Aspects of the Supernatural in Shakespearean Tragedy

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FOREWORD

Much of the reading on witchcraft, demonism, and the like reflected in the following pages was done in the libraries of the University of North Carolina and of Princeton, in the all too brief intervals between the end of the first summer term at Southwestern and the beginning of the fall session. Two summer grants, from the Southern Fellowships Fund and from research funds provided by Southwestern, made working in these libraries possible.

My interest in the function of the supernatural in literature began many years ago with a dissertation on "The Supernatural in Epic". In considering its function in tragedy, I have relied a great deal on C. E. Whitmore's *Supernatural in Tragedy*. As will be clear in these pages, I have sought to consider the uses of the supernatural in Shakespeare's tragedies in the light of the prevailing popular and learned views about it set forth in numerous sixteenth and seventeenth century documents, *i.e.,* to "see" the plays as the majority of Shakespeare's audience presumably saw them.

I have intended to give credit, in these pages, to sources of fact and ideas, but after many years of reading about Shakespeare, one inevitably forgets some distinctions of *meum* and *tuum,* and commits unconscious plagiarisms.

A. T. JOHNSON

Aspects of the Supernatural in Shakespearean Tragedy

The just admiration for the genius and timelessness of Shakespeare has sometimes led commentators to assume that his knowledge of natural science, psychology, and religion, for example, is virtually as up-to-date as that of the average man of the present times, at least in its fundamental assumptions and that he would therefore have relegated such crude supernaturalism as ghosts, demons, and witches to the role of mere machinery or pure symbolism. Even the ghost of *Hamlet* is said to have been reduced, in modern performance, to a ray of light and a phonograph record, the ghosts of *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar* to subjective hallucination or conventional stage machinery, by Kyd out of Seneca. It is confidently asserted that the "weird sisters" of *Macbeth* are chiefly crude borrowings from Middleton's *Witch.*

The extensive and varied supernaturalism of both epic and tragedy, from classic times to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, has suggested to the writer some reconsideration of its purpose and function in these forms of literature, with special reference to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* as the supreme examples in modern drama of the use of supernatural phenomena. The literal faith in the supernatural of all ranks and professions of Elizabethan society, with a very few notable exceptions, of royalty and nobility, the clergy, scholars, the legal profession, as well as of the mere vulgar, is fully attested by their writings and by abundant court records. We cannot know for certain what Shakespeare believed, but it may be possible to draw some tentative conclusions about the purpose and effect of his use of the supernatural. In the following pages the attempt to present some part of the evidence is made.

I. THE SUPERNATURAL IN EPIC AND IN TRAGEDY

Of the persistence, the perdurability, of belief in the supernatural, ranging from faith in a Supreme Being to spiritism and the grosser forms of popular superstition, perhaps the most convincing evidence, however subjective, is the sense of terror of the dark, of malign and mysterious presences, which nearly everyone seems to have experienced. All our knowledge of science runs counter to belief in ghosts, demons, witches, fairies, the "bugs" of Tudor times, yet all our instinctive or acquired faith is for them. Pre-historic and pagan peoples had what we now regard as a naive faith in both beneficent and malign spiritual powers; the dual formula of primitive religions has been expressed by Jane Harrison as *do ut des* (I give that you may give) and *do ut abeas* (I give that you may go away).

The underworld, the chthonian powers, must regularly be propitiated; they were more clearly identified with the business of everyday living, with the health of crops, animals, and humans, than were the gods of Olympus. "What a people *does* in relation to its gods," says Miss Harrison, "must always be one clue, and perhaps the safest, to what it *thinks.*" There is therefore good reason to believe that the "rites of aversion" played a greater role in the common man's worship than did sacrifices to the more impersonal Olympians. In a pre-historic Golden Age men walked with gods, but even as early as Homeric times the great gods seem to have limited their purely social human contacts to the mysterious race of the Ethiopians.

"The supernatural terror," then, according to C. E. Whitmore, "may accordingly be defined as the dread of some potentially malevolent *power,* of incalculable capacity to work evil." It is with this sort of supernatural terror that Elizabethan tragedy is all but exclusively concerned, rather than with the Supreme Being of the Christian faith and his angels, as the religious drama of the Middle Ages had frequently been. For the underworld powers of evil could be brought upon the stage without fear of sacrilege.

Two types of literature, epic and tragedy, have, throughout the ages, generally been recognized as the supreme literary expressions of the human genius. Both forms have made such extensive use of supernatural elements that these forces seem to be essential to the moral purpose, scope, and universality of both, even though our primary interest is always centered upon the human characters. Both forms emphasize the importance, the necessity, of man's being in right relation with the power manifesting itself in and controlling the universe. Men and nations, at least in the free world, still find their greatest quest that of finding their rightful place, their just responsibility, in the society of nations and in a fantastically expanding universe.

The primary and practical difference between the two forms, obviously, is that epic is narrated, or read, tragedy visually presented to its audience. Aristotle considered tragedy the higher form, because it added music and spectacle to the elements both had in common. Renaissance critics ventured to disagree and to give the higher place to epic, largely because of their reverence for Vergil, and because of the inadequacies of early Renaissance tragedy.

Certainly the scope of epic is far wider than that of tragedy, though the intensity and immediacy of the emotional response is less in epic. The wider scope of epic is evident in the physical setting; the great epics from Homer on have presented a cosmic scheme: the abode of the Supreme Being, or beings; the place of the dead, its rewards and punishments; the world of living men, together with something of the relationships between these three realms: this is to say, a coherent system of religion. Prominent also in epic is the concept of the "chosen people," as in the fated triumph of Greek over Trojan, in the destiny of Aeneas and the Roman imperium, in the "national epics" generally. Tragedy, on the contrary, tends to be relatively individual and personal, lacks the cosmic scope and setting of epic, though it may be patriotic in spirit and concerned with fundamental aspects of all human experience, such as the inevitable punishment of overweening pride and the doom of unjust rulers.

But the nature of tragic supernaturalism differs from that of epic chiefly in that visible spirits are generally limited, in tragedy, to such manifestations as ghosts, devils, witches, and conjurors, in so far as these spirits are directly connected with the action and the characters. It is much more possible for the dramatist to deal familiarly with the powers of evil, without fear of impiety and official disapproval, than with the supreme divinities, jealous of their due reverence. That "creaking thrones come down/the boys to please" indicates that the appearance of major divinities is primarily spectacular in purpose, masque-like, decorative rather than functional. No such inhibitions affect the employment of minor spirits and the powers of

evil. Regardless of differences in the nature of the supernatural in epic and in tragedy, however, it is surely no coincidence that both employ it so extensively; it is evident that the greatest mysteries, the profoundest fears and aspirations of humanity, are closely identified with man's relationship to the powers both of good and of evil which inhabit the universe and profoundly affect man's conduct and welfare both in this world and the next.

II. Pre-Shakespearean Tragic Supernaturalism

Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy concludes by stating its function: "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." No passage of the *Poetics,* says Mr. Spingarn, has been more discussed than this. Whether the tragic purgation is ethical, concerned with moral lesson and example, or psychological, relief of the mind from painful and hampering passions, is a question still being debated. In any event it seems clear, as C. E. Whitmore, in *The Supernatural in Tragedy,* has said, that "the desire to arouse terror is the predominant reason for the introduction of the supernatural in literature, where, as in tragedy, a serious effect is aimed at . . . the subtler, more spiritual dread, which may, at its highest, as in certain religious experiences, pass into awe, with the element of terror almost or wholly obscured."

How effectively Aeschylus employed the supernatural to cause terror passing into awe is best illustrated in his *Oresteia,* called by Whitmore "The most perfect example of interpenetration of supernatural and plot that I know." Even now, no very great exercise of the imagination is required to comprehend, even possibly to share, something of the terror and awe aroused in the minds of Athenian spectators at the sight of the Furies, somewhat vaguely, but the more effectively, described by the prophetess:

> Before this man [Orestes] there sat asleep on thrones a wondrous throng of women. No! women they were surely not, Gorgons I rather call them. Nor yet can I liken them to forms of Gorgons either. Once ere this I saw some pictured creatures carrying off the feast of Phineus—but these are wingless, sable, and altogether detestable. Their snorting nostrils blow forth fearsome blasts, and from their eyes oozes a loathly rheum. Their garb, too, was such is unfit to bring before the statues of the gods or into the abodes of men. The tribe which owns this company I have never seen; nor do I know what region boasts to rear unscathed this brood and not repent its pains. (Loeb translation)

After this vivid description, the interior of the temple is disclosed, Apollo enters to take his stand by Orestes, who had exacted vengeance at Apollo's bidding, the sleeping Furies are discovered, and after the departure of Orestes, the ghost of Clytemnestra comes to waken and incite the Furies, who go on to prosecute Orestes, and even threaten the Olympians themselves. The originality and power of these scenes are indeed extraordinary.

The *Eumenides* well illustrates the dictum of Aristotle that "the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place." The combination of visual image and spoken description results in the greatest possible emotional effect. This and other famous examples from the classic Greek drama illustrate certain affinities between the two greatest

periods of tragedy, Greek and Elizabethan, notably their common use of the supernatural terror.

But the primary influence upon Elizabethan tragedy came not from the classic plays of Greece, but from the closet-drama of Seneca, which established the form and technique of English tragedy from *Gorboduc* on, gave notable examples of a high tragic style, and provided the model for the Elizabethan tragedy of revenge. Sensational themes, murder, revenge, treachery, adultery, incest; horrible and unnatural actions, such as the cannibalistic banquet of *Thyestes;* supernatural characters, the Juno of *Hercules Furens,* the ghost of Laius in the *Oedipus,* of Tantalus in *Thyestes*: such elements are borrowed and adapted, more or less directly, by such Elizabethans as the authors of *Gorboduc,* Thomas Kyd, George Chapman, and others, especially in the revenge drama. As Bowers has stated in his *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy,* Seneca strongly emphasized blood revenge for murder or flagrant injury, and the sense of religious duty in carrying out blood revenge, revenge prompted by a ghost, who sometimes speaks a prologue, but is not active in pursuing the revenge. The most striking examples of Elizabethan tragic supernaturalism occur in the tragedy of blood-revenge and its later development, the tragedy of evil.

Reading the Senecan plays, one might wonder at the extent of their influence on the University Wits, who imitated them, and the more sophisticated audience, who admired them, despite the humanistic reverence for all things classical and the current efforts to elevate English vocabulary and literary style. A strong tradition of Christian supernaturalism had come down from the native medieval religious drama, from Easter trope to craft cycles. Extending from the revolt of Satan to the Last Judgment, these plays were dominantly supernatural, religious, didactic; the complete cycles epitomized the story of man's relationship to God and the powers of evil. Similarly, the magnificent stained glass of the great cathedrals summarized the Biblical story and provided visual aids to the common man's understanding of the right relationship of man to God.

In the craft cycles, supernatural beings are prominent among the *dramatis personae,* from "God the Father," the Christ child, Virgin, patriarchs, and saints to devils of various ranks. There is a long tradition of the didactic and ethical in English drama. Study and imitation of the great pagan writers were justified by the device of allegorical interpretation: the great pagans, like Vergil, saw "through a glass darkly", yet they saw a great deal, if understood in the light of Christian revelation, and they magnificently expressed what they saw. The emphasis on the moral function of literature dominated Renaissance critical theory. So, the supernaturalism of pagan sources, through allegorical interpretation, could properly influence Renaissance writers. The poet, says Sidney, "doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue"; the function of literature is to teach and delight. Even comedy, as Ben Jonson put it, shares in "the doctrine, which is the principal end of poesie, to inform men in the best reason of living." [Dedication of *Volpone* to the two universities.] Both critics agreed that much current drama contained faults and absurdities, but refuted the theory of the falsehood of fiction. Even the tradition of bohemianism and depravity associated with such dramatists as Greene, Peele, and "that atheist Marlowe" did not greatly militate against the ethical value of their plays:

the wages of sin is death. The final agonies of Dr. Faustus, longing vainly to repent, are subjective evidence, at least, of Marlowe's genuine consciousness of the immortal consequences of evil-doing. Marlowe's *Faustus* remains as one of the finest examples of intrinsic supernaturalism, a supernaturalism that vitally affects the fate of the protagonist. By the closing decade of the sixteenth century, Elizabethan drama had a long and powerful tradition in tragic supernaturalism, both native and classical.

III. 16th and 17th Century Views of the Supernatural

As the inheritor of the spirit of scientific inquiry and of rationalism heralded by Sir Francis Bacon and fostered by the *virtuosi* of the Royal Society, the present age finds that a sustained effort of the historic imagination is required if one is to understand the beliefs of the Shakespearean era regarding such supernatural manifestations as ghosts, witchcraft, and demonism. A modern audience can employ "the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" essential to all fiction in considering such phenomena in Shakespeare as the ghosts in *Richard III, Julius Caesar, Hamlet;* the "weird sisters" of *Macbeth*; the witchcraft in the pathetic stories of Eleanor Cobham and Jane Shore; the demonism of *King Lear.* Or the audience may accept such elements as merely symbolical of the temptations and passions of men. Certainly Shakespeare "was not of an age, but for all time." But for the fullest comprehension of his plays, it is important to understand the "climate of opinion" in which his plays were created and produced. It would be rash to assume that Shakespeare's views were far in advance of those of all but a few famous skeptics.

When the Elizabethan or Jacobean considered the heavens, it seems probable that he rarely fully understood or accepted all the implications of the change from anthropocentric to heliocentric universe, postulated by the new philosophy, which had "cast all in doubt." All the evidence tends to substantiate the theory that to him, as to men in the age of faith, the earth and all the elements were filled with spiritual presences, of both good and evil, who participated fully in the everyday affairs of men. Man was still the real center of the universe; for him the heavenly bodies wheeled in orbit; for his soul the powers of evil strove. Though God in his infinite mercy was "mindful" of weak and erring man, He permitted Satan to try man's virtue and punish his offenses. Lacking modern scientific explanations of natural phenomena, the great majority of Shakespeare's contemporaries seem to have accepted the traditional supernaturalism.

Most moderns will agree with Reginald Scot's answer to his own question, "Who they be that are called witches," in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft,* 1584:

> One sort of such as are said to bee witches, are women which be commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious and papists; or such as knowe no religion; in whose drousie minds the divell hath goten a fine seat; so as, what mischeefe, mischance, calamitie, or slaughter is broughte to passe, they are easilie persuaded the same is doone by themselves; imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination hereof . . .

There is, Scot goes on, "another sort of witches . . . which be absolutelie Cooseners." Scot is justly contemptuous of the evidence and tests employed

to detect and convict those accused of witchcraft. Having attended some witch trials, he was appalled at the quality of the evidence.

But complete and avowed skepticism about witchcraft and the earthly activities of devils could easily render one liable to the charge of disbelief in the Bible. Scot is rather put to it to explain such passages as, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" and the Witch of Endor story. More than fifty years after Scot, Sir Thomas Browne, physician and inquirer into "vulgar errors," wrote in his *Religio Medici*: "For my part I have ever believed and do now know that there are witches: they that doubt of these, do not onely deny *them,* but Spirits; and are obliquely and upon consequence a sort not of Infidels, but Atheists." In the great Chain of Being, to paraphrase Pope, 'tis plain there must be, somewhere, such a rank as devils, witches, "millions of spiritual creatures" walking the earth, inhabiting all four elements. As an anchor of the supernatural, says Merton (*Science and Imagination in Sir Thomas Browne*) the Christian Devil has a secure position in the Chain of Being. Man, Browne's "Great Amphibium", lives in the realm both of the physical and of the spiritual. The Devil's human agents, witches and warlocks, through their "compact" employed "familiars" to carry out their malign purposes.

But to summarize the whole sordid, brutal, all but incredible story of the witchcraft delusion, at its height in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the activities of the inquisitors and of witchfinders like Matthew Hopkins, the "searching" and torturing of suspects, the wholesale executions: even to list the classics of the faith, such as the *Malleus Maleficarum,* the *Compendium Maleficarum,* the *Daemonologie* of King James, the *Trial of the Lancashire Witches,* would be a task beyond the available space of the writer. The literature of the subject is immense, and its bibliography includes many great names.

No nation of Western Europe, the adherents of no religious creed, no rank of society, no learned profession, seems to have been free from the delusion, the terror, the cruelty of the creed. Kings, clergy, judiciary, and parliaments devoted their best efforts to the attack on witchcraft, which flourished the more. Members of the Royal Society, late in the seventeenth century, accepted the belief. Joseph Glanvil, "chaplain in ordinary to King Charles II and F. R. S.," began in 1666 his published attacks upon skeptics which culminated in his *Sadducismus Triumphatus,* published in 1681, a year after the author's death. Stating the objections of the skeptics with fairness and force, Glanvil replied with what he must have regarded as devastating logic. Those who doubt witchcraft, says Glanvil, "may well disbelieve Angel or Spirit, Resurrection of the Body, or Immortality of the Souls." Such are Modern Sadducees. Anticipating the charge that scientific inquiry involves religious skepticism, Bishop Sprat, first historian of the Royal Society, is at pains to assert that the members' "experiments [are] not dangerous to the Christian Religion."

It is undoubtedly to the credit of the sturdy common sense of the English people that they seem largely to have ignored the more elaborate mythology of witchcraft which flourished on the Continent. There is relatively little of the obscene horrors of the Sabbath, for instance, though Scotland was by no means free of this belief, shown in the activities of the witch

"covens" who sought the destruction of King James. Perhaps the association of such doctrines with "popish delusions" helped to prevent their wide acceptance in England. A corrective to two opposing theories (1) that witchcraft had little impact upon the English people, and (2) that very large numbers of alleged witches were executed, is supplied by the researches of C. L'Estrange Ewen into the records of a large number of assizes. As Professor Kittredge has shown, the hue and cry against English witches came not from scholars and divines, but chiefly from the common people, who believed that they had suffered harm in their persons and property.

The relatively homely quality of the prevailing English witch creed is well illustrated in George Gifford's *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts,* 1593. The Samuell of the *Dialogue* says, ". . . these evill-favored old witches do trouble me." He has seen hares, weasels, and cats about his place, which he believes to be "familiars," and he has lost through mysterious disease a hog and some sheep, obviously, he thinks, killed by witchcraft. It was chiefly fear of the malice of witches, of illness, death, loss of property caused by them, which, as Kittredge says, caused many suspected witches to be accused by their neighbors. But such beliefs are a far cry from the learned, elaborate heresy-hunting of the Continental theorists like the great Bodin and the clerical inquisitors of the *Malleus.*

Most immediate to the consideration of the supernatural elements of *Macbeth* is the *Daemonology* of King James, 1597. To dismiss King James as merely "the wisest fool in Christendom," and therefore to disregard his views on witchcraft is clearly inappropriate. Though, according to John Aubrey and others, the King modified his earlier views, and even became an exposer of charlatanry in certain cases, there seems to be little reason to believe that he changed his essential views as expressed in the *Daemonology.* These doctrines are set forth in the "Preface to the Reader":

> The fearful aboundenge at this time in this countrie, of those detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches or enchanters, hath moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serve for a shewe of my learning and ingine, but onely (mooved of conscience) to preasse thereby, so farre as I can, to resolve the doubting harts of many; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practized, and that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severely to be punished: against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, wherof the one called SCOT an Englishman, is not ashamed in publike print to deny, that ther can be such a thing as Witch-craft: and so mainteines the old error of the Sadducees, in denying of spirits. The other called WIERUS, a German Physition, sets out a publick apologie for al these craftesfolkes, whereby, procuring for their impunitie, he plainly bewrays himselfe to have bene one of that profession . . .

In the face of all the evidence, it would seem to be impossible to deny that belief in witchcraft, in England as well as on the Continent, from highest to lowest in the social scale, was all but universal throughout most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The evidence collected by H. C. Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft,* is indeed overwhelming. No other contemporary system of belief explained so convincingly the methods whereby the Devil and his hosts carried on their undying warfare with God, using humanity as pawns in the struggle. Though the devils could do nothing without the permission of God, their assaults upon men

tested the faith of the righteous and punished the sins of the wicked. There could be no "fugitive and cloistered virtue."

IV. The Supernatural in Plays of Shakespeare's Contemporaries

Any study of Shakespeare's use of the supernatural naturally leads to a consideration of its use by his predecessors and contemporaries. This is to inquire, how dramatically effective had the supernatural in drama proved to be? In what manner and to what extent was Shakespeare's audience prepared to accept such manifestations?

We are conscious of the seeming naivete of the popular religious drama of the middle ages, notably shown in the expense accounts of various guilds for accessories for such supernatural beings as angels and devils. Though Shakespeare's audience was far more sophisticated, it had been well conditioned to the physical presence of such characters of drama. This old tradition and the impact of Senecan drama, and ultimately of Greek drama, made the supernatural fully acceptable to both popular and learned audiences. To the direct influence of the classics upon the humanists of the sixteenth century was added the great prestige of Italian drama, for Italy had taken the lead in the presentation of vernacular plays upon the Senecan model. Sir Philip Sidney's praise of *Gorboduc,* as "ful of stately speeches, and well-sounding phrases, clymbing to the height of Seneca his style" indicates the respectability of the Senecan influence.

"As soon as English writers turned to antiquity for inspiration," says Whitmore, (*The Supernatural in Tragedy*) "the example of Seneca made the supernatural an acceptable feature of serious drama; but once it had been adopted, the whole weight of national feeling was against letting it remain a mere detached ornament." The English tragedians, he adds, imitated Seneca but also followed the tradition established by the miracle plays, of a "close and vital connection of supernatural and action."

Any attempt to consider fully all the extant Elizabethan tragedies employing supernatural elements is clearly beyond the limits of this paper. But a brief consideration of several of them should suffice to make it clear that Shakespeare, in his use of the supernatural, was as usual content to follow established patterns initially, but went on to surpass the achievement of his predecessors and models. That the inexpertness of some contemporaries tended to reduce the device to the level of the ridiculous is indicated in the anonymous *A Warning for Fair Women,* whose first known edition was printed in 1599.

In the introductory debate between Comedy and Tragedy, Comedy replies to Tragedy's insistence on the depiction of the passions with a satirical gibe at stock tragic devices:

> How some damnd tyrant, to obtaine a crowne,
> Stabs, hangs, impoysons, smothers, cutteth throats,
> And then a chorus too comes howling in,
> And tells us of the worrying of a cat.
> Then of a filthy whining ghost,
> Lapt in some fowle sheete, or a leather pilch,
> Comes skreaming in like a pigge halfe stickt.
> And cries Vindicta, revenge, revenge.
> With that a little Rosen flasheth forth,
> Like smoke out of a Tobacco pipe, or a boyes squib . . .

But however wooden, imitative, or absurd such examples of Senecan and mechanical supernatural as are found in *Locrine, The Birth of Merlin, The Misfortunes of Arthur, The Devil's Charter,* to name but a few, appear to the modern reader, the number of surviving examples of plays employing the supernatural tends to prove the popularity of the type. We have only to list some greater and more influential plays and playwrights to realize something of the power of supernatural elements in plays other than Shakespeare's.

Chief among these predecessors of Shakespeare in the use of the supernatural was Thomas Kyd, whose *Spanish Tragedy,* as his editor, Fred S. Boas, says, "for fifty years of the greatest dramatic movement of the modern world was unrivaled with play-goers and readers." In the *Spanish Tragedy,* the pattern of Elizabethan revenge-tragedy, the model for *Hamlet,* was established. This pattern is clearly Senecan in origin: the ghost of Andrea corresponding to the ghost of Tantalus in the *Thyestes,* the recapitulation of scenes from the classical Hades, the use of the chorus, the theme of madness, retribution upon both criminals and avengers. The ghost urging revenge, the avenger's doubts and hesitations, delay in vengeance, feigned and actual madness, intrigue, the final holocaust: all these became stock features of Elizabethan revenge tragedy; they are found, refined, in *Hamlet.*

The theme of blood-revenge as a dedicated duty, the sole means of securing justice, at least as old as the *Oresteia,* is most perfectly exemplified in Shakespeare's play. Other effective, though inferior, examples of the ghost seeking revenge are found in such plays as Chapman's *Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois,* Marston's *Antonio's Revenge,* Webster's *White Devil,* to name but a few of the best known.

V. The Ghosts of Shakespeare. *Hamlet*

The ghost of Hamlet so far surpasses other Elizabethan ghosts that we almost forget Shakespeare's less prominent ghosts. Yet we are several times reminded that the spirit of the dead Caesar dominated the play bearing his name, even though we accept Brutus as the protagonist.

> And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
> With Ate by his side come hot from hell
> Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
> Cry "Havoc," and let slip the dogs of war . . .

The ghost of Caesar, one of those supernatural presages which even the Epicurean Cassius has come to accept as genuine, remains a powerful force, though his visible appearance is very brief. This ghost, like the spirits of Richard III's victims, was no mere subjective illusion, no purely spectacular ornament. The many Elizabethan dramatic ghosts are evidence of the both popular and learned belief that

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in [y]our philosophy.

To the modern audience or reader, Shakespeare's ghosts are valuable chiefly for their symbolic quality; we can no longer expect the naivete in supernatural matters of Partridge at the play in *Tom Jones.* But that the

thrill of supernatural terror is by no means unknown to a modern audience, the extraordinary popularity of horror films will testify.

Whether or not, as Reginald Scot states, the fear of mysterious monsters is instilled in us in childhood, probably very few have not experienced it.

> But in our childhood our mothers maids have so terrified us with an ouglie divell having hornes on his head, fier in his mouth, and a taile in his breech, eies like a bason, fanges like a dog, clawes like a beare, a skin like a Niger, and a voice roring like a lion, whereby we start and are afraid when we hear one crie Bough: and they have so fraied us with bull beggers, spirits, witches, urchens, elves, hags, fairies, satyrs, pans, faunes, sylens, kit with the cansticke, tritons, centaure, dwarfes, giants, imps, calcars, conjurors, nymphes, changlings, *Incubus,* Robin good-fellowe, the spoorne, the mare, the man in the oke, the hell waine, the fierdrake, the puckle, Tom thombe, hob gobblin, Tom tumbler, boneles, and such other bugs, that we are afraid of our owne shadowes: in so much as some never feare the divell, but in a darke night; and then a polled sheepe is a perillous beast, and manie times is taken for our fathers soule, speciallie in a churchyard, where a right hardy man heretofore scant durst passe by night, but his haire would stand upright.

It is not strange that Horatio confesses, on sight of the ghost, "it harrows me with fear and wonder."

The ghost in *Hamlet,* more than any other Elizabethan ghost, is an important element in the dramatic action. It is the ghost which is the moving spirit in the play, arousing the hero to action, as well as the beholder to terror. He has far more dignity and personality than other dramatic ghosts. No mere prologue ghost, dressed in a "foul sheete" or "leather pilch," crying, "Vindicta! Revenge!" he is clad in complete steel or as in the closet scene, "in his habit as he lived." Marcellus, who struck at the ghost with his partisan, recognizes that

> We do it wrong, being so majestical
> To offer it the show of violence . . .

The ghost's revelation of Claudius's guilt and his plea for justice at his son's hands are essential to the plot; thus there is that "interpenetration of supernatural and plot" that characterizes the *Oresteia* also.

In his introduction to a modern reprint of Lavater's *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night* (1572) Dover Wilson says that the modern spectator must contribute not merely "the willing suspension of disbelief"; he must also see *Hamlet* with the eyes of the Elizabethan spectator. "I do not claim," he says, "that Shakespeare 'believed in ghosts'; we do not know what Shakespeare believed, though it seems to me by no means improbable that he regarded ghosts as at least a sublunary possibility. Certainly as a poet he believed in this ghost, and determined that his audience should believe in it likewise. The Ghost is the linchpin of *Hamlet;* remove it and the play falls to pieces." A *Hamlet* in modern dress may present the ghost as an illusion; the real *Hamlet* should present him visually, even if, as sometimes happens, he casts an incongruous shadow.

The central "problem" of *Hamlet* is of course the adequate psychological motivation of the delay in vengeance, the problem with which Kyd struggled in the *Spanish Tragedy.* The list of suggested motivations is long and complex, as is shown in Williamson's *Readings in the Character of*

Hamlet, 1661–1947, Compiled from over 300 Sources, and admittedly incomplete. A. C. Bradley's plausible explanation, of Hamlet as a victim of melancholy which inhibits physical action, except upon impulse, as the result of a succession of overwhelming shocks, hardly suffices; it is even more difficult to accept Goethe's conception of a Hamlet too "fine" to resort to murder, for Hamlet has plenty of ruthlessness. As John W. Draper (*The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience*) has said: "Only by making himself over into an Elizabethan, if that be possible, and seeing the play given complete, on an Elizabethan stage and in Elizabethan fashion, could the subjective critic achieve a result that would approximate Shakespeare's meaning, the only true and important meaning . . ." For this result, among other requirements, a knowledge of Elizabethan science and ghost-lore is requisite.

Though the dramatist may withhold vital information until the proper moment, he should not mislead his audience with false statements. It is true that in his soliloquies Hamlet suggests a variety of false reasons for his delay, cowardice, "bestial oblivion," for example, in his effort to understand himself. It has been plausibly asserted that there is no solution to the enigma of Hamlet, because Shakespeare himself did not fully understand his own creation; or, alternatively, that the sources and materials of the play were so intractable that they did not fit the character he created. But to the Elizabethan, in conformity with the conventions of revenge drama, doubt as to the real nature of the ghost is an entirely adequate reason for delay.

This doubt runs throughout the play, up to and including the presentation of the "Mouse-trap" play. Horatio, in his first address to the ghost, uses the word "usurps't", as applicable both to the time and "the fair and warlike form" of the late king. Convinced by the evidence of his own eyes that a spirit has actually appeared, he recalls the conventional reasons for ghostly apparitions, and the phenomena of the time "a little ere the mightiest Julius fell." He reports to Hamlet the appearance of "a figure like your father." Hamlet, promptly deciding to watch for the apparition, says that "if it assume my noble father's person," he will speak to it. On seeing the ghost, Hamlet exclaims,

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable . . .

Convinced, at least temporarily, of the "honesty" of the ghost by its appearance and noble bearing, Hamlet obeys its beckoning hand, shaking off the restraining hands of his companions, who warn of demonic tricks. In his soliloquy at the end of Act II, Hamlet explains the purpose of the play within the play:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be the devil; and the devil hath power
> T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits.
> Abuses me to damn me.

And just before the play is to begin, Hamlet urges Horatio to observe his uncle:

If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damn'd ghost that we have seen . . .

The device is highly successful and convincing to both Hamlet and Horatio of the "honesty" of the ghost, whose word Hamlet will now take "for a thousand pound." Surely these are not all false leads, especially in the light of contemporary ghost lore.

Apparently the completest, most highly respected, among Protestants at least, of treatises on the nature of ghosts was Lavater's *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night,* available in English translation since 1572, and probably known to Shakespeare. Three contemporary schools of thought about ghosts are distinguished by Dover Wilson, in his introduction to Lavater's book: 1. The typical Roman Catholic view that ghosts are spirits of the departed, allowed to return from Purgatory for some purpose which it is the duty of the pious to further. 2. The orthodox Church of England view, which rejected Purgatory, that ghosts might be angels, but were generally devils usurping the form of the dead to cause spiritual destruction to the living. 3. The skeptical view, at first represented by Horatio, that ghosts are illusions, or the product of "flat knavery on the part of some rogue," as Reginald Scot suggested.

Hamlet's initial reaction to the appearance of the ghost reflects the Protestant view: "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd." Like Marlowe's Faustus, another alumnus of Wittenberg, Hamlet has learned the Protestant belief. But this ghost is "a spirit of health," an "honest" ghost, a Catholic ghost from Purgatory, where he is expiating "the foul crimes done in my days of nature," for, by the manner of his death, he did not receive the last rites of the church. The whole play depends upon his being the genuine spirit of the dead king, despite the fact that in an England militantly Protestant at the turn of the century, the doctrine of Purgatory was officially "repugnant to the word of God."

The fact is, of course, that a people does not immediately and automatically discard the faith into which it has been born with the adoption of a new creed, the ukase of any monarch, the decree of any court, even a supreme court. However loyal the majority of the English people were to the new establishment, their religious beliefs, their superstitions even, or perhaps especially, survived long after an official shift in doctrine. It is not therefore necessary to assume that Shakespeare was a Catholic recusant because he brings to the stage a spirit from a Catholic Purgatory, or to assume that his audience would demur at accepting such a spirit as "honest." Since ghosts traditionally have the power of "selective apparition," Gertrude's inability to see or hear the ghost in the closet scene is no evidence of its subjectivity.

Nor is the fact that Hamlet, who did complete his sacred mission of vengeance, is himself killed, evidence that he was guilty of a mortal sin in killing Claudius, for no Shakespearean tragedy ends otherwise than with the death of the protagonist. His impulsive and fatal thrust at Polonius, however, can be expiated only with his death:

. . . Heaven has pleas'd it so,
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

Blood will have blood; in the Kydean pattern, the avenger, however well justified, dies with his victim.

In *Hamlet,* the reality of the ghost, the ghost's guarded references to the nature of his place of confinement, his majestic deportment, his essential relation to the plot, all contribute to the creation of terror rising to awe, especially for the audience for whom the play was intended. If, as Whitmore states, "Influence on the characters is the sole criterion of the intrinsic supernatural," it is obvious that the Ghost in *Hamlet* is intrinsic and therefore essential to the full appreciation of the play. *Hamlet,* says Whitmore, is "the supreme treatment of the ghost in Elizabethan drama." The ghost lacks the horror of Furies and ghost in the *Oresteia,* but retains their essential effectiveness.

VI. The Supernatural in *Macbeth*

The nature of the supernatural in *Macbeth,* aside from the relatively minor ghostly element, is very different from that of *Hamlet.* The ghost in *Hamlet* is essentially a revenge ghost; the function of the weird sisters is partly the creation of an appropriate atmosphere, partly prophecy, and principally incitement to the self-destruction of what was originally a noble personality, the heroic Macbeth. It is only natural that the victorious Malcolm should stigmatize his opponents as "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen," but this is hardly a just epitaph. "Thus there is in Macbeth," says Farnham (*Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier*) "a paradoxical nobility—paradoxical because it seems to be of a piece with, and even to spring from, the very opposite of nobility. Macbeth has a similarity to the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost* because there is in both characters a fusion of baseness and nobility . . ." Some critics have regarded Macbeth as an example of the villain-hero, in defiance of Aristotle's dictum: "Nor again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited," for such a protagonist does not effect the tragic purgation.

The above quotation from the *Poetics* is not intended to suggest that Shakespeare and his fellow Elizabethans normally followed the Aristotelian canon. But from *Julius Caesar* on, as Farnham says, Shakespeare's "tragic manner" is to present what is essentially a noble nature destroyed by a "tragic flaw," relatively slight in the case of Brutus, progressively greater in the succeeeding tragedies, pushing the ultimate limits dividing nobility and villainy in the case of Macbeth. From the imputation of complete villainy, Macbeth is preserved by the intensity of his remorse and suffering and the magnificence of his expression of them. The contrast of Richard III and Macbeth makes the point clear. Macbeth, unlike Richard, does not glory in his evil; his incitements to crime are not delight in his own cleverness, ambition, deviltry: to the lure of ambition, as Curry (*Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns*) has pointed out, are added the urgings and taunts of Lady Macbeth, and the "demonic forces of evil," symbolized in the "weird sisters."

Critics have observed, about the turn of the century, a slackening of the fine fervor and vitality of the drama of the nineties, and a compensating emphasis on sensationalism. The tragedy of blood-revenge, as well motivated as such a "wild justice" can be, gives place to the tragedy of evil,

in which the revenger himself becomes evil. The antics of mad folk, the almost incredible villainy of a De Flores in *The Changeling,* the lycanthropy of Duke Ferdinand of *The Duchess of Malfi,* the depravity of Jonson's Sejanus and Catiline, the macabre horrors of the *Atheist's Tragedy* and *Revenger's Tragedy,* for example, illustrate a trend in Jacobean drama which Shakespeare may have partially followed in the blood-thirstiness of Macbeth, who seeks to deaden his conscience by repeated crimes.

It has often been observed that the mysterious personages of *Macbeth* are never called witches in the text, but only in the stage-directions. They are not conventional English witches, though they exhibit some of the conventional attributes of such and perhaps more of the characteristics of Scottish witches such as King James described in his *Daemonology.*

Dover Wilson says of these beings that they are "too witch-like to be Norns, too norn-like to be witches." Out of these two elements, he continues, Shakespeare has made something of his own, comparable in originality to his Ariel and Caliban, something to represent "the incarnation of evil in the universe." Lamb called them ". . . foul anomalies, of whom we know not whence they are sprung; not whether they have beginning or ending. As they are without human passions, so they seem to be without human relations. They come with thunder and lightning, and vanish to airy music."

It seems to be true, then, that Shakespeare was not content to use the conventional witches as agents or personification of the evil he wished to depict. Rather, he employed certain conventional attributes of the familiar witch to present the far more mysterious and unfamiliar Norns, to lend to his composite creation some attributes of familiar creatures. Only so would they be readily comprehensible to his audience. As Margaret Lucy puts it, Shakespeare had a higher and deeper motive in *Macbeth* than merely to exhibit scenes of witchcraft; he sought to "train the outer eye before he could reach the inner." Holinshed gave him the suggestion:

> But afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is, (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with the knowledge of prophesie by the necromanticall science, because everie thing came true as they had spoken.

But these creatures, whatever they are, have many of the attributes of the more commonplace witches, *e.g.,* their familiar spirits, their malice, their power over the elements, to name but a few, and this similarity makes them the more readily acceptable and comprehensible.

The theory that *Macbeth* was first presented before King James suggests that Shakespeare in this play paid tribute to the King's authority as an expert in demonology. References to touching for the evil and the pageant of Stuart Kings suggest compliments to him. The opinion of some eminent critics that some of the witch scenes were borrowed from Middleton is less convincing when we note the greatly inferior quality of Middleton's witches. There would seem to be little doubt that the great majority of persons, from King to commoner, believed in the powers of witchcraft and would receive these creatures, anomalous as they are, with full faith.

The riddling prophecies of the sisters illustrate a very popular device, that of the mimic fulfillment of an apparently impossible condition, a device at least as old as the *Aeneid,* in which Iulus cries out that the Trojans, eating the slabs of bread on which the meat had been laid, "are eating tables and all," thus fulfilling the dire prophecy of the Harpy, repeated by Anchises, "When hunger shall drive thee, O son, to consume the tables when the feast falls short, on the unknown shores whither thou shalt sail, then in thy weariness hope for home . . ." (Mackail trans.) So the magic power of Sacrapant (*Old Wives Tale*) is destroyed by her "that is neither maid, wife, nor widow." Similarly, Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, and Macbeth is slain by one abnormally born of woman.

Clearly, these creatures are not genuine Fates; Macbeth is a free agent, not doomed by fate to commit his crimes. Yet they have powers not possessed by witches, for example, the power to vanish and to prophesy. The conclusion seems inescapable that they are neither witches nor fates, but rather, mysterious symbols of the powers of evil, of evil conquering an essentially noble hero. To consider Macbeth at the last merely a "dead butcher" is to diminish the tragic quality of the play, to make of it a typical Jacobean tragedy of evil.

Efforts to dispose of the ghost of Banquo as an hallucination, like the air-borne dagger, are modern rather than Jacobean in spirit. That it was seen only by Macbeth is unimportant, since ghosts have the power of selective apparition, and the ghost was visible to the audience. In *Macbeth,* as in *Hamlet,* then, Shakespeare has, by his use of supernatural agencies, produced the mysterious terror which it is the function of the supernatural in tragedy to produce; as in the *Oresteia* the mysterious nature of the sisters adds to the terror they are intended to produce.

VII. Summary and Conclusions

The above summary of the supernatural elements of two of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies seeks to arrive at an understanding of the "climates of opinion," to use Glanvill's apt phrase, about ghosts, witches, demonism, in Shakespeare's England, and of the function of such elements in the plays. It is not necessary fully to agree with Mr. Whitmore: "Those who cannot accept the Elizabethan ghosts as actual participants in the several plays had better confine their attention to other periods." For those who do not so accept them can still respond to the magnificence of a purely human drama, as we respond to the purely human drama of the parting of Hector and Andromache in the *Iliad.* Yet it is highly important to read or view the plays as their author intended them to be seen (obviously, Shakespeare disregarded readers) and as they must have been received by the great majority of Jacobean patrons of the theatre.

That Shakespeare was not content merely to produce successful plays, that he was deeply concerned with "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls," beyond the scope of assured human knowledge, is more than merely probable, even though attempts to ascertain his own political, philosophical, or religious convictions from a study of his plays are at best highly tentative. We may believe, for instance, that Shakespeare favored a stable order in the state, and that he was much concerned with social and political jus-

tice. But nowhere can we find his complete and final answer to the supreme question of man's right relationship to God and other supernatural powers, both of good and evil. Shakespeare indeed seems to have been tolerant of the minor frailties of mankind, to have approved of cakes and ale, even that poor creature, small beer, not to have been censorious of various snappers-up of unconsidered trifles. But his villains pay the penalty of their evil deeds; his tragic protagonists expiate their sins and errors. We cannot know what Shakespeare actually believed about the literal quality of his supernatural beings; we can believe that the really functional ones were entirely credible to his audience. Though the new philosophy may have cast all in doubt, it by no means had caused, in Shakespeare's time and considerably after, general disbelief in Dr. Dee's predictions, the value of astrology, and all the pneumatology of the times.

Mr. Traversi (*Shakespeare: The Last Phase*) supplies a needed corrective to the view that in his final dramatic phase, Shakespeare is merely "playing out the string," or merely following the popular lead of the tragicomedies of Beaumont and Fletcher, or, like Ben Jonson, flogging his tired genius in plays inferior in conception to the great tragedies. There is, to be sure, a lessening in the element of realism in these later plays, though Shakespeare, as the casket scene of *The Merchant of Venice* and the lovetest in *Lear* attest, was never subservient to the laws of literalism. There is, Mr. Traversi says, a "deliberate abandonment" of realism in the dramatic romances; they become "expanded images;" symbolism is the key to their interpretation. So understood, they are not inferior in thought, though perhaps in visual presentation. It is possible that Shakespeare regarded the supernaturalism even of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* as symbolical rather than literal. He could have done so without affecting the literal faith of his audience.

It is surely no coincidence that both epic and tragedy, the sublimest literary expressions of the human genius, make such constant and varied use of supernatural concepts and characters. Though tragedy is far more limited in length and cosmic scope than epic, both, in their greatest examples, fulfill Milton's magnificent ambition, to "leave something so written to after times, as they shall not willingly let it die." Both epic and great tragedy are ultimately concerned with the greatest of themes, man's proper relationship to his fellows, and to whatever gods control the fates of men, especially the great ones of earth. The Christian poet and dramatist were strictly limited in their visual use of the Supreme Being, as pagan writers were not. Milton's great adversary could act only with God's permission; ghosts, witches, demons had restricted powers. Both epic and tragedy of Elizabethan and Stuart periods treated the powers of good and evil with high seriousness.

Certainly, both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* employ supernatural agencies not merely for their spectacular effect, not merely to exploit the scenic resources of the stage, not merely for ornament, though these ends are incidentally achieved. Far more important, indeed fundamental, are the effects of terror rising at times to a deeply religious awe, arising from a mysterious relationship of man to the powers, both of good and evil, manifesting themselves in the universe, literally experienced in Shakespeare's day, at least symbolically experienced in our own.