

THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE TRAGEDIES OF  
SHAKESPEARE AND WEBSTER

By

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Scope and Contents of Thesis: A brief survey of the treatment of the supernatural in Elizabethan drama before Shakespeare, the popular beliefs about ghosts, witches and demoniacal possession, and an examination of the tragedies of Shakespeare and Webster in which the supernatural figures prominently.

## INTRODUCTION

In the reigns of Elizabeth and James, especially during the last two decades of the sixteenth century and roughly the first two of the seventeenth, English drama touched the highest peak of creative achievement. One of the most remarkable features of this period is the extraordinary interest and curiosity manifested by the Elizabethan mind in the world of the supernatural. The supernatural becomes a fascinating and recurring theme with dramatists, writers in general, philosophers, divines and metaphysicians. The dramatist, above all the others, handles the supernatural with splendid imagination and rich variety, using delicate and subtle suggestion, and making it deeply moving in its emotional appeal and profound moral implications. This is especially true of tragedy, and in the following discussion I propose to examine briefly the treatment of the supernatural theme in the tragedies of Shakespeare and Webster. I should like to define the word 'supernatural', as I use it, before I go any further. I use it as a blanket term to cover all the phenomena, directly presented or only implied or suggested, in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy which involve anything that

transcends the concrete material world of the senses. It includes ghosts, apparitions, hallucinations, infernal or divine spirits called forth or controlled by conjuration or magic powers, witches and necromancers and their traffic with the world of spirits, invocations to spirits and their implications, demoniacal possession, and madness, especially lycanthropia, as a condition resulting from supernatural and often divine intervention. The skill and power with which this theme is treated on the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage have never been surpassed in the history of literature. The theme makes its appearance in one way or the other in the works of all the major dramatists of the period. Charles Whitmore has a theory that an interest in the supernatural is a natural and inevitable concomitant of great creative eras in drama.<sup>1</sup> It certainly seems to be a distinctive trait of Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, and appears to be one of the most important unifying elements in the amazing diversity and complexity of the dramatic literature of the time.

An examination of the supernatural theme in early Elizabethan drama reveals its medieval antecedents. In the beginning, the dramatist's treatment of the subject is influenced and to a certain extent determined by the

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<sup>1</sup>C. E. Whitmore, The Supernatural in Tragedy, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915), pp. 355-57.

earlier tradition of the native religious drama. Subsequently he was able to impose his individual method and original conception upon the inherited norm. He had to face and solve certain problems in order to achieve his objective, and his own technique in dramaturgy was shaped and modified considerably by his treatment of the supernatural. The peculiar and distinctive features of the Elizabethan theatre also influenced the presentation of the supernatural on the stage. Again, a casual survey of the drama of the period, from early Elizabethan to late Jacobean, reveals a gradual but unmistakable evolution or progress in the supernatural theme. This progress, speaking broadly, is from simplicity to sophistication, from a medieval naiveté and directness to a highly subtilized, complex impression which is characteristic of a new and self-conscious culture. And finally, one notes the decline that comes naturally with oversophistication, when the theme ultimately degenerates into sheer sensationalism and horror.

In the following chapters an attempt will be made to trace the broad outline of the development of this theme in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, mainly in tragedy, not necessarily by examining the work of every major dramatist but by following the most general and predominant tendencies and influences. As in other fields of Elizabethan drama, here too Shakespeare reigns supreme.

Next to him, some attention will be devoted to John Webster's tragedies, as he seems to be the most individual and fascinating dramatic artist on the subject after Shakespeare. I shall try to relate Webster's work to Jacobean drama in general, and to refer to the magnificence in decay usually attributed to this period.

When one examines the background for the supernatural theme in Elizabethan drama the native and foreign strains become evident on the one hand, and the pagan and Christian traditions on the other. The direct forbears of Elizabethan drama are to be sought in the earlier forms, namely, the English religious drama of the middle ages. Miracles and morality plays continued to be presented, and enjoyed popularity throughout the sixteenth century. The Elizabethans grew up in the midst of the traditions and forms of this native drama. Divine and supernatural elements permeated these earlier forms. Consequently there was nothing novel or revolutionary in the idea itself. Medieval Christianity as embodied in the miracles and moralities gave Elizabethan drama its saints and martyrs, its angels and visions. Celtic and Anglo-Saxon lore was full of fairies, elves, sprites and such beings, while devils, witches and magicians were the common property of both pagan and Christian lore. All these found their way into the drama of the time.

Another important factor was the classical

tradition as embodied in the tragedies of Seneca. Seneca's plays were translated into English in the early years of Elizabeth's reign and achieved great popularity and high standing, especially in the learned and courtly circles. The ubiquitous ghost in Elizabethan drama owes its existence primarily to Seneca.

In this discussion I am concerned mainly with the supernatural in its darker or more sinister aspect. I shall not touch upon the lighter aspects associated with fairy lore, and shall not include that delightful diminutive world where folklore and poetic imagination meet, and which has been immortalized by Shakespeare in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Nevertheless, it is not possible to draw a line making the division hard and fast between the lighter and darker aspects of the supernatural in Elizabethan drama. It is my intention to make no reference to plays in which the supernatural is distinctly "untragic," but I shall have to consider plays which are classified as comedies, but which treat the supernatural theme seriously.<sup>2</sup> Again, devils, witches and necromancers in Elizabethan drama refuse to be classified or conjured into either genre. Consequently, Friar Bacon will have to take his place along with more awesome figures, and the

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<sup>2</sup>Webster's The Devil's Law Case is a good example.



witches of Middleton who move in an atmosphere of poetry and moonlight, so unreal and fantastic, will have to be grouped along with the "secret, black and midnight hags" who betray no such elements of airy delight. The critical and satirical attitude of dramatists like Ben Jonson and Dekker, who treat the infernal spirits in a grotesque and ridiculous fashion, is also to be noted as a sign of the decadence of the theme.

With these qualifications and provisos it may not be unsafe to say that the main part of this study will be concerned with the following:

- (1) the ghost in Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, its nature and reality,
- (2) the Devil and his instruments,
- (3) communication between mortals and supernatural beings,
- (4) the nature and powers of witches and necromancers,
- (5) the attempts at rationalisation and psychological interpretations of the above, and
- (6) the metaphysical and theological implications behind these phenomena as conceived by the dramatist, and their possible impact on the Elizabethan mind.

For a full understanding of the motives and

purposes of the dramatists of the period, and to appreciate their dramaturgical skill, and, above all, to be in complete sympathy with what Hardin Craig terms the "moral sincerity of the Elizabethans",<sup>3</sup> such a study seems to be as necessary as a rudimentary knowledge of the developments in nuclear physics, interplanetary communications, modern psychology, and politics is to a comprehension of the literature of the second half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>3</sup>English Religious Drama (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 388.

# I

## THE PRE-SHAKESPEARIAN GHOST IN ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

One discerns two main strains of influence in the English drama of the sixteenth century — the native and the classical. The native element is a natural continuation and adaptation of the earlier forms of drama, especially the moralities and interludes. Divine and supernatural elements figure prominently in earlier English drama. The conception of the supernatural at this phase is simple and concrete, reflecting the medieval age of faith. God, angels, and devils are as real and palpable as the human section of the dramatis personae. God speaks almost the same language as his creatures, and resembles more or less a powerful patriarch or a great feudal lord who controls the destinies of the members of the community under his care — superior and elevated, no doubt, but apparently of the same species. There is no sustained effort on the part of the authors to enhance the awe and solemnity and mystery associated with the supernatural by contrasting it with human characters.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. the conception of Christ in The N. Towne Betrayal, The York Crucifixion, God in the Wakefield Noah, Adonai in Everyman, etc. But the Angel announcing the Nativity in the Second Shepherds' Play sings in Latin.

The same lack of sophistication characterises the portrayal of the Vice and the Devil in the moralities, who are more remarkable for their gusto and hearty love of mischief than for any demoniac propensity for evil or malignancy as we understand these in say, the Weird Sisters in Macbeth, or in Iago. In general, these figures are more at home in the world of comedy, and have nothing of the atmosphere of awe and terror associated with the supernatural in tragedy. Naturally, therefore, in what we consider Elizabethan tragedy proper, the solemn and tragic aspect of the supernatural is a development of neither the divine nor the infernal elements in the earlier popular drama. True, the allegorical figures and abstractions of the moralities continue to be present, and provide a natural and continuous transition,<sup>5</sup> but they hardly supply the primary motif any longer. The prime concern of the Elizabethan dramatist is the conflict between the forces of good and evil still, but this conflict is pictured as inward and subjective, within the individual human heart, rather than allegorized or abstract. The dramatist provides us with an insight into the workings of the human hearts involved in the conflict,

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. the Evil and Good counsellors in Gorboduc, and the Good and Bad Angels and the Seven Deadly Sins in Doctor Faustus.

and this is what is of absorbing interest in the plays.<sup>6</sup>

Much more significant and of far-reaching influence is the classical tradition. To the Elizabethans the classical model was pre-eminently Seneca. They whole-heartedly accepted the atmosphere of horror and unnatural violence found in his plays, and took to their bosom the Senecan ghost who was to develop into one of the most popular figures on the Elizabethan stage. The imitators also took over the infernal paraphernalia so frequently found in Seneca's plays. The Furies, gloomy Charon, Pluto and his "kingdom of perpetual night," Minos, Aeacus and Rhadamanth, Tantalus, Ixion and their tribe became stock-in-trade items with the scholarly playwrights from the fifteen-sixties onwards. Gorboduc (1561-2), the first 'regular' English tragedy, though Senecan in style and in its weighty moral reflections, has no figure of a ghost. The only supernatural touch in the play is provided by the Furies in the dumb-show before Act IV. They are "clad in black garments sprinkled with blood and flames," and their appearance and behaviour are in accordance with the classical tradition. In Gismond of Salerne (1567-8), another heavily Senecan play, Cupid comes down from heaven to speak the prologue, and Megaera

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Macbeth, Arden of Feversham, Hamlet, A Woman Killed with Kindness.

comes up from hell at the beginning of Act IV. The Misfortunes of Arthur (1588) presents the typical full-fledged Senecan revenge ghost. The action opens with the appearance of the ghost of Gorlois, duke of Cornwall, who acts as an Induction to the play. He predicts the dire mishaps to befall "great Pendragon's brood," and at the end of the play, goes back to hell, gloating over his revenge, now complete and perfect. He remains essentially a passive ghost, not organically linked to the main action of the play. There are several more plays of the same type, but the triumphant union of classical and popular impulses was achieved only with Kyd's Spanish Tragedy (1586).

In The Spanish Tragedy, one of the most popular of Elizabethan plays, Kyd made a great advance on the purely classical tradition of the revenge-ghost. In this play, the ghost of Andrea, slain in battle, and Revenge supply the chorus. Andrea's opening speech is a masterly piece of exposition, and the audience feels interested in this ghost and his past history as soon as he begins to speak. Andrea and Revenge sit down to watch the unfolding of the tragedy, and speak at the end of each act, Andrea exclaiming against the delay in the desired revenge, and Revenge assuring him that the sickle shall fall when the corn is ripe. These two figures remind the audience of the main business in hand. The ensuing developments are of the

greatest interest to Andrea, who sits watching and makes comments from time to time. The figure of Andrea is thus given a much more important dramatic function than merely that of a chorus — he is supposed to be the prime mover of the whole action. His figure links together all the intrigues and counter-intrigues and gives a kind of unity to the plot. The whole business is primarily meant to be revenge for Andrea, and we are made aware of the spirit of Revenge who controls the whole machinery and brings about the final catastrophe as promised in the opening of the play:

. . . thou shalt see the author of thy death,  
 Don Balthazar, the prince of Portingale,  
 Deprived of life by Bel-imperia.

(I, Chorus, 87-89)

Like all the ghosts before him, Andrea too talks about Aecus, Minos and Rhadamanth, and recites the same Senecan lore of the infernal regions, but some attempt is made by the dramatist to humanize the figure of Andrea. He describes himself as he was in his earthly life, talks with emotion about his friends and foes, and expresses his vexation at the apparent delay in the execution of revenge, all of which adds another dimension to the play. Our reaction and responses are framed, partially at least, in the context of Andrea and his situation. If Hieronimo with his fascinating display of madness and self-reproach

makes us forget Andrea's presence, he is there at the end of the tragedy, exulting in the carnage and proposing to return to the infernal world. In short, Kyd succeeds, to some extent, in individualizing and breathing life into the passive revenge-ghost of the Senecan tradition, links him more closely to the main action, and tries to make his function more dramatic. The apparition of the buried majesty of Denmark, a figure of surpassing awe and dignity, is still a long way off, but Kyd has furnished later dramatists with the right clue to follow. His play was imitated times without number, and by the turn of the century the ghost crying 'vindicta' was a familiar and well-established figure in Elizabethan tragedy.<sup>7</sup>

Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus (c. 1589), one of the most remarkable plays ever written, and perhaps second only to The Spanish Tragedy in popular appeal, deals with the supernatural too. Marlowe dramatizes the popular legend of the famous German necromancer who sold his soul to the Devil. But, despite the classical scholarship of Faustus and his author, the play remains singularly free from any Senecan colouring. In fact, Marlowe makes use of much of the popular tradition in the

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<sup>7</sup>Lochrine, The Battle of Alcazar, Richard III, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth, Sophonisba, Catiline, Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois, Antonio's Revenge, The Changeling are some of the plays having a revenge-ghost.



earlier religious drama. The Good and Bad Angels, and the dance of the Seven Deadly Sins are in the direct tradition of the moralities and interludes. The casual, almost comic conception of the devils and spirits (except for Mephistophilis' lyrical out-bursts) is also in the popular vein of earlier drama. The horse-play in the sub-plot, and the antics and childish tricks practised by Faustus himself remind one of the interludes and the comic figures of the Vice and the Devil, though one cannot indeed be sure of the authenticity of the comic scenes as they have come down to us. In these respects the play looks backward to medieval drama. But in a much more significant way it looks forward to later Jacobean drama and to Milton and the metaphysical poets. The conception of hell and damnation, though directly based on the teachings of the Church, is intellectual and personal. There is something very personal and intense in Mephistophilis' out-burst,

Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.  
 Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God,  
 And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven,  
 Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,  
 In being deprived of everlasting bliss?

(Doctor Faustus, I, iii,  
 77-81)

The thought attains timeless, cosmic proportions, and the sublime lyrical quality so perfectly captured gives to the lines the eternal ring of great poetry. The yearning

of "the high aspiring mind" "still climbing after knowledge infinite," the ultimate futility and frustration, the conflict between the two worlds of man, material and spiritual, and the destruction of the soul that tries to transcend the limitations of mortality have never before or since been depicted with more power and sincerity. It has been remarked that Faustus is Everyman; there is the same simplicity of the naked soul confronted with the mystery and terror of the universe, and the same epic sublimity in the struggle which is veritably Promethean. The mystery that is Life, with its phenomena of Power and Beauty on the one hand, Good and Evil on the other, is given lyrical and dramatic expression in a unique manner, and Marlowe succeeds in bringing out the archetypal quality of the legend and invests it with a power and tragic sublimity that has not been surpassed. The divided mind and inner conflict which characterise most of the Jacobean and metaphysical poets is curiously foreshadowed in this brilliant but restless Elizabethan. Marlowe stands superbly alone in his interpretation of this theme of conflict between the spirit and the flesh, the infinite and the finite. The use of the medieval tradition is not a hindrance to the poet; on the other hand, it supplies him with a ready-made, but still powerfully alive and completely intelligible convention or technique in terms

of which he is able to give concrete expression to the spiritual conflict, and to use the well-known symbols which have a tremendous appeal to the audience because of their accumulated traditional significance.

Far different in tone, atmosphere and content is the anonymous tragedy, Arden of Feversham (1592?). This is the earliest extant specimen of domestic tragedy, and anticipates Heywood's A Woman Killed With Kindness and Macbeth. It relates the history of nearly contemporaneous murder. The author shows a departure from current tastes. Instead of romanticism, he presents "this naked tragedy" without any "glosing stuffe," and instead of writing on past events and remote scenes, kings and courts, he deals with English events of his own time. This curious and somewhat atypical play, sometimes ascribed to Shakespeare, is primarily of interest in this discussion because of the supernatural atmosphere pervading it, though the over-all effect produced is very near to artistic and moral incoherence, blurring the landscape and pattern of the story like the "mystical" mist that hangs over the Kentish coast and miraculously preserves Arden from danger (IV, ii). Arden, the hero and victim of murder, escapes his assassins half a dozen times, and the dramatist explicitly states that there is the hand of God in these interventions as well as in the final succumbing of the victim:

Arden, thou hast wondrous holy luck  
 . . . . .  
 The Lord of Heaven hath preserved him.

(III, iv, 546, 555)

Again, Dick Reede's Curse (IV, iv, 240-44) is shown to have had supernatural effect. Witness the final choral statement by Franklin:

But this above the rest is to be noted:  
 Arden lay murdered in that plot of ground  
 Which he by force and violence held from Reede;  
 And in the grass his body's print was seen  
 Two years and more after the deed was done.

(V, vi, 510-14)

But this explanation of supernatural direction is difficult to sustain in the face of facts. What kind of divine justice or moral law is to be sought for in the death of Arden which is, prima facie, the consequence of the adulterous passion of his wife and her lover? How can these two, Alice and Mosbie, the villains Black Will and Shakebag be regarded as instruments of retribution when the grounds for Arden's "crime" and Dick Reede's subsequent curse are inadequate and ambiguous (at least as developed in the play) to the point of tenuity? This moral judgment is unsatisfactory from the ethical and artistic point of view.

Nevertheless the play is of interest, for this suggested atmosphere of supernatural power at work anticipates the techniques of later, more sophisticated

artists like Webster and Middleton.<sup>8</sup> But this vagueness in the earlier play might as well be the result of defective or careless workmanship. The author makes use, too, of much popular lore about murder, premonition through dreams, etc. Arden's relation of the foreboding dream is one of the finest things in the play:

This night I dreamt that, being in a park,  
 A toil was pitched to overthrow the deer,  
 And I upon a little rising hill  
 Stood whistly watching for the herd's approach.  
 Even there, methoughts, a gentle slumber took me,  
 And summoned all my parts to sweet repose;  
 But in the pleasure of this golden rest  
 An ill-thewed foster had removed the toil,  
 And rounded me with that beguiling home  
 Which late, methought, was pitched to cast the deer.  
 With that he blew an evil-sounding horn,  
 And at the noise another herdman came,  
 With falchion drawn, and bent it at my breast,  
 Crying aloud, "Thou art the game we seek!"  
 With this I woke and trembled every joint, . . .

(III, iii, 176-191)

But this incident is not related to the other supernatural phenomena to make it dramatically more effective. Alice's reaction to her murdered husband's blood "which cleaveth to the ground and will not out" (V, i, 256) anticipates the more magnificent passages in Macbeth (II, ii, 60-64; 68; V, i, 38; 43-44; 55-57). But any claims made for the earlier play as having influenced Shakespeare will have

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. The Duchess of Malfi, IV, ii, and Lamb's comment on it, p. 71; V, iii, the Echo scene, and V, ii, 350-60. The Changeling, V, i, 59-65.

to be qualified; there were many popular superstitions about murder which were the common stock of knowledge and tradition, e.g. the belief that a murdered corpse bled in the presence of the murderer. Macbeth also refers to another current superstition about murder (III, iv, 122-26).

To conclude, this anonymous domestic tragedy definitely possesses some merit, and the author shows originality in the handling of the supernatural, though his technique does not assimilate the different elements into one harmonious whole.

This short review of the use of the supernatural theme before Shakespeare thus leads up to the following conclusions:

- (1) The Senecan tradition was firmly established and proved immensely popular when the playwright showed genius and imagination like Kyd;
- (2) Outside the Senecan school are to be discerned a few strongly marked tendencies reflecting the individual and personal points of view; e.g. Doctor Faustus and Arden of Feversham. These foreshadowed some of the subsequent developments in Jacobean drama.

## II

### ELIZABETHAN SPIRITUALISM

"the subject being fine and pleasing . . ."

To understand the full impact of ghosts, apparitions and other supernatural paraphernalia so frequently met with in Elizabethan drama, one has to be familiar with the Elizabethan attitude to spiritualism in general. Spiritualism formed one of the major interests of the period. The Catholic writer Le Loyer declares:

Of all the common and familiar subjects of conversation, that are entered upon in company of things remote from nature and cut off from the senses, there is none so ready to hand, none so usual, as that of visions of Spirits, and whether what is said of them is true. It is the topic that people most readily discuss and on which they linger the longest because of the abundance of examples, the subject being fine and pleasing and the discussion the least tedious that can be found.<sup>9</sup>

Prof. Dover Wilson in his interesting analysis of Hamlet makes a thorough study of the problems of Elizabethan spiritualism, refers to the great controversy regarding ghosts, and outlines the main schools of thought current in the days of Elizabeth and James.<sup>10</sup> He distinguishes

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<sup>9</sup>In the opening of a second edition of his book on Spectres in 1605; quoted by J. Dover Wilson in What Happens in "Hamlet", (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), p. 65.

<sup>10</sup>Op. cit., pp. 60-66.

three different points of view.

- (1) The Roman Catholics accepted the ghost as the spirit of the departed, a temporary sojourner in Purgatory, who visited the earth for some purpose. Here again one cannot do better than recall the beautiful simile used by Le Loyer to sum up the teaching of his Church:

As the Pilgrim leaving the hostelry where he has lodged with the deliberation never to return there more, if he forgets his purse, his clothes, or some papers of consequence or if he has failed to tell his host some part of affairs that concern as much the one as the other, makes it no difficulty to retrace his steps or to turn his face to go to find that which he has left or even to speak to his host or to warn him; So the Soul, I mean a soul not yet purged, having left its first dwelling-place, if it has forgotten to do something while it was alive, returns again: not in its body, for the Souls do not take their bodies again except in the general resurrection, but in an aerial body, in order to request its near relatives and friends to render it aid to furnish the payment of that which it is indebted to the Justice of God.<sup>11</sup>

This theological explanation is confirmed and supported by popular belief and folklore which goes back to pre-Christian times. Professor Stoll expresses the same opinion about the ghost in Elizabethan drama. He observes that this ghost always came to effect a particular end; to obtain revenge, or to protect some loved one, or to

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<sup>11</sup>Le Loyer, *op. cit.*, quoted in Lewes Lavater's *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking By Nyght* (1572), ed. J. Dover Wilson and May Yardley (Oxford: University Press, 1929), pp. 250-51.



prophecy or to serve as an omen of death, or to crave burial. He refers to several Elizabethan plays which substantiate his conclusion.<sup>12</sup> It was the duty of the pious-minded to further these ends and enable the soul to rest in peace. In Hamlet, Horatio's questioning of the Ghost echoes this belief and covers all these motives.

(I, i, 130-39)

(2) The orthodox Protestants maintained that ghosts, while occasionally they might be angels, were generally nothing but devils, who "assumed" the form of departed friends or relatives to work mischief in this world. King James I subscribed to this view,<sup>13</sup> which is most comprehensively set forth in Lewes Lavater's fascinating work on the subject.<sup>14</sup>

(3) Finally there is the frankly sceptical point of view adopted by the extreme Protestants. The most famous exponent of this is Reginald Scot<sup>15</sup> whose views on the subject appear most rational and

<sup>12</sup>E. E. Stoll, Shakespeare Studies (New York: Stechert, 1942), p. 188.

<sup>13</sup>Daemonologie (1597), pp. 65-66, quoted by J. Dover Wilson, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>14</sup>Of Ghosts and Spirites Walking By Nyght (1572), op. cit.

<sup>15</sup>Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584).

sensible to a modern reader. Scot's main contention is that spirits cannot assume material form; hence the so-called apparitions are either the delusion of melancholic minds (all authorities are agreed that persons suffering from melancholy are liable to be "abused" by such delusions and visitations), or flat knavery on the part of some "couseners". He gives numerous instances to support both possibilities.<sup>16</sup> The attribution to spirits (devils or angels) of powers which should properly belong only to God is the height of impiety and profanity, and is one of the many "egregious popish impostures" that Scot condemns and exposes. He even attempts to rationalise the references to apparitions and spirits in the Bible.

Second only to ghostlore in importance and contemporary interest is witchcraft. As Mavor Moore points out, Shakespeare lived "at the height of the witchcraft hysteria," and it figures with some prominence in several of his plays.<sup>17</sup> Almost all older critics have been unanimous in asserting that the belief in witchcraft was

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<sup>16</sup>Discoverie, pp. 268,269, passim.

<sup>17</sup>"Shakespeare and Witchcraft", Stratford Papers on Shakespeare (Toronto: W. J. Gage, 1961), p. 137.

universal in Shakespeare's days<sup>18</sup> and that King James himself was the arch witch-hunter of the day. It is popular tradition that Shakespeare wrote Macbeth to flatter the King by dealing with his favourite topics: witchcraft and his own ancestry. It is true too, that King James' treatise on Daemonologie (1597) was written partly to answer and refute Reginald Scot's "damnable" and erroneous arguments denying the existence of witchcraft and the power of spirits. But James' reputation as chief witch-hunter and demonologist has been exaggerated and, as recent critics point out, his gradual but growing "diffidence" about these matters has been generally ignored.<sup>19</sup> Again, most authorities agree that Shakespeare must have known Scot's work. Scot defines witchcraft as follows:

Witchcraft is in sooth a cousening art, wherein the name of God is abused, profaned and blasphemed, and his power attributed to a vile creature. In estimation of the vulgar people, it is a supernatural worke, contrived betweene a corporall old woman, and a spiritual divell.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>George Lyman Kittredge, Witchcraft in Old and New England (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 372.

<sup>19</sup>Kittredge, op. cit., ch. XVII, 276-328; Montague Summers, Introduction to Scot's Discoverie (Suffolk: John Rodker, 1930), pp. xvii-xxiii; Mavor Moore, op. cit., pp. 154-5. Moore quotes from Fuller's Church History of Britain to prove that James "gradually lost his faith in witchcraft", and was already "diffident" about it at the time Macbeth was written.

<sup>20</sup>Discoverie, XVI, 274.

Scot pours ridicule and disbelief on the art and powers of witches, and concludes that they are nothing more than melancholy, miserable old women, deluded by their melancholy and imagining that they have all kinds of supernatural powers.<sup>21</sup> Scot nevertheless obliges his reader by giving a full account of the popular beliefs about the power of witches, which is very interesting and illuminating:

they can raise and suppresse lightening and thunder, raine and haile, clouds and winds, tempests and earthquakes. . . . they can pull downe the moone and the starres. . . . with wishing they can send needles into the livers of their enimies. . . . they can transferre corne in the blade from one place to another . . . they can cure diseases supernaturallie, flie in the aire, and danse with diuels. . . . they can keepe diuels and spirits in the likenesse of todes and cats.

They can raise spirits, . . . saile in an egge shelle, a cockle or muscle shell, . . . bring soules out of the graves.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to compare this with the pictures of witchcraft and magic in some of the Elizabethan plays.<sup>23</sup>

As with the ghost controversy, about witchcraft

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., I, 2, 4-5, III, 30-1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., I, 6.

<sup>23</sup>Reginald Scot's account is of special interest and significance in Macbeth I, i, 8-9, 12; iii, 8-25; IV, i, 52-60, and the apparitions in the same scene, The Tempest, IV, i, 41-50; 259-61, and Middleton's The Witch, I, ii, III, iii, which are crammed with witchlore largely borrowed from Scot.

too there was amazing variety and diversity of opinion. Mavor Moore does well to remind the student of Elizabethan drama that "the attitude toward witchcraft in Shakespeare's day was anything but single, and anything but credulous".<sup>24</sup>

One of the cardinal tenets of Elizabethan demonology, and one which appealed strongly to popular superstition, was the idea of 'possession' or 'obsession'. The terms signified a condition in which a person's body was inhabited by the devil and was controlled entirely by the devil. King James subscribed to this view. He believed that the devil can do this if God wills it, and that the devil is interested in obtaining two things from the persons so possessed. The first is "the tinsell of their life," and the devil therefore induces them to "perilous places." The other thing is "the tinsell of their soule," and he tries to obtain this by "intising them to mistrust and blasphemie God."<sup>25</sup> The first danger is described by Horatio when he warns Hamlet against following the ghost:

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,  
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff  
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,  
And there assume some other horrible form,

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<sup>24</sup>Op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>25</sup>Daemonologie, III, 63-64.

Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason  
And draw you into madness?<sup>26</sup>

The same idea is suggested by Edgar, who persuades his blind father that he had been led by a fiend to the cliffs of Dover to make him take his life and thus commit his soul to perdition (King Lear, IV, vi, 70-73).

Madness, especially lycanthropia, was generally believed to be the result of demoniacal possession. Though learned authorities like King James and Scot dismiss this theory as mere superstition,<sup>27</sup> it appealed powerfully to the popular mind, and this explains the success and popularity of the scenes in King Lear in which Edgar pretends to be possessed by the "foul fiend." Webster makes a similar but more eerily suggestive use of lycanthropia and its sinister implications in The Duchess of Malfi.<sup>28</sup> Neither dramatist presents these beliefs with the simplicity of complete credulousness, but these possible implications are very powerful in building up and conveying the atmosphere which seems to hover tantalizingly between the natural and the supernatural. The introduction of the masque of madmen in The Duchess of Malfi serves a similar purpose (IV, ii, 38-120).

<sup>26</sup>Hamlet, I, iv, 69-74.

<sup>27</sup>Daemonologie, III, 61, and Discoverie, V, 51-52.

<sup>28</sup>See below, pp. 71-72.

Middleton uses the madmen (pretended and real) and their dance and incoherent talk to point up the chaos and ambiguity in the moral world of the main plot. (The Changeling, IV, iii). To sum up, madness, to the Elizabethan mind, carried a slightly different connotation, and was a condition with moral and supernatural overtones which are lost on a modern audience.

### III

#### THE SUPERNATURAL IN SHAKESPEARE'S EARLY PLAYS

##### "the lights burn blue"

We have already noted (Ch. 1) that the Senecan ghost became extremely popular and firmly established on the English stage in the last three decades of the sixteenth century. The earliest of Shakespeare's plays to have revenge ghosts is Richard III. It is now generally agreed that Shakespeare's sources for the supernatural in the play were mainly Holinshed's Chronicle and the anonymous True Tragedie of Richard III. Bullough quotes from the earlier play, where Richard confesses to one of the lords (scene xviii, 1847 ff.) that he is troubled by pangs of conscience and imagines that he sees the ghosts of all whom he has slain "come gaping for revenge".<sup>29</sup>

The relevant passage in Holinshed runs thus:

The fame went, that [the King] had the same night a dreadfull and terrible dreame: for it seemed to him being asleepe that he did see diuerse images like terrible diuels, which pulled and haled him, not suffering him to take anie quiet or rest. The which strange vision not so suddenlie strake his heart with a sudden feare, but it stuffed his

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<sup>29</sup>Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), III, 338-9.



head and troubled his mind with manie busie and dreadfull imaginations. . . . he prognosticated before the doubtfull chance of the battell to come; not vsing the alacritie and mirth of mind and countenance as he was accustomed to doo before he came toward the battell.<sup>30</sup>

When one compares these two accounts with Shakespeare's play (V, iii, 119-223), one sees his indebtedness to both. But what is more striking is the way in which Shakespeare transposes, modifies, and invents material. He makes Richard dream, and shows all the ghosts coming and addressing him and Richmond in turn. Richard is made to speak the lines,

I have not that alacrity of spirit,  
Nor cheer of mind, that I was wont to have.

(V, iii, 73-74)

— which clearly echo the Chronicle — before his dream and the supernatural visitations, thus subtly preparing the audience with an indication of his frame of mind. Lavater and others stress that the melancholy mind is more susceptible to apparitions. Even according to our present understanding of dreams and how they are formed, this is a relevant and acceptable point. The hidden anxieties and fears and pangs of conscience are said to find expression

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<sup>30</sup>The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande . . . (second edition 1586), iii, 755, as given in Holinshed's Chronicle as used in Shakespeare's Plays, ed. Allardyce Nicoll and Josephine Nicoll, Everyman (London: J. M. Dent, 1927), p. 169. Italics are the editors'.

in our dreams. But in spite of this subjective origin, the dreams do have a terrifying reality of their own, though on subsequent analysis and calmer reflection on waking we might conclude that it was the subconscious fears and anxieties that were projected as the dreams. Richard's reaction as he "starts out of his dream" is fascinating:

Give me another horse! bind up my wounds!  
 Have mercy, Jesu! Soft! I did but dream.  
 O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!  
 The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.  
 Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.  
 . . . . .  
 Me thought the souls of all that I had murder'd  
 Came to my tent;

(V, iii, 178-206)

The words recapture for us the midnight stillness, the atmosphere of horror and the cold sweat of fear into which Richard awakes. How he gradually recovers and reasons himself out of the petrification of terror is indicated by his characteristic phrase "coward conscience". No finer comment on his inward struggle can be offered than the most unexpected "Have mercy, Jesu!" It is also quite in character that a few lines later he refers to "shadows" which "have struck . . . terror" to his soul (V, iii, 217-18).

In spite of the artificial symmetry of the procession of ghosts visiting the protagonist and the antagonist in turn, the scene is managed with more fineness and

emotional and psychological insight by Shakespeare than in his sources.

The same triumph of imagination is seen in that episode of haunting beauty and terror, Clarence's narration of his dream, earlier in the play (I, iv, 9-63). We may not conceive of Charon and Styx and Pluto's "kingdom of perpetual night" when we try to visualise the experience of death and a state beyond death; we may not even go along with the Elizabethans in their belief that dreams were premonitions, and had something supernatural about them, but Clarence's dream moves us to terror and pity nevertheless, and adds another dimension to the appeal of the play as a whole. The overpowering physical sensation of drowning by suffocation, the roaring of waters in the ears, and the pressure that chokes the breath are all bodily present in the verse with amazing force and truth. It is interesting to compare this account with Arden's in Arden of Feversham, mentioned earlier.

The ritualistic use of curses and invocations to demons and evil spirits is another feature of the supernatural implication of the play. "The power of a curse", observes Miss Bradbrook, ". . . is more usually superstitious, i.e. it involves the supernatural as part of the free energy, the undirected power of the universe".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>M. C. Bradbrook, "Fate and Chance in The Duchess

In Richard III there is a chorus of cursing women, all victims of Richard's cruelty. The curse which the old queen Margaret lays on Richard and his accomplices "invokes the powers of God" (I, iii, 95-96; 287-88; IV, iv, 77-78), and is "a religious imprecation".<sup>32</sup> The terrible figure of the old queen, who is more like a Fury than a human being, hovers ominously over the whole action. When one by one her curses and prophecies come true, the idea of a relentless nemesis catching up with the wrong-doers is driven home with an emphasis ethically and dramatically appropriate. A generation that was familiar with the de Casibus fable and the Wheel of Fortune theme (from translations of Boccaccio and the several very popular Mirroures) needed no further comment to point up the moral of Richard's story.

We shall see how Shakespeare learned later, in Macbeth and King Lear, how to make a more sophisticated use of curses and invocations.

The next play with a revenge ghost is Julius Caesar.

of Malfi", from "Two Notes Upon Webster", The Modern Language Review, XLII (1947), 281-291. Reprinted in Shakespeare's Contemporaries, ed. Bluestone and Rabkin (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 211.

<sup>32</sup>Bradbrook, op. cit., p. 212. Miss Bradbrook mentions the frequent use of this type of curse in Elizabethan tragedy, e.g. Titus Andronicus, Richard III, King John, Timon of Athens and Lear. Also see Arden of Feversham, IV, iv, 240-44.

In its treatment of the supernatural, this play belongs to the same category as Richard III. Shakespeare follows his source here as in Richard III, and the apparition that comes to Brutus in his tent the night before the final encounter at Philippi (IV, iii, 274 ff. S.D.) is conceived very much in the same manner as the ghosts in the earlier play. This ghost has been sometimes dismissed by critics as wholly subjective and a hallucination, but Shakespeare was merely following his source here. Even that age-old superstition that the lights turned blue or dim (Richard III, V, iii, 81) at a spectral visitation is mentioned in North's translation of Plutarch's Lives:

. . . looking towards the light of the lamp that waxed very dim, he [Brutus] saw a horrible vision of a man, of a wonderful greatness, and dreadful look, which at first made him marvellously afraid.

Brutus' words,

I think it is the weakness of mine eyes  
The shapes this monstrous apparition

(IV, iii, 275-6),

and,

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest:

(1 285)

do not mean that the apparition is not real. They only show that he tries to persuade himself it is imaginary. The speeches of Macbeth and Banquo after the Witches have vanished (Macbeth, I, iii, 79-85) reflect a similar

attitude of mind. The very next words spoken by Brutus, "Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee" (1. 286), show that he believes he has seen a spirit, and he proceeds to wake Lucius, Varro and Claudius and to question them as to whether they saw anything. (ll 288, 295, 303). This doubting of the supernatural apparitions is an integral part of Shakespeare's technique, but it is not the reality of the vision that is doubted but its true nature. Thus in the earlier ghost-scenes in Hamlet (I, iv, and II, ii), in spite of the unmistakable resemblance, Hamlet and the others cannot be sure that the Ghost is the spirit of the dead King. By making his characters wonder and vacillate thus, Shakespeare not only shows the conflict and perturbation caused in them by the apparition, but also reflects the various facets of the ghost controversy and somehow manages to leave the whole question open. As for the references to the supernatural in his source-books, it is nowadays commonly acknowledged that the Elizabethans were much less fastidious than the modern historian, and did not always distinguish between what we term 'fact' and 'fiction' in historical narrative. The rumour, the legend and the marvellous are set down with equanimity beside officially recorded events, by Holinshed, Hall, Fabyan and other chroniclers, official and unofficial. The Elizabethan reader or playgoer was not the one to boggle at all the 'True Declarations' and 'True

Chronicle Histories' and 'True Tragedies' that he read and saw. It seems to me that there is something inherent and deep-rooted in the human race that promotes this attitude of credulousness. Perhaps Man never completely outgrows his early delight in listening to a story -- the Elizabethans were, above all, good listeners, and therefore could have their good story tellers too. All of which brings us back to Coleridge's famous definition of what constitutes "poetic faith" and to the actor who defined in a single word his conception of an ideal audience -- "Children".

A word about the general conception of the actual appearance of ghosts: the Elizabethans thought of them as disembodied spirits who "assumed" human shape, insubstantial as air, and invulnerable to weapons. (Cf. Hamlet I, i, 41; 143-145). But they did not have the benefit of photographic tricks or optical illusions to present a ghost as a thin silhouette or as a shadow flitting across without touching the ground, as is sometimes done in modern stage and screen productions. All ghosts and spirits whether they were hallucinations or visions invisible to all but one, silent or voluble, were actually presented on the Elizabethan stage. A white sheet was the easily indentified costume of a ghost, and his face was usually whitened with flour. He usually made

his entries and exits through the trap door. Such a presentation was adequate to create the dramatic illusion and it was up to the dramatist by dialogue and action to show the impact of the ghost on the other characters and thus sustain the illusion. To a future age when more may be known about the nature and properties of ghosts and spirits, our present conception and presentation of them in literature and on stage and screen may look equally naïve and outmoded. It is true that any great writer has to and does outlive the conventions and beliefs of his day, and that his permanent and universal appeal lies in elements which transcend time and place. But it is no less true that to comprehend any writer fully and to see the picture as he intended to show it, it is necessary to see more or less from his perspective. We are not primarily interested in Shakespeare or any other great dramatist because he wrote about ghosts and spirits and the supernatural world; we are interested in what they make of the supernatural, how they admit it into their plays and what effect they achieve. Most of us would read the works of King James, Lavater or Scot only to discover what light they throw on Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

It is idle to speculate whether Shakespeare "believed" in ghosts, witchcraft, demoniacal possession



and similar phenomena. It would be more sensible to remember that Shakespeare was a product of the age he lived in, in spite of his extraordinary insight and knowledge of human nature which seems so "modern" to us. It would be foolish, indeed, to expect Shakespeare to have twentieth-century ideas on political franchise or nuclear physics. It would be even more foolish to adopt a slightly condescending or patronising attitude towards his ideas of political philosophy or physical sciences because they do not happen to be twentieth-century ideas. Let me, therefore, hasten to explain that the statement just made, that Shakespeare was a product of his age does not imply anything derogatory to the genius and achievement of one of the most remarkable minds that humanity has ever produced. It was meant rather to facilitate the right mode of approach to the supernatural element in his plays. Today all sane critics are agreed on the point that Shakespeare was influenced to a considerable degree in his moral and political philosophy by contemporary ideas of a divine "order", "degree", and the sanctity of the anointed King. In the same manner one has to accept the ideas on ghosts and spirits, witchcraft and magic that passed current in those days and are reflected in his plays. Whether he was on the side of King James or of Reginald Scot or on any side at all is not important. The

important and supremely interesting fact to us is that Shakespeare is very much interested in the dramatic possibilities of the supernatural world when it impinges on the natural, and has made use of it in at least six of his major plays — Richard III, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest — while the supernatural makes its appearance, though sporadically and in a minor key, in eight more plays, ranging through his whole career as dramatist, from Henry VI to Cymbeline.

#### IV

#### THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE MAJOR TRAGEDIES OF SHAKESPEARE

"this supernatural soliciting . . ."

The popularity of the Senecan ghost and the revenge motif in Elizabethan drama has been already noted.

Shakespeare's preoccupation with these ideas culminated in Hamlet, perhaps the most remarkable work ever created. So much has been said and written about this play that it seems presumptuous to attempt any analysis or appreciation of it here. Nevertheless, as the play is unique in the handling of the supernatural, I shall try to indicate the distinctive features of this particular aspect of the play.

Dover Wilson has remarked that "the Ghost is the linchpin of Hamlet".<sup>33</sup> Indeed the play would lose much of its mystery and appeal without the figure of the Ghost. The opening scene has been rightly praised by scholars and critics one and all for the masterly way in which Shakespeare prepares for the first appearance of the Ghost, creates an atmosphere of suspense and wonder during his actual presence, and manages the subsequent appearances

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<sup>33</sup>What Happens in "Hamlet", op. cit., p. 52.

so cunningly that there is practically no loss of dramatic effect in repetition. Here is a splendid illustration of Coleridge's remark that Shakespeare makes use of expectation in preference to surprise. When the scene opens we find Marcellus and Bernardo describing "this dreaded sight twice seen" of them already: the apparition had occurred exactly at the same hour and in the same spot on the two previous nights (I, i, 65-66). The audience is given the feeling that this Ghost has some solemn and important mission, and bodes some "great perturbation in nature". Thus the eagerness and wonder with which the spectator awaits the apparition is enhanced rather than dissipated. When the portentous figure actually appears it harrows Horatio with fear and wonder, and the erstwhile sceptic trembles and looks pale. Its second appearance confirms the belief in the beholders that it has something significant to impart and naturally they decide that the best person to receive its message would be the Prince. Thus the expectation of the audience is worked up to a climax with regard to Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost.

When young Hamlet finally beholds the apparition, he reacts with such intensity that the audience feels the shock with almost the same freshness. Hamlet feels he will "burst in ignorance" if he cannot communicate with

The last appearance of the Ghost to Hamlet in the Queen's chamber is of a different kind, and has raised its own problems of interpretation. Much has been said about the reality and "objectivity" (to use Prof. Stoll's word) of Shakespeare's ghosts. The ghost of Banquo at the banquet-scene in Macbeth, (III, iv), the ghost of Julius Caesar (IV, iii), even the procession of ghosts in Richard III (V, iii) and the Ghost in Hamlet visible only to the prince (III, iv) are all suspect in the eyes of some critics who would explain these away as hallucinations like "the air-drawn dagger" that Macbeth sees (II, i, 33 ff.). Scholars have marshalled every possible scrap of evidence and information on both sides, but the only really incontestible statement that can be made as a generalisation seems to be this: originally, on the Elizabethan stage, all these spectres and spirits seem to have been bodily and visibly shown. The reasons for this are self-evident. If Shakespeare's intentions regarding the subjectivity or objectivity of these apparitions could be gauged from this, and if all scholars could reach the same conclusions from this, there would be no problem. But under the circumstances, the most one can say is that each situation has to be judged by its own context and tone. For instance, in that scene (III, i, 13-62) in Henry IV, I, where Hotspur relentlessly pricks the bubble of Glendower's

conceits about his supernatural status, it is clear on whose side the dramatist's sympathies lie. This scene should not be taken as an index of Shakespeare's belief or lack of belief in portents, conjuration and the like. The good-humoured sceptical laughter is the only thing that strikes one in this scene. But Shakespeare presents another sceptic in the presence of the supernatural. Horatio is a scholar to boot, and from Wittenberg, the strong-hold of the emancipated Protestant faith. When he declares, after seeing the Ghost,

Before my God, I might not this believe  
Without the sensible and true avouch  
Of mine own eyes . . .

(Hamlet, I, i, 56-58)

there is no trace of scepticism left in these accents. What more could any rationalist or sceptic possibly say to prove his conversion is total and absolute? Anyone who saw a ghost and was convinced of its reality would talk in the same way, in the seventeenth or the twentieth century. As Prof. Dover Wilson says, "Certainly as a poet [Shakespeare] believed in this ghost; and determined that his audience should believe in it likewise."<sup>35</sup> Of course, the matter is less simple when it comes to an explanation of the real nature of the Ghost, whether he is "a spirit of health or goblin damn'd".

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<sup>35</sup>Op. cit., p. 52.

Again, The Tempest — call it allegory, myth, romance or what you will — becomes meaningless if one does not believe in Ariel and his function. To doubt his reality is to question the artistic reality of the whole work, the pattern, the conception and the ideas that went into its making.

To believe anything beyond the pale of immediate actual experience constitutes an act of faith to some extent — like my faith that there exist such things as electrons, though my chances of exchanging greetings with these are rather remote. How and why do I believe in them? I am quite content to take the word of some person or persons who are reliable authorities in such matters. The Elizabethan had his learned authorities and long tradition and widespread belief in the existence of a supernatural world.

To return to the objectivity of these phenomena in Shakespeare's plays: the two instances cited, of Horatio and Hotspur, are examples of the extreme points of view — complete faith and complete scepticism. The supernatural world in the plays is ranged between these two poles. As for the nature of the supernatural apparition, the difference between a subjective apparition and an objective one seems to be a difference of degree rather than one of kind. That is to say, some minds are shown to be more

sensitive, better attuned to receive such an experience, or at least not offering positive resistance. With all such minds the supernatural world may communicate. Hamlet and Horatio can see the Ghost, even the rough, unreflective imaginations of Marcellus and Bernardo can, if need be; but it seems Gertrude can never see it. Neither can an Iago nor an Edmund see a ghost, for they have no perception of anything beyond this gross, palpable world of things; at least, no conscious recognition of anything beyond the senses guides their conduct or shapes their philosophy. They may be called spiritual philistines. This supernatural clairvoyance need not necessarily go hand in hand with a clarity of moral vision, for Macbeth, Richard III, and Brutus, among several others, are endowed with this fineness of imagination. Lady Macbeth is notoriously lacking in this sensitivity or truth of imagination, and naturally her conscious, dominant self has to be laid aside in sleep before she can experience this extension of her moral and spiritual awareness. It is significant that her simple diagnosis of Macbeth's "restless ecstasy" (III, ii, 22) is

"You lack the season of all natures, sleep"

(III, iv, 140)

It seems to me that in any situation where the supernatural comes in, this imaginative sympathy or fineness of perception is a better index to the validity of



the experience and its dramatic propriety. That is to say, the interest and significance of the supernatural manifestations (especially apparitions) consist in the fact that they are totally and absolutely real to at least one person, who reacts to them with his whole being, whatever be the actual duration of the experience or the rationalising that may follow. Thus the relevant fact is not whether the King's spirit really appears in Gertrude's chamber or not, but that Hamlet sees his father's spirit there and communicates with it. These moments of Hamlet's experience are as valid and significant to us as any other. Shakespeare's conception of the prince of Denmark embraces this sensitivity or vividness of imagination, and our response to Hamlet is total and accurate only when it is framed in the context of all that happens to him, as judged by Hamlet himself and no other. Of course our picture of Hamlet would not be complete without piecing together the impressions of others in the play. Ophelia's speech on the Hamlet that had been is a typical example:

O! what a noble mind is here o'er thrown:  
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue,  
sword;

The observ'd of all observers, quite, quite, down!

(III, i, 159-163)

but Hamlet's subjective experience and reaction are of prime importance. The same is true about Macbeth and all

his visions, Brutus, Richard III, in short of all the persons in the plays who are able to perceive and comprehend beyond "this muddy vesture of decay". The ultimate reality of these apparitions and visions is their reality to the person or persons to whom they appear. The forms that rise from the Witches' cauldron, the ghosts that "come gaping for revenge" to Richard, are all of primary interest to us because of the reactions of Macbeth and Richard.

But, as one critic puts it, Shakespeare was rarely content with doing one thing at a time: his plays say several things at the same time, and all these different and simultaneous interpretations are written into the plays. Naturally, the supernatural can be comprehended at various levels. Thus the Ghost in Hamlet is a portentous figure, boding some strange eruption to the state. Wilson Knight sees him as "the devil of the knowledge of death, which possesses Hamlet and drives him from misery and pain to increasing bitterness, cynicism, murder, and madness".<sup>36</sup> Also, true to the spirit of the times, Shakespeare in presenting the Ghost scenes has adopted the conventions, the current ideas and general beliefs in ghost-lore.<sup>37</sup> Thus

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<sup>36</sup>The Wheel of Fire (Oxford Univ. Press: London, (1930)), revised, enlarged ed. Methuen & Co., 1960, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup>See Lavater, Scot, Dover Wilson, quoted elsewhere.

he is able to create a very complex impression. This is equally true about Macbeth and the supernatural agency made use of in it. Shakespeare's conception of the Witches offers at least three different possible interpretations:

- (1) the Witches of folklore — "withered and wild" hags, malignant creatures with supernatural powers, in league with the Devil, practising black magic, who can raise spirits, work through their familiars, "look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow and which will not". They delight in mischief, mutilate corpses for their secret rites, and hold witches' sabbaths on blasted heaths or dark midnight caverns where the cauldron brews a most potent magic;
- (2) "instruments of darkness" as Banquo terms them,<sup>38</sup> or "juggling fiends" who lure mankind from the path of righteousness and truth to "the primrose way" and "the ever-lasting bonfire" — the Bad Angel of the morality play tirelessly fighting with the Good

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<sup>38</sup>Cf. King James, Daemonologie, Bodley Head Quartos, ed. G. B. Harrison, (1924).

As likewise to make himselfe [the Devil] so to be trusted in these little thinges, that he may have the better commoditie thereafter, deceiue them in the end with a tricke once for all; I meane the everlasting perdition of their soul & body.  
(p. 17)

In Macbeth, Banquo's words which follow (I, iii, 122-26) recall this idea very strongly.

Angel for the possession of man's soul. Macbeth's "mine eternal jewel given to the common enemy of man" (III, i, 68-69) echoes Faustus' pact with Lucifer;

- (3) the "bubbles" of the earth, shadows of evil and temptation proceeding outward from the hearts of Macbeth and Banquo; the deep-rooted instinct for crime and fulfilment of ambition projected from the human heart and given an externalized symbol and shape — the enemy within viewed as one outside. This is the most abstract and metaphorical explanation. But the fact that Macbeth never lays the blame on the Witches (though he curses them) for his actions, and the vague hints that Banquo was also feeling the effects of the insidious poison working in him (cf. III, i, 1-10) — though he is better able to dissimulate and bide his time — lend support to the idea of temptation and crime corrupting from within rather than without.<sup>39</sup>

These nuances are worked into the texture of the

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<sup>39</sup>Banquo's behaviour and words, after the murder of Duncan, give a vague uncomfortable impression of false professions and self-interest, which is not stressed, though. Perhaps, as some editors suggest, Shakespeare ran into trouble trying to square the Banquo of the source with the glorified legendary ancestor of James I!

play and are not obtrusive. They make it possible for the play to appeal to different levels of understanding, on the emotional, intellectual or psychological, and moral planes. It has been wisely observed that each age gets as much Shakespeare as it can take.<sup>40</sup> The peculiar merit of Shakespeare is that he starts at the lowest rung of the ladder and gradually works his way upward, leaving his audience free to ascend with him or to view the whole picture from the bottom itself.

One word more about the Weird Sisters and their function: whatever be the true nature of the Witches — which Prof. Foakes calls "the one real mystery of the play"<sup>41</sup> — their kinship with evil is made abundantly clear. They infect the human mind with evil. But Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were only too ready to be seduced. The tiny germ of suggestion that Macbeth shall be king hereafter — as Kenneth Muir has pointed out, their prophecy is "morally neutral"<sup>42</sup> — sprouts into a gigantic growth. The response of Macbeth and his lady is of such intensity and mischief that their fundamental kinship with evil is

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<sup>40</sup>Prof. Robertson Davies in his lecture "Changing Tastes in Shakespearean Production", Stratford Seminar 1962.

<sup>41</sup>In a lecture on Macbeth delivered during the Shakespeare Seminar, Stratford, Aug. 6, 1962.

<sup>42</sup>Introduction to the Arden edition (London: Methuen, 1959), p. lxiii.

immediately and beyond doubt established. Chance and supernatural agencies seem to favour them. Lady Macbeth declares that "Fate and metaphysical aid" have already crowned Macbeth king. Macbeth is taken in by the prophecies too, and after Duncan's murder he thinks he can command the Witches to impart to him secret knowledge. But he is never under any illusions as to the actual nature of their practices and powers. They fascinate and repel him. In fact he treats them with scant courtesy, and after Duncan's murder, his language to them is full of invective and abuse. (Cf. IV, i, 47, 104-5; 115; 133-4; 138-39). Towards the end he refers to them invariably as "the fiend" or "fiends" (Cf. V, v, 43-44, vii, 48). The moral and theological implication in this association with the Witches is thus made abundantly clear by Macbeth himself:

And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd,  
That palter with us in a double sense;  
That keep the word of promise to our ear,  
And break it to our hope.

(V, vii, 48-51)

He has learned too late what Banquo had perceived in the very beginning:

. . . to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's  
In deepest consequence.

But Macbeth chose sides with his eyes wide open; the Witches are only accessories or agents who signify the

perennial inscrutable forces of evil, forever lying in wait to seize the human soul that is not constantly vigilant against them.

Shakespeare's use of the Witches is very economical and dramatically appropriate. The main emphasis is always on Macbeth. There are no scenes of ghoulish delight, no piling up of the macabre and the obscene, no sadistic relish in the coarser detail for its own sake. It is only when one compares the Witch scenes in Macbeth (with even the Hecate scenes included) with those in Middleton's The Witch, Marston's Sophonisba and Dekker's The Witch of Edmonton that Shakespeare's admirable restraint and superb sense of proportion become fully evident. When the Witches in Macbeth have accomplished their purpose of tempting Macbeth into crime and are assured that he is "in blood / Stepp'd in so far, that, should [he] wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er", they pass out of the action entirely. There are no infernal gloatings over the victims. The Witches are kept strictly within the proper artistic bounds.

## THE POWER OF CURSES AND IMPRECATIONS

"the undirected power of the universe"

We have seen how Shakespeare makes use of the popular belief about the supernatural power of curses in Richard III. In his mature tragedies, especially in Macbeth and King Lear, he makes use of curses and invocations too, but in a more sophisticated and subtle way. Macbeth is another Faustus who has given his "eternal jewel" to the "common enemy of man". Lady Macbeth too, denies grace and salvation by her irrevocable invocation to the spirits of evil and wickedness. She prays to them to unsex her and transform her nature completely:

Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts! unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top full  
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry, 'Hold, hold!'

(I, v, 41-55)



Her prayers are answered. Macbeth invokes night and darkness (I, iv, 50-53). Both are conscious that they are defying and violating nature. (Cf. the references to nature in Lady Macbeth's invocation, and also Macbeth's "now o'er the one half-world / Nature seems dead" (II, i, 49-50)). Both are transformed. They have severed themselves from the common "bond" (see below, p. 59) of humanity, broken the link that united them to the Great Chain of Being. Inevitably, the consequences follow. They are denied sleep. At the very moment that Macbeth commits the deed of murder, he hears a voice cry,

'Sleep no more!  
 Macbeth doth murder sleep', the innocent sleep,  
 Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,  
 The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
 Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,  
 Chief nourisher in life's feast, . . .

(II, ii, 36-41)

Shakespeare found this reference to a voice in Holinshed, but he links up sleep with nature and her scheme of things, and Macbeth is made fully aware of the monstrosity of his deed. Lady Macbeth consequently suffers "a great perturbation in nature" (V, i, 10) in her "slumberry agitation". She smells blood and sees murky hell. Both suffer, like Marlowe's Mephistophilis, a present hell, "here upon this bank and shoal of time". We are not interested (because Shakespeare is not, in this case) in identifying that part of the nether world which is to be

allocated to them after death. (Cf. Andrea who has it all laid out ready, to each according to his merit, torture for his enemies and pleasures for his friends. (The Spanish Tragedy IV, iii, (Chorus), 315-22; 329-42)).

It is significant that the supernatural and the "unnatural" almost always go hand in hand in Shakespeare's plays. The terrible and most unusual phenomena that follow Duncan's murder (II, ii, 62-67; iv, 6-18), are described as "unnatural, Even like the deed that's done". (II, iv, 10-11). They are Nature's comment and protest made at the violation of the laws and rules governing the universe and the life of man.

The murder ("most foul, strange and unnatural") of the anointed King of Denmark brings his spirit clad in steel to walk the platform of the castle at Elsinore by night. Horatio rightly divines that "This bodes some strange eruption to our state", (I, i, 69) And goes on to recall the strange phenomena that came to pass in Rome "a little ere the mighty Julius fell":

The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead  
 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;  
 And even the like precurses of fierce events,  
 As harbingers preceding still the fates  
 And prologue to the men coming on,  
 Have heaven and earth together demonstrated  
 Upon our climatures and countrymen.

(Hamlet, I, i, 155-125)

Compare Lavater:

Before the alterations and changes of kingdomes and in the time of warres, seditions, and other dangerous seasons, ther most commonly happen very strange things in the aire, in the earth, & amongst liuing creatures clean contrary to the vsuall course of nature. Which things men cal, wonders, signes, monsters, and fore-warnings of matters to come.<sup>43</sup>

The worlds of Hamlet and Macbeth imply a more or less Christian or biblical cosmology and moral system. But the world of King Lear has a mythical, timeless quality which is more akin to the ancient classical idea. Man on earth below has to look up to the inscrutable, impersonal powers of the universe, occupying the high heavens. We hear of Jupiter, the Gods, and heavens, and the keyword is "nature".<sup>44</sup> Cordelia replies to the King's question:

I love your majesty  
According to my bond; nor more nor less.

(I, i, 94-95)

The "bond" Cordelia refers to is the bond of nature which links parent and child in mutual feeling, obligation and duty; it is also the bond that unites all humanity in

<sup>43</sup>Op. cit., pp. 80-81.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. "The Influence of Gorboduc on King Lear", by Barbara Heliodora Carneiro De Mendonça, Shakespeare Survey XIII (1960), 41-47. The author discusses the connotations of "nature", and "unnatural" in the two plays, and shows how good and evil are bared and placed in mortal combat as in the morality plays.

fellowship; it is this bond that fills each human bosom with "the milk of human kindness" (cf. Macbeth). It is by this bond that a human being keeps the tenure of his life and his natural qualities. (Cf. Macbeth, III, ii, 49-50 where "bond" has the last two meanings. In Richard III,; IV, iv, 77, Queen Margaret uses it in the last-mentioned sense). Lear goes against nature and this bond when he rejects and curses his daughter:

. . . by the sacred radiance of the sun,  
 The mysteries of Hecate and the night,  
 By all the operations of the orbs  
 From whom we do exist and cease to be,  
 Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
 Propinquity and property of blood,  
 And as a stranger to my heart and me  
 Hold thee from this forever.

(I, i, 111-118)

I hope it is not too fanciful to note something closely similar and relevant, in ancient Indian mythology, to the parent-child relation and its implications. The Hindu epics tell of fathers who were able to bless their children and grant them any boon they desired. A certain king even granted his son the boon of being able to choose the moment of his death. It was not by any specially acquired power or merit besides their position as king and father that they were able to do this. Miss Bradbrook observes that the power of a curse was "greatest in a parent or King, in whose outraged authority God saw an image of his own". Note that Lear utters his imprecation

in all solemnity, swearing by the sacred powers.<sup>45</sup> In King Lear there is a complete reversal of this function and power of the father: Lear rejects, disowns and curses his youngest daughter. By this unnatural act he may be said to have set moving the whole juggernaut of chaos and evil; in this instance the curse recoils on him too, to some extent. He finds himself spurned and tormented by his other daughters and has to pay with his life and his daughter's too, before they can find peace. When he later calls on Nature to blast Goneril's womanhood,

Hear, Nature, hear! dear goddess, hear!  
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend  
To make this creature fruitful!  
Into her womb convey sterility!  
Dry up in her the organs of increase,  
And from her derogate body never spring  
A babe to honour her! If she must teem,  
Create her child of spleen, that it may live  
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!

(I, iv, 299-307)

the imprecation chills the whole air with terror, as Albany's horrified exclamation:

Now, gods that we adore, whereof comes this?

(I, iv, 314)

shows; and when he repeats his curses in the presence of Regan (II, iv, 164 ff.), she exclaims in awe:

O the blest gods! So will you wish on me,  
When the rash mood is on.

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<sup>45</sup>Cf. Bradbrook, op. cit., p. 212.

Similarly in The White Devil and The Devil's Law Case the daughters shrink in terror and stand aghast at the mothers' curses.<sup>46</sup> In The Tempest, when Ferdinand has passed the test, Prospero bestows on him the rich reward of his daughter, but warns him:

If thou dost break her virgin knot before  
 All sanctimonious ceremonies may  
 With full and holy rite be minister'd,  
 No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall  
 To make this contract grow; but barren hate,  
 Sour-ey'd disdain and discord shall bestrew  
 The union of your bed with weeds so loathly  
 That you shall hate it both: therefore take heed,  
 As Hymen's lamp shall light you.

(IV, 1, 13-23)

The injunction gains two-fold power from his authority as father and as one who practises the most potent art.

It is interesting to recollect that Gloucester does not curse Edgar, though he is stricken to the heart by his apparent treachery and vows vengeance and punishment. He learns the truth about his two sons when he loses his eyes, at the end of Act III, and from that moment he is penitent and invokes the Gods' blessings on Edgar, and wishes to be forgiven and reconciled. One wonders if this forgiveness has anything to do with the different fates that overtake Cordelia and Edgar, the two wronged children in the story. Is it partly because he was not

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<sup>46</sup>The White Devil, I, ii, 288-93; The Devil's Law Case, I, ii, 112-14. I owe these references to Miss Bradbrook, op. cit., p. 212.

blighted by the parental curse that Edgar escapes disaster and emerges as a beautiful saintly champion of good?

The association of ideas in supernatural and unnatural carries over to Shakespeare's depiction of magic, too. This is not applicable to A Midsummer Night's Dream, which is pure fantasy, an exercise of exuberant fancy, a lyric world which is peopled by Cobweb, Mustard Seed, Titania and Puck. This is a gossamer world which has no relevance outside the moonlit Athenian wood, and it would be idle to seek ethical or philosophical overtones in it. It is a far cry from the world of tragedy.

Not so with The Tempest. Though Prospero's magic might be termed "white", there is an underlying gravity and earnestness of tone, and a philosophy and judgement of life, though it is not obtrusive or dogmatic. The action itself hovers on the verge of tragedy and violence. Evil is portrayed in the persons of Antonio and Sebastian, and in Caliban and the drunken plot on Prospero's life. Prospero's role is one of divine Providence in the action. Many allegorical and symbolic interpretations of The Tempest have been made, but the most striking fact in the play is Prospero's redemption. He wins what he had lost. It is significant that like Dr. Faustus and Friar Bacon, more sinister practitioners of necromancy, he decides to abjure his art. He describes it as "rough magic". Here we have the moral implication made clear.

Much has been said about the exquisite imagination that conceived Ariel and Caliban, but they, together with the light and airy beings of A Midsummer Night's Dream, are outside the pale of tragedy and one is not immediately concerned with them in this discussion.



## VI

### THE WORLD OF JOHN WEBSTER

"a perspective that shows us hell"

In the tragedies of John Webster there are not so many ghosts or apparitions as in Shakespeare and in other contemporary plays. Direct mention of ghosts is made only twice in Webster's plays (The White Devil, IV, i, 105, S.D.; V, iv, 118, S.D.) but the plays are full of intangible but powerful suggestions and overtones which through their cumulative effect build up an atmosphere which pervades the plays, and the action seems to hover between the natural and the supernatural.<sup>47</sup> This atmosphere is deliberately created by the dramatist, and in fact, is one of the ways in which he achieves that distinctive ethos which is the most remarkable thing about his plays. This is far more important than the actual movement of the plot or the intrinsic interest in character. This essence cannot be captured in any synopsis

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<sup>47</sup>Cf. M. C. Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), pp. 195 ff. I am indebted to Miss Bradbrook's fine analysis of The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil for this idea of Webster's suggestive treatment of the supernatural.

of the plays, whose plots are usually highly melodramatic and full of ingeniously devised cruelties and horrors. There is something diseased and baleful about this world that Webster shows us, and in this world of unnatural horrors and elaborate Machiavellian techniques of poisoning and murder, at some point in the action the boundaries of the concrete natural world seem to melt and blur into something more awful and mysterious. Though indefinable, this element makes itself felt, and gives the whole action a supernatural complexion. With a writer of such high seriousness and deliberate artistry as Webster, this is very significant and forms an integral part of his design. A closer examination of this aspect of his plays may very well reveal something of Webster's moral vision and show how his imagination shaped his works.

In The White Devil, the earliest of his great works, the title itself catches our attention. F. L. Lucas explains that this was a common expression in Webster's time to describe a hypocrite, a devil disguised under a fair outside, as contrasted with the openly wicked Black Devils.<sup>48</sup> Here was a dazzlingly beautiful woman, whose aristocratic bearing, high mettle and indomitable courage made her a most striking and magnetic personality.

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<sup>48</sup>Complete Works of John Webster, ed. F. L. Lucas, (London: Chatto and Windus), 1927, I, 193-94.

The combination of almost angelic beauty and evil produces an indescribable effect on the beholders. The Elizabethans were fascinated by the theme of appearance and reality (cf. Una and Duessa in The Faerie Queene, the contrast between Othello and Desdemona, and the variations on the theme in Othello.)<sup>49</sup> Again, there is something inexplicably sinister in the association of the epithet 'white' in such a context. Herman Melville analyses this response to "the supernaturalism of this hue" in discussing the "Whiteness of the Whale" in Moby Dick.<sup>50</sup> Webster himself characteristically repeats the idea in The Duchess of Malfi:

He thinkes her fault, and beauty  
Blended together, shew like leprosie,  
The whiter, the fowler.

(III, iii, 74-76)

This impression is strengthened by the fact that in the play *Vittoria* is called "devil" several times,<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Othello, I, i, 88-89; iii, 291-92; V, ii, 128-29. The theme has appealed to the human mind through the ages. (Cf. the appearance of Satan in Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger). It has the archetypal quality of myth and fairy tale.

<sup>50</sup>Ch. 42, pp. 192-195: Melville describes "a certain nameless terror" produced by this "hideous whiteness" which is the colour associated with the pallor of death and with all ghostly apparitions.

<sup>51</sup>I, i, 246; III, ii, 72-73; III, ii, 224-25; IV, ii, 88-89.

and it is even hinted that she was possessed by the devil.

Flamineo exclaims:

Thou hast a Devill in thee; I will try  
If I can scarre him from thee:

(V, vi, 19-20)

Brachiano, Vittoria's partner in crime, is poisoned, and in his death agony and "distractions" imagines he sees the devil. The infernal incantations of Lodovico and Gasparo, whose every other word is "devil" or "damn'd," and their strangling of him enhance the effect which reaches its crescendo in Vittoria's cry: "O me! this place is hell."<sup>52</sup> To strengthen the impression of supernatural governance, Webster makes use of premonitions, dreams, omens, vows and curses.<sup>53</sup> Cornelia, discovering her daughter's dishonour cries:

My feares are falne upon me, oh my heart!

(I, ii, 206)

Vittoria's dream, real or invented, and its effect on Brachiano (I, ii, 221-258) bring forth the prophetic comment from Cornelia:

Woe to light hearts! — they still forerun our fall!

(259)

<sup>52</sup>V, iii, 80-182.

<sup>53</sup>See above pp. 17, 18, 32-33 on the supernatural implication of these.

Brachiano's vow by his wedding-ring has a blighting effect on Isabella, who cries that she will need her winding sheet shortly. Marcello recollects, just before he is stabbed to death by his brother Flamineo, that the latter had broken a limb off their father's crucifix, and sees heaven's hand in his fall. (V, ii, 20-23) The ghost of Brachiano appears to Flamineo, throws earth upon him and shows him a skull (V, iv, 118 S.D., 129 S.D.), which Flamineo rightly interprets as an omen of his approaching end. This apparition may or may not be purely a product of Flamineo's imagination. Flamineo is prepared for such a warning; his heart and whole being are attuned to receive such a message. For at Brachiano's death-bed Flamineo says:

I doe not like that he names mee so often,  
 Especially on's death-bed: 'tis a sure signe  
 I shall not live long:

(V, iii, 127-29)

The sight of his mother distraught at the death of Marcello has moved him to an unwonted experience of emotion:

I have a strange thing in mee, to th' which  
 I cannot give a name, without it bee  
 Compassion . . .

(V, iv, 107-9)

He reviews his past life and confesses he has lived "riotously ill." He is in a penitent and melancholy mood and reveals the conflict between his outward behaviour and

inner state; he has often felt "the maze of conscience in his breast." It is in this susceptible mood that he sees the ghost of Brachiano. But, true to Webster's conception, Flamineo can still be a sophisticated and critical audience to a supernatural apparition. He is full of curiosity and half-mocking remarks and pretends not to be shaken by the supernatural visitation. But it has struck terror into his heart nevertheless, for when the ghost throws earth at him he cries "O fatal!", and confesses that "this terrible vision" is the culmination of all the mischances his fate has brought about. Unlike Isabella's ghost, which appears to Francisco (IV, i, 105 S.D. - 119 S.D.) as a result of his deliberate imaginative creation and disappears when he wills it, Brachiano's ghost seems to have a greater degree of objective reality and independence. But neither apparition talks or does anything to initiate a new action, and some critics hold that both are presented as creatures of the imagination.<sup>54</sup> But the real nature of the ghosts is not so important dramatically as their impact on the beholders. It is difficult to pronounce a verdict on Webster's treatment of the supernatural because he is far too sophisticated and subtle to follow a general moral or artistic pattern. The only unity he cares about and

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<sup>54</sup>The White Devil, ed. G. B. Harrison (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), p. 165.

achieves is the unity of atmosphere; he does not relate in an organic or coherent way all the supernatural implications in the action, nor does he offer any moral comment on their significance. Thus in The Duchess of Malfi, too, we find omens and premonitions, Bosola fancies he is haunted by the murdered Duchess, and Antonio in that curiously Gothic Echo scene (V, iii) seems to see "a face folded in sorrow" which may be his (dead) wife's. But all these are left unrelated and Webster is content to let each incident or situation achieve its effect in isolation, at the moment of its occurrence. There is no attempt to "look before and after" or offer any choric comment.

The most striking example of Webster's suggestive and evocative use of the supernatural is furnished by the theme of madness in The Duchess of Malfi. In this play Webster uses the theme in two different contexts. In IV, ii we find the Duchess suffering her hell and purgatory here in this life itself. She describes her condition in terrible and sublime words:

I'll tell thee a miracle --  
I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow.  
Th' heaven ore my head, seemes made of molten brasse,  
The earth of flaming sulphure, yet I am not mad:

(25-28)

Charles Lamb, as usual, reveals his extremely fine and sympathetic sensibility when he remarks on the "several parts of the dreadful apparatus with which the Duchess'

death is ushered in," and "the strange character of suffering" they bring upon her:

As they are not inflictions of this life, so her language seems not of this world. . . . she speaks the dialect of despair, her tongue has a smatch of Tartarus and the souls in bale.<sup>55</sup>

Now a "wild consort of madmen" are brought in, who sing and dance to "a dismal kind of musique." They "howle" about ravens, screech owls, death, and their talk is all about doomsday, hell, devils, and the "fire" that "never goes out." The word "mad" runs through the whole scene like a refrain. Soon Bosola appears as a tomb-maker and proceeds to bring the Duchess "by degrees to mortification." He brings a present from her "Princely brothers," "a coffin, cords and a bell." The Duchess welcomes death:

Come violent death,  
Serve for Mandragora, to make me sleepe;

(241-42)

When she is strangled, along with her children, there begins a "sencible hell" for Bosola and Ferdinand.

Ferdinand's reaction to the Duchess' murder — the second aspect of the theme of madness — is one of the most eerie things in the play. He begins by remarking callously, about the strangled children:

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<sup>55</sup>Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, ed. Israel Gollancz (London: J. M. Dent, 1893), II, 42.



The death  
Of young wolffes, is never to be pitied.

(274-75)

Bosola asks him to fix his eye on the dead Duchess, and he answers without a touch of remorse, "Constantly". But the sight of her face "dazzles" his eyes, and proves his undoing. He had made a "solemn vow" earlier (cf. III, ii, 159) never to see her again. His vow rebounds on himself and the sight drives him mad.<sup>56</sup> Now his mind dwells constantly on the murder and its terrible consequences, especially exposure by the wolf.

The wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up,  
Not to devour the corpse, but to discover  
The horrid murder.

(IV, ii, 332-34)

The association of the wolf with a murdered corpse is one of the popular Elizabethan superstitions.<sup>57</sup> The contrast between the intensely passionate outbursts of the handsome, arrogant, unscrupulous Duke of Calabria and his

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<sup>56</sup>Cf. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, p. 213. Also see Lear's curse and its effect, above, p. 60.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. The White Devil, V, iii, 33-34; iv, 97-98; Dyce quotes from God's Revenge against Murther (1670 ed.), VI, 27-407, an account of a murdered body being dug up by a wolf "sent thither by God as a Minister of his sacred justice and revenge." I owe this reference to Lucas, *op. cit.*, I, 263. This was one of the symptoms, commonly acknowledged, of lycanthropia. See The Duchess of Malfi, V, ii, 6-20, where the Doctor defines the disease Ferdinand is suffering from.

subsequent incoherent, undignified ravings, punctuated by such blood-curdling statements as

Strangling is a very quiet death,

(V, iv, 38)

produces an indescribable effect of horror and pity.

Bosola, the melancholy villain, is an interesting figure, as he provides an insight into Webster's moral vision and conception of the metaphysics of Evil. Bosola is endowed with a fine moral sensitivity, though he is deep-dyed in crime. The struggle in him between the forces of good and evil is constantly emphasized though it is no longer as simple or clearly defined as it was in the moralities. The death of the Duchess shakes Bosola out of his protective cynicism and self-interest.<sup>58</sup> He talks of heaven and sacred innocence and mercy. He becomes the "sword of Justice," is conscience-stricken and truly penitent. (V, ii, 380-83). He broods on the deed he has done, and it is natural that the Duchess haunts his thoughts. (Cf. 380-81, above). His attempts at rationalising ("'tis nothing but my mellancholy") are characteristic of Webster's conception of human character and the

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<sup>58</sup>Cf. his words,

Off my painted honour! --

. . . . .  
I would not change my peace of conscience  
For all the wealth of Europe!

(V, ii, 362, 366-67)

supernatural.

Webster reveals a fine judgment in the choice of nature and quality of the supernatural manifestations as they appear to the different dramatis personae. The tight-lipped Cardinal, who is a study of the cool, ruthless Machiavellian, is characterised by his poise and iron control. Faced with the death of the Duchess and Ferdinand's madness, however, he is found speculating seriously on hell and its "one materiall fire." Suddenly he breaks out into

How tedious is a guilty conscience!  
When I looke into the Fish-ponds, in my Garden,  
Me thinkes I see a thing, arm'd with a Rake  
That seemes to strike at me:

(V, v, 4-7)

The effect of this vague "thing" is more terrifying than all the "material" hell fire. This vision of the Devil (it appears Webster got the idea from Lavater)<sup>59</sup> is in harmony with the Cardinal's nature and his theological knowledge.

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<sup>59</sup>Of Ghostes and Spirites, p. 61:

Pertinax for the space of three dayes before he was slayne by a thrust, sawe a certayne shaddowe in one of his fishepondes, whiche with a sword ready drawen threatned to slay him, & thereby much disquieted him.

Lavater's work seems to have been a favourite source book with Webster. Cf. p. 51 ("gloewoorme" and "some kynd of rotten wood") and The Duchess of Malfi, IV, ii, 141-42; The White Devil, V, i, 38-39; and The Devil's Law-Case, II, iii, 128.

The Devil's Law-Case shows the characteristic Websterian skill in creating a subtle pervasive atmosphere by frequent repetition and suggestion of the word "Devil" throughout the play. But the tone is more satirical than tragic or serious, and the play suffers from this division of sympathy. Satire and tragedy rarely produce a happy effect in contiguity; the one tends to destroy the other in a work of art. It is Webster's supreme achievement that in his two great works he has managed to keep the tone delicately though precariously balanced between tragedy and satire, but he did not repeat the achievement in The Devil's Law-Case. The play also suffers from the shock of the absurd, mechanically contrived "happy" ending. Romelio and Leonara, the only two characters that count, suffer such distortion to provide this ending that they become almost unrecognizable, grotesque, dramatically impossible. The whole fabric of the play is violently strained, and so is the reader's "poetic faith." One feels cheated, dissatisfied, bewildered, and, above all, sorry that genius should be misspent and misdirected like this.

The sub-title of the play explains the title: "When Women goe to Law, the Devill is full of Busnesse." This statement suggests a satirical tone as the obvious and natural one. But the play is also a "tragicomedy,"

which further complicates matters. There are references to jealousy in women which raises the devil up (III, iii, 215-219); Leonara says she will be a fury to her son (289-90), and wishes to have one property more than the "Devill of Hell" (299-300). But the intensity of her grief for the loss of Contarino and her distraction in which she feels she is being addressed by her "evill genius" are on a totally different plane and more akin to Websterian tragedy:

Ha, ha, what say you?  
 I doe talke to somewhat, me thinks; it may be  
 My evill Genius. Doe not the Bells ring?  
 I have a strange noyse in my head: oh, fly in pieces!

(III, iii, 294-97)

When she brings in her most strange and unnatural suit against her son, the advocate cries to her:

Woman, y'are mad, Ile swear't, & have more need  
 Of a Physician than a Lawyer.

(IV, i, 66-67)

and later,

go old woman, go pray,  
 For Lunacy, or else the Devill himselfe  
 Has tane possession of thee;

(73-75)

Romelio warns the Capuchin monk who tries to shrive him and "faine would justle the devill out of his way," that the devil is "a cunning wrastler, . . . and has broke many a mans necke". (V, iv, 75-91). All these references

taken together create a conflict in the reader's mind and leave it unresolved. It seems that the references are to be taken, for the greater part, metaphorically, and not in the medieval or morality play connotation. This strengthens the satiric tone. But there are expressions of more serious thought, echoes from the older plays:

While they aspire to doe themselves most right,  
The devil that rules ith ayre, hangs in their light.

(V, iv, 221-22; cf. Duchess of Malfi, II, i, 97-98)

The devil in this play seems to be an ineffectual hybrid between the "Prince of Darkness" and the comic figure of the interludes, associated with the Vice. This conception is akin to Dekker's and Jonson's satirical portrayal of the devil.<sup>60</sup> Here we have an indication of the degeneration of the supernatural theme. Webster shares this tendency with the other Jacobean playwrights whose treatment of the supernatural showed their love of sensation and horror rather than artistic propriety. Thus The Virgin Martyr (Dekker and Massinger) has an imposing array of supernatural paraphernalia, good and bad angels, a martyr who comes back clothed in glory and presents the next candidate for martyrdom with fruits and flowers from heaven and a cross made of flowers to defeat the devil.

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<sup>60</sup>If This Be Not a Good Play The Devil is in it; The Devil is an Ass.

The Roman Actor (Massinger) has apparitions of Junius Rusticus and Palphurius Sura, who wave bloody swords over the head of Caesar and take unfair advantage of the sleeping Caesar by stealing the image of his deity and disappearing with it! This reminds one of the tablet that Posthumus finds by his side after his vision.<sup>61</sup> In Bussy D'Ambois, Chapman kills off the Friar most unaccountably so that he can make use of his ghost later on in the play to warn Bussy. (V, i, 157; iii, 8). But Umbra Friar provides the occasion for some splendid poetry and thus vindicates himself, more or less. Bussy gives expression to his thoughts on the disappearance of the ghost, and here is an example of Chapman's poetry at its best:

Methought the spirit  
 (When he had utter'd his perplex'd presage)  
 Threw his changed countenance headlong into clouds,  
 His forehead bent, as it would hide his face,  
 He knocked his chin against his darken'd breast,  
 And struck a churlish silence through his powers.  
 Terror of darkness! O, thou king of flames!  
 That with thy music-footed horse dost strike  
 The clear light out of crystal on dark earth,  
 And hurl'st instructive fire about the world,  
 Wake, wake the drowsy and enchanted night. . . . (V, iii, 35-45)

But Umbra Friar is an example of Chapman's least dramatic use of the ghost. Behemoth and his spirits, conjured up by proper incantation in Latin have the imposing and

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<sup>61</sup>Cymbeline, V, iv, 133.

mysterious air of the powers of "inscrutable darkness", and are associated with "blue fires", "dim fumes" and "vast murmurs". They attain a classic or epic stature through their utterances. Perhaps this accounts for a certain aloofness in them which gives the impression that they are not as closely knit into the plot as Marlowe's Mephistophilis or Shakespeare's ghosts.

In Middleton (in The Changeling) one finds a striking use of atmosphere and suggestion reminiscent of the world of Webster. The title, The Changeling, has supernatural implications, and Middleton plays on the variations of meaning. Beatrice-Joanna is the moral changeling, "all deform'd" by her crime. The sub-plot, with Antonio "the changeling" and the inhabitants of the mad-house, provides a commentary to the main plot: the world of the madmen and women (real and pretended) appropriately reflects the chaos and ambiguity in the moral world of Beatrice-Joanna. All this is left more or less implied; Middleton does not mar the effect by explicit moral comment or open didacticism. The play is a subtle and imaginative study of evil. It has a revenge ghost too, who flits by like a shadow, mainly to torment his murderers. The reactions of De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna are well distinguished, and significant:

De Flores. Ha! What art thou that tak'st away the  
light



Betwixt that star and me? I dread  
 thee not. —  
 'Twas but a mist of conscience; all's  
 clear again.

Beatrice. Who's that, De Flores? Bless me, it  
 slides by!  
 Some ill thing haunts the house; 't  
 has left behind it  
 A shivering sweat upon me; I'm afraid now.  
 This night hath been so tedious!

(V, i. 59-65)

De Flores is more like Bosola and Flamineo; he has been tormented by his conscience for his crime even before he saw the ghost. But in spite of his awareness of crime, he tries to brush away this "mist of conscience" and rallies himself for his next crime. Beatrice-Joanna is curiously lacking in imaginative insight. She is like Lady Macbeth, imperious in her will, and not endowed with any foresight, blind to the consequences of her action, and unable to see where her desires are leading her. Beatrice sees herself only just before her death. The ghost is an "ill thing" which makes her afraid, but she cannot connect it with her crime and the lover she has got rid of. It does not make her see any better than before. But she comes to terms with herself at the moment of her death, and recognizes in De Flores her "fate" or evil Angel:

Beatrice. Beneath the stars, upon yon meteor  
 Ever hung my fate 'mongest things  
 corruptible;  
 I ne'er could pluck it from him;

(V, iii, 155-57)

In The White Devil Vittoria is called "a blazing star," "prodigious," "ominous" etc., and Brachiano is referred to as an "earthquake." Beatrice makes the same implication about supernatural governance in the lives of De Flores and her own self.

The Witch, however, is a far cry from the world of The Changeling. Middleton's witches have a lyric gift, and the description of the witches flying through the air has a lilt and buoyant lightness which makes it imaginatively credible:

Now I go, now I fly,  
Malkin my sweet spirit and I.  
O what a dainty pleasure 'tis  
To ride in the air  
When the moon shines fair, etc.

(III, iii, pp. 166-67)

But this is the best that can be said about Middleton's Witches. Everything else about them is full of the filthy and loathsome details of witch-lore.

Tourneur and Marston (The Atheist's Tragedy, Sophonisba, Antonio's Revenge) show their excessive pre-occupation with the charnel house imagery that is found in Webster and Shakespeare (Hamlet), but without the true passion or poetry of either. In Hamlet there is much railing and satire, but it is not allowed to poison the whole atmosphere. In Webster's two great plays too, the balance is maintained and the dramatist has something to say besides "talk fit for a charnel". But Tourneur and

Marston show a more than healthy interest in the macabre and the abnormal. Poisoned skulls dressed up, charnel houses where the hero and heroine sleep, "each with a death's head for a pillow" (The Atheist's Tragedy, IV, iii), corpses real and imaginary, and counterfeit ghosts are some of the savoury fare they provide. It is not easy to think up something more loathesome and repulsive than Marston's catalogue of the witch Erictho's activities (Sophonisba, IV, i, pp. 46-47).

Dekker's The Witch of Edmonton belongs to a completely different category. The figure of Mother Sawyer is a triumph of the dramatist's sympathy for the miserable creatures who were forced to embrace evil by circumstances and driven to the devil by false accusations. The play is a study of evil too, but pathos is the dominant note rather than terror. Mother Sawyer is completely human and never ceases to be human. In fact Dekker's picture of a witch might have been more realistic and closer to the witches of Shakespeare's days, but Shakespeare's imagination has created for us the Weird Sisters, and they have become almost the prototypes of their class for most readers of Elizabethan drama. The artistic conception of the Witches in Macbeth has almost superseded the traditional or true one, in almost the same way as the fairies of A Midsummer Night's Dream have come to embody the popular and standard conception of fairies.

## CONCLUSION

When we consider the role of the supernatural in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and try to evaluate its significance, the peculiar nature of the Elizabethan stage has to be borne in mind. As critics have pointed out, it was the neutrality of the stage that made the transition from one world to the other so easy and credible. The stage could represent, without any improbability, whatever the dramatist wanted it to represent because it was nothing to begin with. This fluid conception of what the stage might stand for might have encouraged the dramatists to exercise their imagination to the utmost, and they could do so in the confidence that the audience could and would follow their flights of imagination without any straining of credulity as long as the words said the right things and induced the right moods. As long as the verse is nervous and the imagination dynamic, the dramatic illusion created stays taut and as palpable as any of the actual stage properties.

Another vital factor that contributed to the "willing suspension of disbelief" with regard to the marvellous or the supernatural element was the moral and metaphysical climate of Elizabethan thought. The

Elizabethans (playgoers and readers) did not make the mistake of trying to interpret the supernatural in realistic or naturalistic terms. They accepted the supernatural beings in the plays as what they were — symbols. One might call them symbols of the moral cosmos, or of the elements of good and bad in the universe, the Devil or the Good Angel, moral responsibility, conscience, integrity, the divine in man, the subconscious or subliminal (to use what seems to be a popular phrase nowadays) self, or, as Goddard puts it, "the autonomous character of the unconscious" (this is the pedantic way of referring to a belief in ghosts, he tells us).<sup>62</sup> As long as man is interested in the mystery that is himself, the mechanism — moral, physical, psychic or spiritual — that makes him act, feel and think as he does, he will be interested, as the Elizabethans were, in the study of what we term, for want of a better word, the "supernatural."

An interesting question to ask at this point, but not easy to answer satisfactorily, would be: how far is the excellence of Elizabethan-Jacobean tragedy due to the predominant supernatural element? Is Whitmore's postulate (cf. Introduction, p. 1) that great tragedy and an interest in the supernatural go hand in hand legitimate and acceptable? Whitmore's own definition of tragedy can throw

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<sup>62</sup>Goddard, op. cit., I, 382.

some light on this. He says tragedy is "that form of drama which seeks to penetrate as far as possible into the mystery of existence, and to reveal the secret sources of human existence."<sup>63</sup> This definition recalls Lear's question, "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III, vi, 81-82). According to this definition, any attempt to study the inner self of man, the moral code that governs human actions, the power and the law that religion and philosophy attempt to discover in the governance of the cosmos, would be of primary interest to the writer of tragedy. If the word "supernatural" and the idea behind it can possibly carry this larger and universal connotation, then it is aptly the province of tragedy. Yet Whitmore's definition seems to ignore works like Othello in which the predominant interest is in the passions of the human breast, with no explicit reference to a cosmic order or the powers that govern it. But the tragedy is not less sublime for this concentration on the human microcosm. It seems safe, therefore, to conclude that Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, especially tragedy, was certainly enriched and another dimension added to it because of the supernatural element in it. Again, as the reciprocity in the terms

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<sup>63</sup>The Supernatural in Tragedy, op. cit., p. 356.

"macrocosm" and "microcosm" implies, there is no irreconcilable conflict between the natural and the supernatural. The region where the two meet is excellent proving ground for man to reveal his potential greatness and spiritual stature. The human gains in grandeur and sublimity in contact with the superhuman. It is Faustus and Hamlet who fascinate us, rather than Mephistophilis or the ghost.

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