More things in heaven and earth: the role of ghosts and the supernatural in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

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The supernatural has always been a popular theme amongst novelists and film makers. Today entire sections of bookstores are devoted to the strange and paranormal, whilst whole television channels churn out programs featuring anything from vampires and werewolves to witches and wizards. One of the reasons this theme appeals so much to writers and audiences alike, is its ability to make the strange and unnerving seem appealing and seductive. Gothic creations such as Stevenson’s Mr Hyde or Stoker’s Count Dracula have often been interpreted as metaphors for the more depraved, sinful side of human nature. Consequently, most stories use a set of rules that represent the morals that mortals must follow to recognise and defeat these dangerous creatures, restoring the world to a more natural state. For example, a vampire’s lustful, blood thirsty nature comes to life at night but can be driven back with the use of religious symbols such as the crucifix.

However, the ghost, perhaps one of the most prominent components of the supernatural, seems to avoid any of these laws and has often taken a number of very different and often contradictory forms. In Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black* (1983), the ghost is able to choose when she is visible and also possesses the ability to affect her surroundings in order to cause the deaths of the other characters. However, in the film *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990), spirits are ‘good’ people with unfinished worldly issues, who are invisible to the living and only able to affect small parts of the mortal world. Therefore, apart from being removed from the living world in some way, there seem to be no definitive rules as to what a ghost actually is, making them (perhaps appropriately) vague, unclear and difficult to define.

It is precisely this ambiguous identity that makes the ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* just as troubling for the audience as they are for the protagonists. As Samuel Johnson points out in his essay on *Hamlet*, both of the plays create a feeling of uncertainty from the very beginning, where Hamlet is unsure of his own father’s ‘questionable shape’ (1.4.24), and Banquo demonstrates anxiety over the witches by asking them ‘Live you, or are you aught / That man may question.’ (1.3.40) (Johnson [1745] 1975, 968). Ambiguous as they are, the questions raised by the spirits in these scenes are integral to the resulting action. Therefore, by
examining the way in which Shakespeare uses the supernatural, it should be possible to gain a better understanding of how it represents and develops the wider themes and issues within the plays.

The very first lines of *Hamlet* seem to be designed to prepare the audience for the ideas that will develop as the play progresses.

BARNARDO  Who’s there?
FRANCISCO  Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself. (1.1.1-2)

This opening exchange is set upon the gloomy, gothic battlements of the castle as the watchmen stumble through the dark, afraid of meeting the ghost that the audience will discover has already appeared twice before. As an opening image, this immediately introduces an element of the supernatural in order to unnerve the audience and convey the sense of uncertainty that runs throughout the play. As well as this, the dialogue hints at the way in which the dark battlements can be read as a metaphor for the way in which Hamlet is struggling with his own sense of identity, which his father’s ghost later forces him to ‘unfold’ in order to restore a natural order to the usurped throne.

When the ghost of King Hamlet eventually speaks to the Prince, Shakespeare seems to ensure that the feelings of uncertainty are not removed as an audience may expect. Instead, the ambiguity of the ghost’s intent and role within the play are only increased, which is again something that is reflected on stage through Hamlet’s own reactions. Despite the apparition taking his father’s form, Hamlet is cautious of the spirit’s intentions and finds himself unable to act upon his promise to avenge his father due to conflicts with his moral and religious characteristics. Arguably, Shakespeare is exploring the idea of the conflicts between morality and a greater sense of duty, something that is reflected in Hamlet’s ‘To be, or not to be’ soliloquy where he contemplates the difference between life and death as an analogy for taking action or being passive. Campbell and Quinn argue that:

The soliloquies are the passages that most clearly reveal Hamlet’s struggle on the one hand to obey the Ghost’s sacred injunction and on the other to follow the dictate of his own nature … They relate what is passing through his mind to moral
imperatives and religious principles. In the ‘To be or not to be’ speech Hamlet considers the implications of his undertaking the career of an avenger to which he has just dedicated himself. (1966, 288)

Shakespeare is therefore using the supernatural as a dramatic device through which he can convey Hamlet’s uncertainty to the audience by forcing them to consider his predicament from their own perspective. In this sense the ghost is used as a powerful device that crosses the divide between actors and the audience, affecting both ‘worlds’ and crucially blurring the audience’s perception of what is presented as real and what is a representation of Hamlet’s internal struggle. This would have been especially significant to an Elizabethan audience whose Christian beliefs would have suggested that King Hamlet’s spectre was a product of Prince Hamlet’s deranged mind, for as Campbell and Quinn point out:

Hamlet is no pagan avenger of Icelandic saga, but a Christian Elizabethan who adopted the current confused beliefs of his age about ghosts…The Protestants, having banished purgatory from their theology, held that a man once dead could find no exit from heaven or hell. Therefore, such spectres as the ghost of Hamlet’s father were either illusions of minds unhinged by melancholy or devils masquerading as spirits of the departed in order to lure the persons they address to damnation. (1966, 288)

However, from the very beginning the audience has been told that other characters are able to see the ghost and Horatio is even able to describe him in detail:

MARCELLUS Is it not like the King?
HORATIO As thou art to thyself.
Such was the very armour he had on
When he th’ambitious Norway combated. (1.1.57-60)

This raises important questions about the objectivity of King Hamlet’s ghost. Just as Hamlet questions whether it is really the spirit of his father who is visiting him, so does the audience, again taking advantage of the ambiguous nature of the supernatural imagery to link the audience’s state of mind to that of the protagonist. Robert West argues that if:
the pneumatological evidence in *Hamlet* is ambiguous, it is either because Shakespeare thought it unimportant to post the audience by its means on the ultimate nature of the ghost, or because he thought it desirable to keep the audience a little uncertain about it. (1955, 1111)

The pneumatological evidence mentioned here, is a reference to the established ideas and ‘laws’ that an audience of the time would have expected ghosts in drama to adhere to. However, as I have already mentioned, the concept of the ghost is far too vague to be fixed to a set of laws. Therefore, by suggesting that Shakespeare is purposefully ignoring the established pneumatological evidence, West seems to be confirming that he is indeed being deliberately ambiguous about his supernatural characters in an attempt to subvert the audience’s expectations.

Therefore the identity of the ghost in *Hamlet* is certainly not as easy to define, as an Elizabethan audience may have liked it to be. If King Hamlet is a product of Hamlet’s deranged state then why is it that the watchmen are also able to see him? Furthermore, to add to this confused identity, we are later shown that Gertrude is unable to see the apparition. These constant contradictions deny the audience an easy way of identifying the ghost as real, or a product of Hamlet’s disturbed state of mind. As West points out, the supernatural is being used to increase the dramatic impact of the play by distorting the audience’s own ideas of death and identity and therefore allowing them to identify with Hamlet’s situation.

… [Shakespeare] knowingly gave precedence to dramatic considerations over pneumatological ones, and that, for *Hamlet* particularly, this required a confusion of pneumatological dogma. (1955, 1113)

In *Macbeth* the supernatural also plays a large role in exploring the theme of identity. However, the supernatural elements of the play differ greatly from those found in Hamlet; the most important difference being that the witches do not have any wrong doing for Macbeth to put right. This apparently random interference of the witches and the subsequent chaos it causes in the kingdom is likely to stem from the fact that Shakespeare was writing the play to be performed for King James, who was notorious for his belief in the evils of witchcraft:
These witches conform exactly to King James’ beliefs. Their every act confirms the truth of his suspicions…By seeking and accepting their aid Macbeth becomes guilty, albeit indirectly, of trafficking with the Prince of Darkness. This vivid way of dramatizing a man’s bondage to evil has enthralled every spectator or reader of the tragedy, as, in a peculiar sense, it must have enthralled King James. (Campbell and Quinn 1966, 484)

Aside from the rather sweeping statements made at the end of this quotation, it should be noted that Macbeth never actually seeks the witches help until after their first meeting. In fact, it is the witches that seek Macbeth at the beginning of the play. However, his instant and incautious commitment to fulfilling the prophecy is a stark contrast to Hamlet’s slow battle with his morality, showing how the supernatural is used differently in the plays to expose vastly different character traits. Furthermore, the sudden change in Macbeth from the seemingly likeable and noble character to an immoral, villainous one, can either be seen as another damning account of the evils of witchcraft, or a subtle warning of power’s ability to corrupt. After all, it is Lady Macbeth who finally convinces her husband to actively pursue the prophecy and kill the King in his sleep (1.7.61-72). She condemns Macbeth for his cautious character, challenging his manhood: ‘When you durst do it, then you were a man’ (1.7.49), whilst adopting a more ‘masculine’ mode herself:

LADY MACBETH…unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th’access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th’effect and it. (1.5.39-45)

She even takes it upon herself to ensure that what needs to be done is seen through:

MACBETH I’ll go no more
I am afraid to think what I have done
Look on’t again I dare not.
LADY MACBETH

Infirm of purpose
Give me the daggers …
I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt (2.2.48-55).

Despite this, both protagonists remain fully responsible for their actions, or inaction, throughout the play. Macbeth may have many different influences acting upon him, but it is not the knowledge of his fate that drives him to murder, it is his submission to his ambition and lust for power. In both plays, the ghosts and witches are only able to provide information on what has happened, and in both circumstances the protagonists seek proof before taking action. Hamlet sets up the play within a play, and Macbeth waits for confirmation of his new title before plotting to pursue the witches’ prophecy. Crucially, the witches do not specify how Macbeth will become King, nor can King Hamlet’s ghost take his own revenge on Claudius. To actively take part in such events would not only change the plots dramatically but also destroy the protagonists’ underlying struggle to come to terms with their actions and humanity.

Time is another theme that Shakespeare explores through the use of the supernatural in both plays. Hamlet is haunted by a ghost of the past, who demands that the wrongs of the past are avenged and restored to normal. In contrast, Macbeth is concerned about his future, hence his submission to his violent ambition. As I have mentioned, his rise to power is meaningless in the face of his inability to leave behind a successor, who can continue to reign once he has died. This is perhaps why the ghost of Banquo haunts Macbeth, for it is Banquo who will represent the future line of kings, rather than King Duncan. Finally, of course, Macbeth begins to realise the futility of his struggle to maintain power in the face of an uncertain future.

MACBETH

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle. (5.5.18)
Hamlet also discusses the way in which great men are returned to nothing more than dust when they pass away:

HAMLET
Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t’expel the winter’s flaw! (5.1.196)

This may at first appear to be a similar feeling to that of Macbeth’s; however, in remembering the deeds of Caesar and Alexander, Hamlet is showing how it is possible to live on through memory of great deeds performed in a lifetime. This is furthered by his comment that he knew Yorick (5.1.171-80). Even though he is disturbed at the way humans return to dust, the audience is shown how memory can keep preserve life, something that Macbeth neglects in his blind ambition to secure power.

The use of the supernatural is therefore very different for both characters, however it serves the same dramatic purpose of externalising the internal mental struggles each character goes through. In *Hamlet* the focus on past events and the clash between Hamlet’s moral standards and his sense of duty is externalised by the memory of his father. Whereas, by hearing his fate through the witches self-fulfilling prophecy, Macbeth’s ambition is awakened as he desperately tries to secure a future, spurred on by the futility of having no offspring like Banquo. Hamlet therefore struggles with his humanity, whilst in contrast Macbeth neglects to think about his through his concerns over his mortality.

Another interesting difference is the appearance of the ghosts themselves. Horatio describes the ghost of King Hamlet as wearing the armour from a previous ferocious battle, perhaps to emphasise his anger at being murdered without the chance to confess his sins and then buried without the appropriate religious ceremony. In contrast, Banquo appears to Macbeth covered with twenty trenched gashes on his head (3.4.80), suggesting that, unlike King Hamlet, only Macbeth is able to see the ghost, which the audience is likely to interpret as a physical representation of his own guilty conscience. At the feast, Macbeth seems to be able to exert some power over his conscience, forcing the ghost ‘hence’ and recovering himself. Shakespeare is again using the ghosts as a dramatic device that force the internal thoughts of
the characters outwards, showing the audience, both on and off stage, that his struggle to come to terms with what he has done is making it difficult for him to control his guilty conscience. Elmer Stoll maintains that:

> the words of Macbeth are words of impiety, of a classical Infatuation and Insolence, and they are answered from the other world. They fly in the face of Heaven, and…are hurled back upon the speaker’s head. (1907, 209)

Just like the ghost of King Hamlet however, the subjectivity of Banquo’s ghost is still debateable. Stoll’s essay, ‘Objectivity of the Ghosts in Shakespeare’, argues against the idea of Banquo’s ghost as a vision conjured only by Macbeth’s guilty conscience.

> Banquo’s Ghost, then, rises not because Macbeth remembers the words of the murderer, but because the ghost must be like the corpse. It is no matter of psychology of symbolism, but the exceedingly simple matter of a story hanging together. (1907, 216)

However, this conclusion appears a little weak if it is taken into account that Banquo appears just as the murderer has described him, and very shortly after this description. Also, given the way that Shakespeare has demonstrated a disregard for pneumatological rules, it is unreasonable to think that the ghost appears as it does just because it must conform to the same law as the Ghost of Hector in the Aeneid, who, by stark contrast, appeared in a dream. Again, it is probable that the apparition is meant to be deliberately ambiguous, both to the audience and to Macbeth, making physical (or perhaps metaphysical) his fears of Banquo’s children retaking the throne while he has no power to create his own line of Kings and pointing out the cruel irony of a man who is told his future, bit is incapable of sustaining it.

Therefore, whether it is Hamlet’s objective ghost from the past or Macbeth’s subjective visions of the future, it is clear that the supernatural elements of both plays are essential to the way in which the key themes of identity and mortality are conveyed to the audience. Contradictions in the concept of the ghosts, such as who is able to see them, as well as the ambiguous way in which they can be interpreted as real or representations of internal struggles, mean that the audience is prevented from settling on a comfortable, easy
Why explanations for them. This disturbs their sense of identity, just as it does the characters in the play, blurring the boundaries between actor and audience and forcing them to confront the same questions that Hamlet and Macbeth face as they struggle to find a sense of purpose in their corrupted worlds.

Usually explanations of supernatural figures tend to reduce their proper effect of awe and mystery, but the indecisive explanations Shakespeare gives and the standard questions he raises rather tend to create awe and mystery...In contemporary consciousness such experience kept a preponderance of terror and doubt that overrode normal confidence in pneumatological rationalizations. We see just this overriding take place in the sceptical Horatio, and Shakespeare meant, perhaps, that it should take place in the audience too. (West 1955, 1114)

Shakespeare uses the supernatural in these plays a metaphor for many different things, from the physical manifestation of Macbeth’s immoral acts and guilty conscience, to Hamlet’s sense of duty toward his family and the natural order. However, what is arguably most important about Shakespeare’s use of the supernatural is not the form it takes, but the way in which it is used as a dramatic device that disrupts the audience’s expectations and forces them into engaging with the plays central themes and issues.

References

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