This essay examines the groundswell of interest in zombie literature and film in light of Shakespeare's recent assimilation into the popular subgenre. Although much has been written about Shakespeare's fascination with the undead—ghosts—I extend that analysis to his interest in the more aberrant case of zombieism. Drawing upon two early English accounts of physical revenants, I establish the longstanding folk belief in the return of the dead. While Shakespeare could not have understood zombieism precisely as we do today, he does seem to share our current preoccupation with the living dead. In fact, he repeatedly engages what later come to be the conventions of the genre, including the use of an aesthetic of horror; apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic settings; more-or-less-rotting corpses; the presence of infectious—pestilent—disease; the practice of witchcraft; and, most crucially, the revivification of the soulless dead, especially dead kindred. I pay especial attention to Old Hamlet's representation, particularly in Q2. Directors, filmmakers, and readers alike envision Old Hamlet in only one way—as spirit—while Shakespeare's text seems to accommodate perfectly well a zomboid understanding of his being. The essay also touches upon the zombiesque in King Lear, The Winter's Tale, and The Tempest, arguing that Shakespeare's language can and no doubt soon will accommodate a zombiesque staging of his plays that will remain, unlike recent pop adaptations (as in Hamlet, Zombie Killer of Denmark), faithful to the eeriness of the Shakespearean text.
Shakespeare and the Zombiesque

If Shakespeare “was not of an age, but for all time,”¹ perhaps we should not be surprised, given the groundswell of interest in zombie literature and film,² to see his assimilation into the popular subgenre. In Lori Handeland’s *Shakespeare Undead* (2010), he is a zombie-hunting vampire who joins forces with an unhappily married transvestite, Katherine Dymond (the Dark Lady of the sonnets, no less) to overcome a zombie horde that Shakespeare had raised from the dead. When, as might be expected, the zombies run amok, the necromancing bard “was sorry for the raising now.”³ In Chris Stiles’s stage adaptation, *Hamlet, Zombie killer of Denmark* (2010), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are—*pace* Stoppard—undead, along with Old Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes, Yorick, Bernardo, Francisco, and a host of others. In Scene 13, Hamlet asks the gravedigger whose grave it is he is digging:

GRAVEDIGGER: It be no one’s grave at the moment. Its owner has vacated.

HAMLET: Vacated? What do you mean?

GRAVEDIGGER: I mean, good sir, I bury the dead, but they don’t stay dead, they become undead, rising from the earth.

HAMLET: You’re speaking of Zombies?

GRAVEDIGGER: I’m surely not speaking to zombies. Terrible conversationalists, they are. Lots of groaning.⁴

As if this weren’t enough, there has also been a filmic travesty, Ryan Denmark’s campy *Romeo and Juliet vs. The Living Dead*, in which Romeo is a zombie with whom our eponymous heroine falls, as always, tragically in love.⁵

Will he nill he, Shakespeare and his plays are being pulled into undead culture, right along with other literary and political luminaries—witness the recent slate of book titles: *Pride*
and Prejudice and Zombies; Alice in Zombieland; Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter; Little Zombie Women; and, in a clever title riff, Jane Slayre. The question is whether Shakespeare needs to be dragged kicking and screaming, as it were, into zomboid culture, or whether, as I shall argue, his plays already uncannily anticipate—even comfortably inhabit—that world.

Shakespeare repeatedly engages what later come to be the conventions of zombie literature and film, including the use of an aesthetic of horror; apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic settings; more-or-less-rotting corpses; the presence of infectious—pestilent—disease; the practice of witchcraft; and, most crucially, the revivification of the dead, especially dead kindred. Hamlet in particular adumbrates and thus acts as a precursor to the genre of zombie literature. Genres are of course dynamic rather than static, subject to continual revision and innovation, but they are most fluid at their inception, before the conventions reify as such. This is the case with Shakespeare’s evocation of the living dead, which anticipates the zombieism with which we are so familiar today.

Although Catherine Belsey and Adam Cohen have recently treated the phenomenon of revivified corpses in the Shakespearean corpus, nothing has been written concerning Shakespeare’s precise engagement with zombieism. In one sense, this is perfectly understandable: the word zombie first appears in English only in the nineteenth century in the West Indies and southern United States. While Shakespeare could not have known the term, he nonetheless appears preoccupied with the prospect of the dead emerging from their graves. Commenting on the recognition scenes in the romances, Hans Urs von Balthasar regards the return of those presumed dead as a benign phenomenon: “[Shakespeare] takes the risk of portraying the return from the realm of the dead as a pure gift to those in mourning,” as a “metaphor for the grace of existence.” Yet Shakespeare also tantalizes us with a much darker
strain that is no gift, but a nightmare in which the dead stalk the living, “[m]aking night hideous, and . . . horridly to shake our disposition” (*Ham.* 1.4.54-55).\(^{11}\) Freud locates one expression of *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, precisely in this context: “Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead. . . .”\(^{12}\) Paulina, for one, suggests as “monstrous” the idea that her dead husband, Antigonus, should “break his grave / And come again to me . . .” (*WT* 5.1.41-43).

If the living dead—zombies—have received no attention from Shakespeareans, much work has been done on the undead, particularly the representation of ghosts on the early modern stage.\(^{13}\) Elizabeth Prosser has calculated that over fifty ghosts appeared on stage between 1560 and 1610; Stephen Greenblatt has further argued that “Shakespeare’s celebrated ghost scenes—easily the greatest in all of English drama—are signs of a deep interest that continues through virtually his entire career.”\(^{14}\) I want to extend the analysis of Shakespeare’s fascination with the undead to his interest in the more aberrant case of zombieism, the reanimation of the dead. While zombieism is a modern concept, the accommodating plasticity of Shakespeare’s language—the subterranean latency that “bodes some strange eruption to our state” (*Ham.* 1.1.73)—permits and even encourages us to read the figure of Old Hamlet as a potential or actual zombie. What’s more, he is merely one of several physical revenants who dot the Shakespearean landscape from *Hamlet* to *The Tempest*. Shakespeare in fact employs the tropes and conventions of zombie lore well before the genre’s formal emergence in 1968 with that lodestar of zombie cinema, George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*.\(^{15}\)

I

A zombie by definition is “a soulless corpse” originally “said to have been revived by witchcraft,” and this usage, surprisingly, is compatible with Shakespeare’s depiction of the living
dead, particularly, as we will see, in *The Tempest*. Yet zombies are not, strictly speaking, reanimated, at least not in the etymological sense that their soul or spirit—what Aristotle in *De Anima* calls the “the principle of life”—is reactivated or somehow reinstated in the body. In early Greek as well as Judeo-Christian thought, upon death the “dust returne to the earth as it was, and the spirit returne to God” or to some other ideal realm. *The Winter’s Tale* reflects this mind-body split. Leontes declares that he shall remain a widower unless Paulina chooses a wife like Hermione for him, but he insists there are

No more such wives, therefore no wife. One worse,

And better used, would make her sainted spirit
Again possess her corpse, and on this stage,
Where we’re offenders now, appear soul-vexed,
And begin, “Why to me?” (5.1.56-60)

If her spirit were to repossess her corpse, he tells us, then Hermione might appear once again before him, but otherwise it would be impossible. While Shakespeare never pronounces on the precise ontological status of his potential or actual walking dead, they are clearly unnatural, “soul-vexed” beings in whom something has gone terribly awry. As Hamlet says, ostensibly of Claudius but perhaps glancingly and suggestively of his father, whose ghost keeps reappearing to him, “The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—” (4.2.28-29). We’ll return to Old Hamlet’s thingness shortly.

In the early modern period, any apparent reanimation of the dead was already suspect: a sign that the devil “hath power” either to “assume a pleasing shape” (*Ham. 2.2.600-01*) or to ventriloquize the dead: “Hell can put life into a senseles body / and raise it from the grave, and make it speake, / Use all the faculties alive it did, / To worke the Devill’s hellish stratagems!”
As Peter Marshall remarks, Protestant reformers insisted that “a body cannot walk without a soul.”\textsuperscript{20} Much of this was of course a reaction to belief in and sightings of purgatorial spirits, which were anathema to the Reformers: “ghosts of departed persons are not the wandring soules of men, but the unquiet walkes of Devils. . . .”\textsuperscript{21} The authorized discourse was directed against ghostly revenants as mere Catholic superstition. Bodily resurrection could and would take place only at the Apocalypse: “certain it is,” John Foxe inveighed, “that no dead man materially can ever rise againe, or appeare, before the judgement day.”\textsuperscript{22} Zombification was not only not true; it was not even “dans le vrai (within the true)\textsuperscript{23}—within the framework of that which could be true—and thus outside the discursive and theological realms of possibility.

Yet folk beliefs in the living dead persisted despite official animadversions. The exempla of medieval sermons, for instance, “often included stories of ghosts and walking corpses in order to suitably impress the audience.”\textsuperscript{24} Among various old legends are two series of accounts of physical revenants, those who, as Jacqueline Simpson remarks, “are not ghosts in the usual sense of that word but ‘walking dead,’ corpses that have literally emerged from their graves.”\textsuperscript{25} In the earlier series, the Augustinian canon William of Newburgh relates four tales of the walking dead in his \textit{Historia Rerum Anglicarum} (ca. 1198), all the while attesting to their authenticity:

It would not be easy to believe that the corpses of the dead should sally (I know not by what agency) from their graves, and should wander about to the terror or destruction of the living, and again return to the tomb, which of its own accord spontaneously opened to receive them, did not frequent examples, occurring in our own times, suffice to establish this fact, to the truth of which there is abundant testimony.\textsuperscript{26}
Two centuries later, but just a few miles down the road, an anonymous author (presumably a monk) added some paranormal stories to an early fifteenth-century manuscript in the Cistercian abbey at Byland.\textsuperscript{27} One of his stories concerns three living kings who are “confronted,” as Belsey notes, “by three emaciated corpses.”\textsuperscript{28} Although she calls these figures “the walking dead,” Belsey regards them as ghosts.\textsuperscript{29} Yet she is distinctly aware of the problem their corporeity raises: “What were they, these living dead who defied the categories by which people reduced the world to knowledge? Although they are named as ‘spirits’ . . . [they] are nonetheless substantial.”\textsuperscript{30} Even more intriguing is Belsey’s juxtaposition of these “living dead”—her term—with Old Hamlet:

These figures are material, corporeal, and decomposing; they have come from their graves to confront the Living. When Hamlet calls the Ghost a dead corpse that has burst its cerements, cast up by the sepulcher to revisit the night (1.4.47-53), he invests the phantom with a physicality quite remote from the ethereal wraiths of Victorian imagining.\textsuperscript{31}

As with the emaciated corpses, Old Hamlet’s corporeality renders him a figure of the uncanny, of “what arouses dread and horror,”\textsuperscript{32} as Horatio confesses: “It harrows me with fear and wonder” (1.1.48).

We also ought to consider the implications of Belsey’s yoking of Old Hamlet with these “living dead”—the term we usually reserve for zombies. In a moment of striking ambivalence, the three figures’ very corporeity, coupled with their ambiguous identity, allows us to interpret them either as ghostly or as alive but not fully human; in short, as zombiesque. Old Hamlet can certainly be interpreted as a spirit—all three versions of Shakespeare’s play, as well as what little is known of the \textit{Ur-Hamlet}, refer to him as a ghost or spirit. Yet Shakespeare’s playscripts,
especially the Second Quarto of 1604/05, trouble and challenge such a univocal reading, as they contain little to prevent, and much to encourage, the use of a more subversive hermeneutic. This is not to insist on *Hamlet* as a zombie play, but merely on its receptivity to such a staging. *Hamlet* in fact accommodates the zombiesque in a number of ways, including Old Hamlet’s digging up the ground (1.5.71), the “earth” in which Hamlet assures Horatio that “[t]here are more things” going on “[t]han are dreamt of in your philosophy” (ll. 175-76).

**II**

Just before Old Hamlet makes his second entrance in the play, Horatio gives his wonder-wounded hearers a history lesson in Roman zombie lore:

> In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets. . . . (1.1.117-20)

The passage derives from Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*; Plutarch, however, has no reference to open graves, but only to “spirits running up and down in the night. . . .”^33^ Shakespeare’s “sheeted dead” would almost seem to conjure an image of ghosts, but these are instead actual corpses in their burial shrouds, what we would call the living dead. Shakespeare’s immediate source here, an instance of his “imitating himself,”^34^ is Calpurnia’s speech from *Julius Caesar* (ca. 1599): “A lioness hath whelped in the streets / And graves have yawned and yielded up their dead” (2.2.17-18).^35^ As George Walton William comments, Shakespeare’s classical sources—Plutarch in particular—“all mention the presence of spirits or ghosts in the city, [yet] none specifically says they come from ‘open graves’, as they do in *Julius*
Caesar. . .‖ That particular locution is exclusive to Scripture: “And the graves did open themselves, and many bodies of the Saints which slept, arose, and came out of the graves” as resurrected, and presumably fully human, persons. But in syncretizing his classical and New Testament sources, Shakespeare embodies the ghosts of Roman lore, changing them from the undead into what appear to be the subhuman living dead. In effect, Shakespeare begins to zombify his Plutarch.

To further the zombiesque effect, Shakespeare has these corpses squeaking and gibbering in the Roman streets, which Thompson and Taylor in the Arden 3 Hamlet gloss as having “made inarticulate noises (perhaps evoking those made by bats).” A more apt and appropriately eerie comparison is to the inarticulate and subhuman moaning that is a staple of zombie lore. William of Newburgh’s third tale, for instance, concerns an “excessively secular” chaplain at Melrose who, after he died, kept “issuing from the grave at night-time” “with loud groans and horrible murmurs, round the bedchamber of his former mistress.” At her request, a friar kept vigil over the cemetery: “Midnight had now passed by” when the dead chaplain appeared, “rushing upon him with a terrible noise, and [the friar] struck the axe which he wielded in his hand deep into his body. On receiving this wound, the monster groaned aloud, and, turning his back, fled. . .” Why do the living dead make such “terrible noise” and groan, or, as in Horatio’s equivalent, squeak and gibber? Because they are either soulless, as is the case with traditional voodoo zombies of cinema culture, or utterly lacking in consciousness, as in modern philosophy’s definition of a zombie. Whether brain-dead or sans an animating spirit, their speech pathologies are eminently understandable.
Shakespeare’s borrowing from Plutarch also presents a vexing textual problem, as Horatio’s entire speech is absent from both Q1 and F1. Where it does appear, in Q2, the passage quickly becomes garbled after the reference to the zombie flash mob who, again,

Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune’s empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse. (1.1.121-24)

Some sort of elaborate simile appears to be incompletely rendered here, but what remains gives us some idea of the passage’s intended trajectory. Horatio’s “trains of fire” and blood-dewed heavens conjure an apocalyptic image, one which he completes with his reference to the moon’s being “sick almost to doomsday.” With “more explicit references to doomsday than any other Shakespeare play,” Hamlet acts as a harbinger of conventions to come: “Zombie movies,” as Kyle Bishop remarks, “are almost always set during (or shortly after) the apocalypse.” Because of their physical slowness and dimwittedness—they literally hunger for brains—zombies thrive in apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic worlds where the societal infrastructure is broken and chaos reigns or is imminent. The tumult and war footing of the Danish court, which is about to be overthrown in a blood-drenched coup d’état, are palpable; as Hamlet keeps intimating, “doomsday” is “near” (2.2.239).

Horatio’s image of Roman revivification is certainly not the joyous reunion of the saints, as in Scripture or as in Balthasar’s theologically tinged reading of Shakespeare, but something more sinister, unnatural; in a word, zomboid. Horatio’s apocalyptic heavens constitute an early modern equivalent of the horror film, which is a distinct species of tragedy complete with
Aristotelian catharsis, the attendant pity and fear of which, as Gadamer argued, are meant to be overpowering in a way belied by perceptions of a gentle purgation of the emotions. At the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, for instance, Barbara (Judith O’Dea) is pulled outside the isolated house she has been hiding in, literally overwhelmed by a swarm of zombies, including her brother, Johnny (Russell Streiner), whose eerie refrain at the beginning of the film—“They’re coming to get you, Barbara!”—comes to ghoulish fruition. When discussion of Old Hamlet first occurs in the play, Horatio’s first question (in Q2), “What, has this thing appeared tonight?” (1.1.26), anticipates Hamlet’s “The King is a thing—” (4.2.229). Belsey remarks that the reference to *thing* “deepens the sense that something unnamable awaits its moment.” Even the play’s opening gambit—Bernardo’s “Who’s there”—resonates, eerily and uncannily, with any number of horror films when a character hears an unidentifiable, perhaps off-screen, but still diegetic, sound. From that first line, on a stage concerned with “the first corpse till he that died today” (1.2.105), we are continually treated to Hamlet’s aesthetic of horror, the “dreaded sight” and sounds that “assail your ears” (1.1.29, 35).

Old Hamlet’s ontological status is the real problem, as Hamlet notes: “Thou com’st in such a questionable shape. . .” (1.4.43). Questionable indeed. Writing of the day-to-day demands of early modern dramaturgy, Marshall remarks, “Most dramatists who placed ghosts on the stage did not unduly agonize over their precise ontological status,” which makes Hamlet’s statement all the more unusual. The characters continually refer to Old Hamlet as an indeterminate being: “Speak to it, Horatio” (1.1.49); “Is it not like the King?” (l. 62); “If it assume my noble father’s person, / I’ll speak to it” (1.2.249-50); and so on. What exactly is Old Hamlet? *It* is also used as an indefinite pronoun to refer to a skull—“This might be the pate of a politician . . . might it not?” (5.1.77-80)—as well as to the subhuman corpse of Polonius: “Tell us where ’tis, that we
may take it thence / And bear it to the chapel” (4.2.7-8). It is also more than a little ominous that a few lines after Horatio’s reference to the Roman “sheeted dead” who have risen from their now-tentantless graves, his ruminations are interrupted by the entrance of Old Hamlet. On one level, this would appear to return us from the living dead to the ghastly world of the merely undead. Yet the apposition is unsettling: one wonders if the figure of Old Hamlet offers less of a contrast to the Roman horde loitering in the streets than an uncanny resemblance to them, perhaps as one of their kind.

Notice, too, how at the moment of Old Hamlet’s entrance, Horatio’s evocation of the living dead moves seamlessly from classical Rome to current events:

    And even the like precurse of feared events,
    As harbingers preceding still the fates
    And prologue to the omen coming on,
    Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
    Unto our climatures and countrymen.

    Enter Ghost. (1.1.125-29)

Is one of these precursory events the raising of Danish dead as harbingers and “prologue to the omen coming on” stage in the form of Old Hamlet? Such a reading cannot be ruled out. Having conjured what he thought was Old Hamlet’s ghost to “Speak, speak!” (l. 55) during their first encounter, Horatio suggests in his Q2 speech that an apparition of the king would be a mere “mote . . . to trouble the mind’s eye” (l. 116) in comparison to the antique Roman (and local Danish) living dead whose stories he then proceeds to tell. His biblical allusion—“And why seest thou the mote, that is in thy brothers eye, and perceivest not the beame that is in thine own
— is revealing, as it subtly casts a zombie-like Old Hamlet as the far worse beam in their eyes to worry about.

Hamlet later asks whether he is “a spirit of health or goblin damned” (1.4.40), as if these are the only two possibilities. Old Hamlet’s reply, “I am thy father’s spirit” (l. 10), seems to place himself, ontologically speaking, in the spirit realm, presumably as a ghost. To be sure, the history of performance as well as interpretation regards Old Hamlet as an immaterial spirit—a point reinforced in the diaphanous ghost of recent filmic adaptations such as Michael Almereyda’s Manhattan biopic of the Prince of Denmark. Perhaps, however, we need not “take,” as Hamlet later does, “the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” (3.2.284-85). I would like to extend my reading of Old Hamlet’s “questionable shape” as tantalizing us with the prospect of a zombie emerging from the margins, both in the deconstructive sense of a marginal reading as well as in the literal sense of margin: “the ground immediately adjacent to a . . . body of water”—in this case the graves in which “your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body” (5.1.171-72).

III

Old Hamlet’s physicality is reinforced visually on stage and textually in the script. When Hamlet first sees him, he is struck by his bodily—material—presence, complete with “canonized bones” that “have burst their cerements,” or winding-sheets. Old Hamlet is described as a “dead corpse” for whom “the sepulcher” “[h]ath oped his ponderous and marble jaws / To cast thee up again” (1.4.47-52), just as it did for the Roman horde. Old Hamlet does not sound like a traditional ghost and, “from a more pragmatic standpoint,” as Cohen remarks, his physicality
may even be a function of theatrical necessity. Shakespeare had to use a flesh and
blood actor in order to portray the ghost of King Hamlet. . . . Instead of attempting
to obscure or gloss over this fact, he may be attempting to take advantage of it
. . . . While it is astounding to see ghosts on the stage, it is even more astounding
to see apparitions that are materially indistinguishable from actual corpses, ghosts
that literally matter.\textsuperscript{52}

Moreover, instead of simply disappearing instantaneously as a diaphanous ghost might be able
to, Old Hamlet exits in plodding fashion: “See, it stalks away” (1.1.54). To stalk is to walk
“stealthily,” often “for the purpose of killing,”\textsuperscript{53} and this is precisely the fear Old Hamlet’s initial
appearances occasion. The first Old Hamlet would have made some of his entrances and exits via
the trapdoor,\textsuperscript{54} thus suggesting the infernal, as in \textit{Dr. Faustus}.\textsuperscript{55} But emerging or, rather, erupting
from the ground resonates equally well with the Byland and Newburgh accounts of physical
revenants. “If,” on the other hand, “the Ghost merely walked on from the wings how could the
sentries have regarded it as a ghost?”\textsuperscript{56} Hamlet notes at one point, “Look where he goes even
now out at the portal!” (3.4.142). Without trapdoors, as in many modern productions, staging
Old Hamlet presents technical problems that are easily solved by having him walk on and off
stage, thus inviting ontological questions for sentries and audiences alike.

We tend to read Marcellus’s famous line, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”
(1.4.90), as a metaphor, but if we allow for a representation of Old Hamlet as a rotted corpse—
he has, after all, been decomposing anywhere from two to four months (3.2.126)\textsuperscript{57}—we can read
the line quite literally. Four months may appear to be a long time for Old Hamlet to appear “cap-
'à-pie” “[i]n the same figure like the King that’s dead” (1.1.45), the first clown informs us that
most “corpses nowadays” “will last you some eight year or nine year. A tanner will last you nine
year” (5.1.165-67). His informal musings on taphonomy—the decomposition rate of the human body—are anecdotally well-informed, if at times comically exaggerated. The tanner’s hide is virtually embalmed, “so tanned with his trade that ’a will keep out water a great while” (ll. 169-70). Humidity and rainfall—any form of water, in fact—is, as the clown informs us in Q1, a “parlous devourer of your dead body, a great soaker.” To inter or inhume a corpse, as was done with both Ophelia and Old Hamlet, can also delay skeletonization beyond a year. Old Hamlet appeared to Horatio “[a]rmèd at point exactly” (1.2.201), but it is not clear whether he was buried thusly; if he were, his armature would have offered some protection from the “convocation of politic worms,” “maggots,” and other carrion insects (4.3.20, 22-23), the absence of which would likewise slow the rate of fossilization.

The single greatest factor on bodily decay, however, is ambient temperature. That Old Hamlet was buried in late fall or early winter, when Danish temperatures would have been near or below freezing, means that his body could have been preserved by the frost, with much if not all of his body’s soft—fleshy—tissue still intact. But the process of decomposition would nonetheless be underway, and the stench after two months, even in the “bitter cold” of winter (1.1.8), would be hard to stomach, as Hamlet notes both of Yorick’s skull—“And smelt so? Pah!” (5.1.200)—and of Polonius’s soon-to-putrefy flesh: “if you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby” (4.3.36-38). When Old Hamlet enters Gertrude’s chamber, he is described as “A king of shreds and patches” (3.4.106), recalling Yorick’s motley while also hinting at his own decay. From a taphonomic standpoint, one could stage Old Hamlet in a state of advanced putrescence, with the visible ear and head wound typical of cinematic zombies; or as seemingly hale as he was in life; or anywhere in between. Old Hamlet is, more or less, a rotting corpse.
Hamlet and the gravedigger relentlessly place dead and decaying corpses at the center of the frame in 5.1, despite Horatio’s thinking it “too [curious] to consider so” (ll.205-06). Hamlet asks, “Who is to be buried in’t?,” only to receive the gravedigger’s retort, “One that was a woman, sir, but, rest her soul, she’s dead.” (ll. 135-36). The digger’s equivocation attests to the subhuman status of the dead Ophelia. His allusion to Christian theology reminds us, if only obliquely, of the similarity between her case and that of the peripatetic Roman horde whose souls also appear to be absent from their bodies. Hamlet further invokes the ubi sunt topos in regard to Yorick—“Where be your gibes now? (ll. 188-89)—and to a dead lawyer—“Where be his quiddities, now” (l. 99)—the latter a subtle reminder of the quidditas of scholastic theology, the essence or soul that would now be divorced from their corpses. If Hamlet’s “inwardness is his most radical originality,” as Harold Bloom suggests, it would be all the more ironic, and equally radical, for Hamlet also to bring in to view characters with no seeming inwardness or soul. The zombiesque keeps irrupting from the margins of the text.

Even Old Hamlet’s declaration that he is a (purgatorial) spirit, “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night” (1.5.11), scarcely settles his ontological status. Unlike the numerous references to Old Hamlet as a thing, as a dead corpse, and as it, there are only five references to him as a ghost, which we have always interpreted to mean bodiless spirit. But the word ghost is highly variable—the OED records thirteen distinct valences, the ninth of which, now obsolete, defines a ghost as “a corpse.” This usage was operative from at least 1567, and the OED cites Shakespeare as having used it in this sense as early as Henry VI, part 2. None of Hamlet’s uses of ghost necessitates that we interpret its signification in only one way. Consider Hamlet’s warning to his friends that they had best let him follow Old Hamlet: “Unhand me gentlemen. / By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me!” (1.4.84-85). He could be referring to a spirit or
to a corpse or to both. “Today,” as Cohen notes, “we draw clear distinctions between a spirit or
ghost on one hand and a revivified dead body on another, but Shakespeare seems to intentionally
cloud this distinction. . . .”68

If one reads Old Hamlet as a physical revenant who, as in Q1, pantaloonishly enters
Gertrude’s chamber “in his night-gown,”69 then reading the multivalent ghost as signifying a
corpse would allow the marginal to move to the center of a contemporary production. With the
obsolescence of ghost to denote a corpse, directors, filmmakers, and readers alike envision Old
Hamlet in only one way, as a spirit, while Shakespeare’s text seems to accommodate perfectly
well a zombiesque understanding of his being. In neat chiastic fashion, too, Hamlet can be read
as the story both of a father who walks out of his grave into the air and of a son who “walk[s] out
of the air” and “[i]nto [his] grave” (2.2.206-07). Hamlet leaps in Ophelia’s grave and voices his
wonderfully compressed claim to the throne: “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane!” (5.1.257-58). Both
his words and actions identify the living son with his dead father. The distinction between the
two men is blurred by the eerie verbal and visual affirmations Hamlet offers us of Old Hamlet
risen from the grave.

Hamlet’s use of “contagion” and infectious disease imagery generally—“plague”
(4.7.14); “pestilence” (5.1.178); “infected” (3.2.256), “diseased” (ll. 20-21)—provide yet another
anticipatory link to the subgenre, as zombie films “graphically represent the inescapable realities
of unnatural death (via infection, infestation, and violence). . . .”70 Indeed, in an age where the
theaters were closed repeatedly for fear of unnatural death via infectious plague,71 it is no more
surprising that Shakespeare invokes the zombiesque on his stage than modern cinema has since
9/11 as well as the pandemic scares of SARS and bird flu.72 In 1603 alone, as Camden recorded,
“there died in London 38,244; of which number there were 30,578 of the Plague.”73 Eric Mallin
has argued that “[t]he second quarto of *Hamlet*, contemporaneous with a deadly epidemic,” is
riddled with plague references in response to it.\textsuperscript{74} However topical the references, the
atmospheric conditions in Elsinore—“a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” (2.2.303-04)—would seem to situate its *mise-en-scène* comfortably within the zombiesque.

The association of pestilence and zombies is a longstanding one. Consider the leitmotif of
contagion in William of Newburgh’s second account of the living dead, which retells the story of
a wealthy “rogue” who “after his death sallied forth (by the contrivance, as it is believed, of
Satan) out of his grave by night. . . .”\textsuperscript{75} The “wiser” sort among the townsfolk felt the need to act
immediately against this Tasmanian devil for fear that “the atmosphere, infected and corrupted
by the constant whirlings through it of the pestiferous corpse, would engender disease and death
to a great extent. . . .”\textsuperscript{76} William’s fourth and final tale concerns “a certain man of evil conduct”
who had, like Old Hamlet (1.5.78-80), died unshriven—“destitute of Christian grace.” He
subsequently emerged “from his grave at night-time” and, again like Old Hamlet, “wandered
through the courts and around the houses. . . .” The townspeople feared encountering him “and
being beaten black and blue by this vagrant monster. But these precautions were of no avail: for
the atmosphere, poisoned by the vagaries of this foul carcase, filled every house with disease and
death by its pestiferous breath.”\textsuperscript{77} The idea has proven equally infectious on the contemporary
stage: John Heimbuch’s *William Shakespeare’s Land of the Dead* sets *Henry V* amidst a plague
that quickly zombifies the infected.\textsuperscript{78} At the very least, Old Hamlet is a figurative “transmitter of
destruction,” “pour[ing] another venom, the virulent narrative of his death, into Hamlet’s ears.”\textsuperscript{79}
At the worst, he is a walking carrier of the plague.
IV

Lest my reading of Old Hamlet seem too marginal, consider a number of allusions to zombiesque corpses in Shakespeare’s *oeuvre*, beginning with *King Lear*. Asked the whereabouts of his “servant Caius,” Lear responds as if Caius is a zombie about to kill the living: “He’s a good fellow, I can tell you that; He’ll strike, and quickly too. He’s dead and rotten” (5.3.288-90). Caius will strike “quickly,” as one of the quick, even though he is among the dead, or living dead, as thus envisioned. In *The Tempest*, too, while “neglecting worldly ends” back in Milan (1.2.89), Prospero had in their stead begun to acquire skills as a sorcerer: “I have bedimmed / The noontide sun,” he tells us. His powers culminate in his realization of the Faustian dream of resurrecting the dead:80 “graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let ’em forth / By my so potent art” (5.1.41-42, 48-50).81 As with the earlier references to the Roman “sheeted dead,” Prospero’s claim makes indisputably clear that Shakespeare pushes beyond the raising of mere spirits. These are *sleepers*, which is a frequent metaphor for the dead in Scripture and elsewhere.82 Naseeb Shaheen also detects in the passage another echo of Matthew’s “And the graves did open themselves. . . .”83 While we never learn the precise status of Prospero’s revivified corpses, it is reasonable to interpret them as zombie-like rather than as fully human. Prospero recoils from what he has done as something unnatural: “But this rough magic / I here abjure . . .” (5.1.50-51). This unerringly anticipates the modern definition, as we saw earlier, of a zombie as a corpse “said to have been revived by witchcraft.”

If we recall Paulina’s fear that the dead Antigonus should “break his grave / And come again to me . . .” (*WT* 5.1.42-43), she envisions the same nightmarish scenario realized in Prospero’s macabre sorcery. What would Antigonus’s return to life mean; what, in other words, would be the ontological status of his body? “At the sound of the Last Trumpet,” according to
Christian theology, the resurrected saints “would be perfect, agile, and luminous (like the transfigured body of Christ). . . .” In Paulina’s pagan eyes, a resurrected corpse would not be luminous, but ominous, sinister, as in Horatio’s Roman horde squeaking and gibbering in the streets, or as in Prospero’s equally horrified recollection of the dead whom he has raised. We never learn the precise status of these potential or actual revenants, but it is safe to say that in their corporeity as well as in their soullessness (or lack of consciousness), theirs would not be a return to the status quo pre mortem, but something remarkably akin to and consistent with a modern understanding of zombieism.

Although there are no flesh-eating scenes in Hamlet (see Titus), his plays often adhere quite closely to zombie conventions. It is telling, for example, that in both Hamlet and The Winter’s Tale, zombification is a family affair: “Audiences fear these ghouls for a number of obvious reasons: they are corpses raised from the dead, and, more significantly, they are the corpses of the known dead, what horror scholar R. H. W. Dillard calls ‘dead kindred.’” Such effects belong to the realm of the uncanny, the Freudian “class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” In Romero’s groundbreaking film, again, it is the brother—attacked and killed in a graveyard in the opening scene—who returns to infect his sister. In their horrific imaginary conjured by Old Hamlet, Hamlet’s friends fear the same fate for him, but he braces for the action: “’Tis now the very witching time of night, / When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood . . .” (3.2.387-89). Hamlet’s aesthetic of horror could easily serve as the storyboard or trailer for a zombie film.

Likewise, in the inverted Pietà scene from the F1 version of King Lear, the dying father looks upon the dead Cordelia and declares, “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look
thee, look there!” (5.3.316-17). R. A. Foakes notes, “What he sees or thinks he sees has been much debated; to some it seems a final cruel delusion if he imagines Cordelia to be alive, to others a blessed release for him in a moment of imagined reunion.” Both of these explanations are united in considering Lear’s alleged sighting illusory. I would like to suggest a tertium quid (or terrestre quid), a zombiesque reading of the scene based on Kent’s and Edgar’s allusive commentary. “Is this the promised end?” Kent asks, to which Edgar replies, “Or image of that horror?” (ll. 268-69). Their response not only does not deny but actually seems to confirm Lear’s claim—and they are horrified at the prospect of her corpse revivifying beneath their very eyes. Equally remarkable—typical of Shakespeare’s religious syncretism—is the prochronism in Edgar’s pre-Christian reference to the “promised end” of the Last Judgment when the dead shall be raised. Pagans such as Paulina or Edgar and Kent have no conception of bodies transfigured as in the apostle Paul’s depiction of the end times: “and the dead shal be raised up incorruptible . . . .” Quite the contrary: for Cordelia to mist Lear’s looking glass can only signify to Edgar and Kent the apocalyptic, horrifying rise of a zombie-like corpse.

Zombies are said to prefigure our own death, our coming decay made visibly manifest, glimpses of which we see in the loitering Roman horde; in the potentially revivified Antigonus; in Old Hamlet; in Prospero’s reanimated corpses; and perhaps in the dead Cordelia as well. Other than Old Hamlet, Shakespeare’s living dead are either imagined or raised up offstage, making them more imaginatively horrific, ripe for the contemporary stage and screen with their technical capacities to mount the zombiesque. Shakespeare need not have had our precise understanding of zombieism in order to share our preoccupation with the possible reanimation of lifeless corpses. Macbeth reminds us of this in his echo of the Newburgh and Byland abbey accounts: “The time has been / That, when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end; but now they
rise again . . .‖ (3.4.79-81). We hardly need to do violence to the Shakespearean text, as in Stiles’s Hamlet, Zombie killer of Denmark or Handeland’s Shakespeare Undead, in order to locate zomboid violence in Shakespeare’s plays. Zombie scholar Peter Dendle has called George Romero the “Shakespeare of zombie cinema”93; I think it only fair to call Shakespeare the George Romero of the early modern zombiesque.

Why, finally, is there so much ado today about Shakespeare and zombies? Our own age—postmodern, secularizing—appears to be as fascinated by the material return of the dead as Shakespeare’s was of the immaterial. Stiles has given us a zomboid Old Hamlet in a play based very loosely on Hamlet, but the time cannot be far away—perhaps should not be if Shakespeare is to remain our contemporary94—when productions faithful to Shakespeare’s language offer us a zombiesque Hamlet or King Lear. Along those lines, Shakespeare’s plays anticipate one further convention of zombieism—the quick revivification of the dead; one must dispose of a corpse almost instantly because zombification occurs within minutes after death. Shakespeare had already experimented with quick revivification in Desdemona’s eerie if momentary return from the dead to exonerate her murderous husband (Oth. 5.2.127-28). What if, contrary to current staging practice, Cordelia’s lips were actually to move in response to Lear’s assertion? And what if, as I suggested, her sentience is seen and acknowledged by Kent and Edgar or, even more eerily, goes unseen by them? Moments later Edgar declares that Lear, like his daughter, is “gone indeed” (5.3.321). Speaking for those of us who have seen too many horror films, I wouldn’t be so sure: Edgar’s apodictic assurance is the raw material out of which the zombiesque irresistibly emerges.
Notes


5 Ryan Denmark, dir., *Romeo and Juliet vs. The Living Dead*, 2009.


*OED*, s.v. zombie.


15 George A. Romero, dir., *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968. Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie* (1932) is the original zombie film, but the real vogue for both zombie literature and film does not occur until Romero’s film.

16 *OED*, s.v. zombie. A zombie was originally “the name of a snake-deity in voodoo cults of . . . West Africa and Haiti,” and this seems entirely consistent with the exotic paganism and sorcery associated with Shakespeare’s Bermudan isle.


27 The manuscript is transcribed in M. R. James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” *The English Historical Review* 37, no. 147 (July 1, 1922): 413–422. See also Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, 16, 256; and Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?,” 389.


29 Belsey, 10, 16.

30 Belsey, 20, her italics.

31 Belsey, 12.


33 Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 7 (New York: Columbia UP, 1973), 83.


35 Consider, too, the minor character Balthasar’s singing a song to Diana in which he asks, “Graves, yawn and yield your dead, / Till death be utterèd, / Heavily, heavily” (*Ado* 5.3.19-21).


40 William of Newburgh, 659.


46 Belsey, “Shakespeare’s Sad Tale for Winter,” 3. Belsey distinguishes between what she regards as the awe and wonder of Marcellus’s asking the question in Q1 and F1, and the skepticism of Horatio’s asking it in Q2.

1.1.44-54, 143-54, 1.2.215-20, 248; 1.4.38, 58, 61-63, 66-69, 79; 1.5.174; and 3.4.140.


*Cohen, Wonder in Shakespeare*, 46.

*Cohen, Wonder in Shakespeare*, 46.


There is some discrepancy in the stated time since interment: Hamlet insists that his father has been dead for two months (3.2.128-29), or possibly even less (1.2.138), while Ophelia puts the date four months ago.

*OED*, s.v. taphonomy.

Mann, Bass, and Meadows, “Time Since Death and Decomposition of the Human Body,” 106. In optimal conditions for fossilization—high humidity; unburied, exposed corpses with open wounds; the presence of carrion insects—the human body can skeletonize in as little as two to four weeks.

Mann, Bass, and Meadows, 107.

Mann, Bass, and Meadows, 105.


Thompson and Taylor, Hamlet, 416–17n.


OED, s.v. ghost. An apparition can also be material; see OED, s.v. apparition.

Warwick comments upon seeing the dead body of Humphrey, the Duke of Gloucester, “Oft have I seen a timely-parted ghost, / Of ashy semblance, meager, pale, and bloodless” (3.2.161-62). Gloucester’s ghost is merely his corpse.

Cohen, Wonder in Shakespeare, 45.

Shakespeare, The First Quarto of Hamlet, 11.56 S.D.


On plague and the closing of the theaters, see Ackroyd, Shakespeare, 419; Jonathan Bate, Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare (New York: Random House, 2009), 335; and Gary Taylor, “Shakespeare Plays on Renaissance Stages,” in The


76 William of Newburgh, 658.

77 William of Newburgh, 660.


81 Prospero’s reference derives most directly from Medea’s claim, “I call up dead men from their graves” in Golding’s 1567 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. See Geoffrey


84 Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, 226. See also Berry and Whittingham, *The Geneva Bible*, 1 Cor. 15:51–54; and the priest’s statement that Ophelia “should in ground unsanctified [be] lodged / Till the last trumpet” (5.1.229-30).


86 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 220.

87 Romero, *Night of the Living Dead*.


