneath the boards of Elizabethan and Jacobean stages.<sup>32</sup> The same had been the case with purgatory: although now abolished, it too had been, at least in the popular understanding, an imaginable, describable place. By contrast, the soul-sleepers wanted to retain an intermediate state, but could give virtually no positive account of it: it was definitely *not* purgatory, but what it definitely *was*, no one could say. When the fate of their immortal souls was at stake, such a doctrine—'Uvhat god doeth with them, y<sup>t</sup> shall we know when we come to them'—was a risk most Protestants were simply not willing to take.

Still, the doctrine was not wholly banished to the wilderness of the radicals. If in popular Protestant accounts souls went 'post haste' to heaven or hell, detailed commentary by orthodox authorities often gives a more nuanced picture. It seems significant, for example, that in the *Institutes*, Calvin refutes those who deny the immortality of the soul and those who deny the resurrection of the body, but does not explicitly refute soul-sleeping:

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<sup>31</sup> Luther, *An Exposition*, T7v.

<sup>32</sup> Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, 2.1.124–5; Marshall, 'The Reformation of Hell.'

the souls of the pious enter into blessed rest, where in glad expectation they await the enjoyment of promised glory, and so all things are held in suspense until Christ the Redeemer appear. The lot of the reprobate is doubtless the same as that which Jude assigns to the Devils: to be held in chains until they are dragged to the punishment appointed for them [Jude 6].<sup>33</sup>

This categorically excludes soul-sleeping, yet the terms ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ are conspicuously absent, while conspicuously prominent is the emphasis laid on the general resurrection. ‘Calvin is careful,’ Burns comments, ‘to insist that the state of the elect souls is imperfect, though joyous and peaceful, for Resurrection must keep a role even while the sleepers are being refuted.’<sup>34</sup> Exactly, except they are not actually refuted, for they are never specifically mentioned; in fact, Calvin’s position here can be construed as negotiation rather than refutation, with substantial tacit concessions to the sleepers’ doctrine. Furthermore, just before that passage, Calvin says explicitly that his view is no more than a biblically conditioned guess: something we should ‘be content with . . . meanwhile.’ His ultimate statement on the subject is in fact largely agnostic, and speaks only of a biblically sanctioned ‘paradise’ and ‘torments.’<sup>35</sup>

The underlying influence of soul-sleeping doctrine is still more tangible in William Perkins, whose position is impeccably orthodox in believing that reprobate souls undergo ‘the torments of hell, euen vntill the time of the last iudgement.’ However, only a few lines later we read that ‘The reprobates when they die, doe become without sence and astonied, like vnto a stone.’<sup>36</sup> Although Perkins immediately offers a safer alternative—‘or else they are ouerwhelmed with a terrible horroure of conscience, and despairing of their saluation, as it were, with the gulfe of the sea ouerturning them’—it is remarkable that he considers soul-sleeping as a possibility, even if only in passing and in a reprobate-only variant. Such a brush with heterodoxy cannot be accidental; it must reflect genuine doubt. In the end, the

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<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.25.6.

<sup>34</sup> Burns, *Christian Mortalism*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.25.6: ‘Now it is neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our souls’ intermediate state. Many torment themselves overmuch with disputing as to what place the souls occupy and whether or not they already enjoy heavenly glory. Yet it is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know. Scripture goes no farther than to say that Christ is present with them, and receives them into paradise [cf. John 12:32] that they may obtain consolation, while the souls of the reprobate suffer such torments as they deserve. What teacher or master will reveal to us that which God has concealed?’

<sup>36</sup> Perkins, *A Golden Chaine*, V5r.

impression one takes away from these controversies as they stood around 1600 is that the appearance of confidence on the part of orthodoxy is really symptomatic of a profound concern over this matter. As with Augustine and time, it seems everyone knew where souls went and what they did there, as long as no one asked them about it.

*Soul-sleeping in 'Hamlet'*

With this background in mind, let us now return to *Hamlet*, and let us begin by establishing our own set of adiaphora. For the present argument, it is ultimately irrelevant, although not uninteresting, at what point 'To be, not to be' takes place, or whether it is about suicide or homicide, or both; either is a mortal sin, and Hamlet is considering his prospects in the afterlife were he to commit such a sin. Still more interesting, but also ultimately indifferent, is the textual question; none of the competing theories about the relations between the three early texts materially alters the conclusions reached below. Nor do these conclusions, in themselves, encourage or discourage any particular comprehensive reading of *Hamlet*, except one that would deny or radically downplay the religious element in the play. That this is a play pervaded by religious sentiments in general, and specific points of religious doctrine and controversy in particular, is the only thing we need to agree on—how precisely these are to be taken, and what they contribute to the broader movement of the play, are questions left to our individual interpretive consciences.

With this in mind, let us now finally turn to the soliloquy, beginning with its non-canonical, Q1 variant. 'To be, or not to be,' asks the prince of Denmark,

—ay, there's the point.

To die, to sleep—is that all? Ay, all.

No, to sleep, to dream—ay, marry, there it goes,

For in that dream of death, when we're awaked

And borne before an everlasting judge

From whence no passenger ever returned—

The undiscovered country, at whose sight

The happy smile and the accursed damned.

But for this, the joyful hope of this,

Who'd bear the scorns and flattery of the world—

Scorned by the rich, the rich cursed of the poor,

The widow being oppressed, the orphan wronged,  
 The taste of hunger, or a tyrant's reign,  
 And thousand more calamities besides—  
 To grunt and sweat under this weary life  
 When he may his full quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? Who would this endure,  
 But for a hope of something after death,  
 Which puzzles the brain and doth confound the sense—  
 Which makes us rather bear those evils that we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Ay, that—O, this conscience makes cowards of us all. (Q1, 7.115–36)<sup>37</sup>

It has long been noted that Q1 presents us with an explicitly Christian account of the afterlife, but it must now be further specified that this account is not only Christian, but that it is heterodoxly Christian, endorsing the eschatological doctrine of soul-sleeping. 'Sleep' is of course a conventional metaphor for death, and numerous examples of such usage are found elsewhere in Shakespeare's works.<sup>38</sup> Here, however, we are dealing with more than metaphor, and with a view of the afterlife which emphatically does not 'clearly [operate] within the conventional categories of Christian eschatology.'<sup>39</sup> To say that 'To die' is 'to sleep' is one thing, but to go beyond this, to describe the afterlife as the 'dream of death' from which one is 'awaked' to be 'borne before an everlasting judge,' is as precise a description of soul-sleeping as any encountered in the non-fictional literature surveyed above.

It cannot be overemphasized that in the orthodox view souls are supposed to assume *immediate* and *conscious* existence in either heaven or hell. Both Hamlet's failure to say anything like this, and what he actually says instead, depart strikingly from this view.

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<sup>37</sup> Unemended, line 7.11 reads 'For in that dreame of death, when wee awake'; Shakespeare, *The Tragicall Historie*, D4v. Thompson and Taylor plausibly emend into 'when we're awaked,' but even without the emendation the general sense is clear.

<sup>38</sup> For example, 'Thy ignominy sleep with thee in the grave' (*1 Henry IV*, 5.4.99); 'sleep in dull cold marble' (*Henry VIII*, 3.2.434); 'death, which is no more [than sleep]' (*Measure for Measure*, 3.1.19); 'The sons of Edward sleep in Abraham's bosom' (*Richard III*, 4.3.38); 'life / . . . rounded with a sleep' (*The Tempest*, 4.1.157–58), 'sleep in peace, slain in your country's wars' (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.91). For further explorations of these and other metaphorical resonances, see Williams, 'Sleep in *Hamlet*,' and Totaro, 'Securing Sleep.'

<sup>39</sup> Lander, *Inventing Polemic*, 128. Lander indeed notes that 'The sleep or dream of death here indicates the period between earthly death and the resurrection that precedes judgment,' but does not seem aware of the heterodoxy of such a view. Cf. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance*, 145: 'In Q1, the afterlife bears a familiar, more comforting shape [than in Q2/F]'; Lesser, *Hamlet after Q1*, 159: '[Q1] presents a powerfully traditional Christian understanding of the afterlife.'



That the afterlife is an ‘undiscovered country,’ and that only once ‘awaked’ from the ‘dream of death’ are we to be afforded our first ‘sight’ of it, makes sense only if one’s soul is not already, and consciously, there. This also elucidates the textual crux in line 7.121, ‘The happy smile and the accursed damned’:

The undiscovered country, at whose sight  
The happy smile and the accursed damned.  
But for this, the joyful hope of this,  
Who’d bear the scorns and flattery of the world

Thompson and Taylor attempt no emendation, but note that ‘The sense requires us to understand “are damned.”’ The unemended syntax can hardly bear such a reading, but even if it could, the line simply makes no sense if read in this way. Why would the ‘accursed’ *be* ‘damned’ at the ‘sight’ of the ‘undiscovered country’? The unemended reading makes good sense, however, if ‘the accursed damned’ is taken as a noun phrase: i.e. if ‘damned’ is taken as a noun rather than a verb, ‘accursed’ as an adjective, and ‘and’ as having a non-contrastive rather than contrastive function (‘The happy smile *as well as* the accursed damned’ rather than ‘The happy smile *whereas* the accursed [are] damned’). Such a reading makes perfect sense in a soul-sleeping eschatology, where the resurrected dead, although predestined for either salvation or damnation, would not yet know, in the interval between waking and the last judgment, which would be their lot. During this interval, both the ‘happy’ and the ‘damned’ can thus still ‘smile’ alike at their first ‘sight’ of the ‘undiscovered country’ and the ‘joyful hope’ of salvation. (Note that ‘this’ in 7.122—‘But for this, the joyful hope of this’—must refer to salvation alone, rather than both salvation and damnation, for any ‘hope’ of the latter cannot be ‘joyful.’) So construed, the passage is not only grammatical but in fact conjures an image of great poignancy. Waked from their age-long sleep, and ‘smiling’ in their ‘joyful hope,’ the resurrected dead are ‘borne’ to judgment, but while the ‘happy’ among them will continue to smile, the smiles of the ‘accursed damned’ would soon be exchanged for the weeping and gnashing of teeth.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> At least two biblical passages made clear that, at this point, the damned would not yet know they were damned. See Luke 13: 26–8: ‘Then shall ye begin to say, Wee haue eaten and drunke in thy prese[n]ce, and thou hast taught in our streates. / But hee shall say, I tell you, I knowe you not whence ye are: depart from mee, all ye workers of iniquitie. / There shalbe weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shal see Abraha[m] and Isaac, and Iacob, and all the Prophets in the kingdome of God, and your selues thrust out at dores.’ Cf. Matthew 7:21–3.

Admittedly, Q2 and F are less explicit in this place, which enabled the late nineteenth-century rise of the once dominant and still influential agnostic reading of the soliloquy, which sees Hamlet as doubting the particulars or even the entire prospect of the afterlife.<sup>41</sup> More recently, the pendulum has swung back towards a religious reading, yet it remains very easy for modern readers to overlook the potential presence of a heterodox and now obscure doctrine like soul-sleeping.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the words of the Q2/F Hamlet can still be construed as endorsing the doctrine:

To be, or not to be—that is the question;  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them; to die: to sleep—  
No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished—to die: to sleep—  
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
Must give us pause: there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns  
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin. Who would fardels bear

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<sup>41</sup> This took place in spite of the discovery of Q1, if not in fact because of it, as Shakespeare now had to be defended from the he embarrassingly explicit religiosity of the 'bad' version; see Lesser, *Hamlet after Q1*, 157–206.

<sup>42</sup> Especially readers unfamiliar with the Q1 version, which almost certainly explains why Ball, *Soul Sleepers*, 57, actually quotes the soliloquy in the canonical Q2/F variant, but finds in it nothing more than the conventional sleep-death metaphor.

To grunt and sweat under a weary life  
But that the dread of something after death  
(The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns) puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of.  
Thus conscience does make cowards—  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action. (Q2/F, 3.1.63–87)

To readers attuned to the nuances of early-modern religious controversy, the extension of the basic sleep–death metaphor ('to die: to sleep,' 'sleep of death') into the further metaphor of 'dreams' (and they are such 'dreams' as 'Must give . . . pause' to our scruples), would have still come across as endorsing the same eschatological heresy that is openly presented in Q1, especially as it very appropriately emanates from the troubled mind of an alumnus of Luther's Wittenberg.<sup>43</sup>

Again, we are always to keep in mind that the orthodox view assumes *immediate* conscious existence of the soul once parted from the body. We find not a word in the canonical version of the soliloquy that reflects this orthodox view, and what we do find points to varying degrees of heterodoxy. The commonplace sleep-death metaphor works in an orthodox context as long as it does not draw attention to itself, yet Hamlet's procedure is precisely to defamiliarize this metaphor. When he first utters the words 'to die: to sleep,' the reader has no reason to suspect anything out of the ordinary:

To be, or not to be—that is the question;  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

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<sup>43</sup> It was presumably Shakespeare's invention to make Hamlet and Horatio students at the University of Wittenberg, a fact stressed repeatedly in the second scene of the play (1.2.112–19, 164–68), in which the audience first encounters the prince.

And by opposing end them; to die: to sleep—

However, this initial impression disperses almost momentarily with the arrival of ‘No more’ in the following line. What seemed a dead metaphor is suddenly alive with the most disturbing prospects, what seemed a mere end of a line has become the edge of a theological precipice, and ‘No more’ is tantamount to placing one foot over the edge, for this ‘No more’ must denote either annihilationism or simple atheism:

to die: to sleep—

No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: ’tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished

Hamlet quickly withdraws his foot, although not before managing to blasphemously conflate these ultimate heresies with their exact antithesis: Christ’s dying words on the cross, uttered in the very moment of securing man’s immortality. Instead of realizing the error of his thinking, however, he simply returns to step one: ‘to die: to sleep.’ Again we are at the end of the line and the edge of the precipice, and again Hamlet fails to leave it at that:

to die: to sleep—

To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come . . .  
Must give us pause

What, in this context, and this particular train of thought, does this extended metaphor of ‘dreaming’ signify? In the received view, it simply signifies Hamlet considering the possibility of an afterlife as opposed to its nonexistence, temporarily entertained just moments earlier. This is certainly part of the meaning, but not the full meaning, for the way Hamlet presents this possible afterlife is itself decidedly heterodox.

Only four lines above, ‘sleep’ unambiguously meant unconsciousness: ‘to die: to sleep— / No more.’ Now, continuing and expanding the metaphor, the words ‘in that sleep of death what dreams may come’ unambiguously presume *a finite period of unconscious existence in the afterlife*. One does not normally begin to dream immediately upon falling

asleep; there is usually an interval of complete unconsciousness before any dreams come, if they come at all. This is a metaphor at once completely unsuitable to the orthodox view, where there must be immediate post-mortem consciousness, and completely suitable to the soul-sleeping eschatology. Given this temporal gap between the ‘sleep’ and the ‘dreams’ which ‘may come’—along with the fact that these are such ‘dreams’ as ‘Must give us pause,’ ‘respect,’ and ‘dread’—it seems most plausible that they are to be metaphorically identified with the last judgment and its aftermath, and that they thus restate the more explicit account of soul-sleeping eschatology in Q1. Hamlet is not entirely assured in the existence of an afterlife: the ‘dreams may’ or may not ‘come.’ But if there is an afterlife, it is, in both Q1 and Q2/F versions, the afterlife of the soul-sleepers rather than orthodox believers. Modern readers should not be misled by the fact that the prince’s thoughts border on unbelief. They do, but that is precisely the point: the sleepers saw themselves as pious Christians, but their opponents relentlessly misrepresented them as denying the immortality of the soul and consequently bordering on atheism. ‘To be, or not to be’ dramatizes this polemical and satirical agenda, presenting Hamlet as engaged in a dangerous bout of theological bargaining, from which he comes out evading the ultimate pitfalls of atheism or annihilationism, but in the process reveals himself as subscribing to what was in orthodox eyes only a slightly less damning heresy.

It is worth noting here that soul-sleeping is associated with religious despair and suicide in at least two other important early-modern works. The first is Matteo Gribaldi’s (c.1505–1564) account of the death of the lapsed Italian Protestant, Francesco Spiera (1502–1548), a famous ‘case of conscience’ reported in numerous accounts both in England and abroad. Convinced of his reprobation, Spiera spent the last days of his life in a state of profound religious despair, unalleviated by the efforts of Gribaldi, Pier Paolo Vergerio (1498?–1565), and other Protestant divines who gathered at his side, and who later wrote accounts of these events, first published in 1550, with Gribaldi’s translated into English in the same year. ‘Emongest other thynges,’ Gribaldi records,

I demaunded of hym [*sc.* Spiera] what he thought of the sleping of soules. And he aunswered. Although a certayne Doctour of Germanye, supposeth that this is not manyfestlye ynough declared by the scriptures: yet I beleue that the soule of the electe, dothe strayghte waye ascende intoo the place of euerlastynge blisse, and doth not slepe with the buried bodi. Then the Reuerende Lorde Uergerius, takynge hys tale by thende, of this (sayde he) oughte we in no wyse to doubtte. There bee for thys

manie places of scripture: as, this day thou shalte be with me in Paradyce: and it is alsoo manifestlye proued by the story of Lazarus, and the riche man: and Paule desired to be deade, that hee myghte bee in heauen wyth Chryste.<sup>44</sup>

Spiera does not unequivocally endorse the doctrine, but he does admit having consulted heterodox opinions, and explicitly extends immediate, conscious, post-mortem existence only to the souls of the elect; this clearly falls short of the confidence displayed by Vergerio, for whom the orthodox view is ‘in no wyse’ to be doubted.

The other analogue comes from the Despaire episode in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*.<sup>45</sup> Besides general resemblances, several details in Hamlet’s soliloquy find parallels in Spenser’s account of how Despaire accosts the knights, Terwin and Trevisan, and then Redcrosse himself, urging them to take their own lives: unrequited love as the motive of suicide (cf. ‘The pangs of despised love’); the dagger as the instrument of suicide, repeatedly emphasized (cf. ‘a bare bodkin’); the metaphor for death by suicide as a ‘port after stormie seas’ (cf. ‘take arms against a sea of troubles’); the catalogue of the ‘thousands’ of worldly woes (cf. the sequence beginning with ‘Th’opressor’s wrong,’ and ‘the thousand natural shocks’); the description of how ‘fickle fortune rageth rife’ (cf. ‘outrageous fortune,’ emphasis mine); the blood going to and from Redcrosse’s face as he is ‘resolu’d to worke his finall smart’ (cf. ‘the native hue of *resolution* / . . . sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,’ emphasis mine); and the role played by Una, coming to Redcrosse’s rescue (analogous to that served by Hamlet’s ‘conscience’). And most importantly in the present context, consider Despaire’s deviously tempting endorsement of soul-sleeping: ‘Is not short payne well borne, that bringes long ease,’ he asks, ‘And layes the soule to sleepe in quiet graue?’<sup>46</sup>

The rationale behind the association of soul-sleeping with suicidal despair in these texts is that the doctrine—again, according to the hostile misinterpretation propagated by its opponents—would be very tempting to those suffering from this condition. If only death was

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<sup>44</sup> Gribaldi and Calvin, *A Notable Epistle*, D2r–v.

<sup>45</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.9.27–54.

<sup>46</sup> The use of ‘soule’ is striking and although he does not pursue it further, Hamilton actually remarks, in the commentary on these lines in his edition of Spenser’s poem (see n. 45), that ‘Unless soule refers to the whole person, Despaire rejects the distinction made in the burial service in the BCP: the soul is taken by God, the body is committed to the ground.’ (The caveat is in fact inconsequential: even if ‘soule’ referred to both body and soul, this would still constitute soul-sleeping.) Hamilton also describes the whole passage as Spenser’s ‘allegorical version of Hamlet’s soliloquy, “To be, or not to be,”’ but does not further develop this either. The similarities are briefly noted Watkins, *Shakespeare and Spenser*, 74, and Potts, *Shakespeare and ‘The Faerie Queene,’* 141–2, who points out the parallels at 1.9.40.8–9 and 1.9.51–3. That ‘Shakespeare read Spenser with some care’ is now well-established; see Lethbridge, *Shakespeare and Spenser*, 2.

nothing more than sleep; if only one could suffer a moment's pain to be released from all pain forever. This is exactly the tortured train of Hamlet's thoughts in both Q1 and Q2/F as he momentarily considers, but almost immediately rejects the possibility. He had already stated explicitly (in Q2/F, 1.2.132) that the religious 'canon 'gainst self-slaughter' is the only thing preventing him from taking his life. This established, 'To be, or not to be' can now revisit this sentiment in more dynamic and dramatically effective terms, presenting us not only with the general idea, but also the thought-process behind it (the soliloquy need not be viewed as solely about suicide, of course, but neither should suicide be excluded from any reading of the soliloquy as a more general meditation on life and death).

Before moving on to conclusions, a few tentative remarks about the textual problem. As noted above, this is not of decisive importance to the present argument, but the differences between the variants of the soliloquy and other comparable places certainly raise some interesting questions. Besides 'To be, or not to be,' there is at least one other and well-known instance where Q1 gives a more explicitly religious reading than Q2/F, namely Hamlet's appeal to 'predestinate' (Q1, 17.45) as opposed to 'special providence' (Q2/F, 5.2.197–8). In accounting for this, two circumstances seem particularly significant. Firstly, the Q1 text has direct associations with early performance contexts: it is the earliest text, the shortest text, and the text, according to its title-page, that *hath beene diuerse times acted by his Highnesse seruants in the Cittie of London: as also in the two Vniuersities in Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where*. Secondly, overt representation of matters of religious doctrine and controversy in the popular drama of this period was at least nominally prohibited: Elizabeth I's (1533–1603) second proclamation of 1559, forbidding plays 'wherein . . . matters of religion or of governance of the estate of the Commonwealth . . . shall be handled,' is only the best known piece of such legislation, which goes back to the reign of Henry VIII and remains in force throughout Shakespeare's day and beyond.<sup>47</sup> Taking these circumstances into consideration, it makes sense that any references to religious matters would be more explicit in a performance-associated text, since this would have helped the desired meaning come across effectively in the real-time of performance, and since references to such controversial topics were less likely to incur offence in the transitory act of performance than the permanent testimony of print. By contrast, in the reading-oriented Q2 and F,<sup>48</sup> the same meaning could be achieved in a subtler manner, and such subtlety would have been not only

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<sup>47</sup> Wickham et al., *English Professional Theatre*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, 136–42, 178–83, 234–41.

artistically but also pragmatically expedient: ‘special’ is less explicit than ‘predestinate,’ but with sufficient leisure to ponder the former, a reader may still interpret it to mean precisely the latter, and the same can be said of ‘in that sleep of death what dreams may come’ when compared to ‘in that dream of death, when we’re awaked / And borne before an everlasting judge.’

### *Conclusion*

Are there broader implications of Hamlet’s reference to soul-sleeping for our understanding of the play’s religious subtext? The current consensus, epitomized by Stephen Greenblatt’s work, continues to reproduce a line of argument ultimately traceable to the pioneering comments on the play’s demonological element by T. A. Spalding in the late nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> According to this tradition, *Hamlet* is a play suffused with religious matters, but is also thoroughly and intentionally ambiguous in its treatment of them. Granted, ‘a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost,’ yet ‘The point surely is not to settle issues that Shakespeare has clearly gone out of his way to unsettle or render ambiguous.’<sup>50</sup> My own view, as already noted above, is that the religious element in this play is not ambiguous but aligned with mainstream Church of England polemics of the period. More specifically, I believe that the play utilizes the Puritan-Papist topos operative in such polemics, equating the ‘Puritan’ and the ‘Papist’ as the twin enemies of the moderate English Protestant. Hamlet’s anxious acceptance of soul-sleeping, a doctrine related primarily to nonconformist groups and individuals, adds to the store of his ‘Puritan’ associations and lends further support to this view, which should be given sustained attention in future work on the play. More broadly, the identification of each such reference and allusion refines our understanding of how these dramatic and literary devices were deployed, how they combined into more comprehensive topical and allegorical subtexts, how these subtexts interacted with the principal dramatic action, and how, ultimately, the English

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<sup>49</sup> Spalding, *Elizabethan Demonology*, 53–61.

<sup>50</sup> Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 239–44. More recently, see inter al. McCoy, *Faith in Shakespeare*, xii: ‘Shakespeare’s ambiguous presentation of the ghost in Hamlet . . . reflects the ambivalent quality of faith in Shakespeare’s plays’; Kastan, *A Will to Believe*, 135, 141–3: Hamlet is ‘intensely saturated with religious language, religious practices, and religious ideas, but their presence neither exhausts nor explains the play’s mysteries’; Loewenstein and Witmore, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, 2: the ‘religious ambiguity or tension dramatized in Hamlet’ is representative of the manner in which ‘Shakespeare’s plays give dramatic, imaginative, and provocative expression to diverse early-modern religious perspectives and faiths—some of them contradictory, paradoxical, and dissonant—without resolving them.’



drama of this period still managed to engage with 'matters of religion or of governance of the estate of the Commonwealth' in spite of repeated attempts to prevent it from doing so.

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