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Paper 3

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The Supernatural in Shakespeare's Macbeth

The supernatural according to *The Oxford Dictionary* "includes all those phenomena, which cannot be explained by the accepted laws of natural science or by physical laws." A belief in the existence of the supernatural: ghosts, fairies, witches etc., has been universal in all ages and times. Therefore, it was also in the age of Shakespeare in which there was almost a universal belief in the presence and power of the unseen. All classes of people, including the king, shared this belief because it was an age literally which struck. Not only the common person, but also the learned and the cultured one believed in the supernatural. The popularity of Raginald Scott's, *Discovery of Witchcraft*, King James' *Demonology*, Middleton's *The Witch* and the frequent burning of women suspected to be witches are so many strong witnesses to the supernatural terrors of the Elizabethans who believed in the power of demons, ghosts, witches, wizards etc.

As a popular dramatist, Shakespeare had to furnish the public taste even

if he may or may not have believed in the world of spirit. He uses all kinds of supernatural categories: the powers of the unseen, ghosts, fairies and witches to appear and reappear in one play after another. However, his use of supernaturalism has added a deep moral and psychological significance. It is brought into closest harmony with the character of the protagonists of his dramas. Writing for the stage, he did not hesitate to use whatever tended to make his dramas box-office hits.

There are many distinctive features of the supernatural; it is always placed in the closest relation with the character and does definitely contribute to the action. This supernatural influence the course of the action and is an indispensable part of it. It gives a confirmation and definite form to inward movements already present and exerting influence is merely suggestive. Thus, we may use the words of the critic, Baily: "the tragedy of Macbeth is the greatest murder in Shakespeare, done in the most supernatural atmosphere, and by Shakespeare's greatest poet.

The atmosphere of blackness is accentuated by the prominent part that has been assigned to the supernatural. Shakespeare introduced ghosts in Hamlet, Julius Caesar and in Macbeth. In Macbeth we have the ghost of Banquo. However, Macbeth is the only tragedy in which the dramatist has introduced the witches. The scene of the three weird sisters dancing

round the cauldron with their spell must have been a fascinating sight to the audience of the Elizabethan period. The following is a quick sketch of the evolution of the idea of supernatural in Shakespeare's plays. There is a touch of it in at least half of his plays which were written in different periods of his dramatic career in which they dealt prominently with this fascinating subject.

The *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* are good examples of the use of paranormal powers. All of them deal with the idea of supernaturalism. The use of fairies, ghosts, witches and unseen powers respectively has evolved and invested all the circumstances and the features of popular superstitions so that it may be readily accepted by the audience. Clark, a critic, believes that the use of ghosts in Shakespeare's plays is "current ghostly superstition and clever dramatic use made by the poet. In fact, the use of the supernatural, brought by the dramatist, is in the closest relation with the characters and action. It is integral to the sequence of events. The use of supernatural is also useful to intensify the atmosphere of horror and dread in the plays. For example, the ghost in *Hamlet* is not a meaningless apparition; it "starts the train of contradictory thoughts in Hamlet's brain which makes the whole play, as C. Clark believes. Another important factor of the use of the supernatural element is the

limited appearance of such powers in the Shakespearean plays. Shakespeare knew too well that such supernatural powers might lose their influence if they are seen or appeared more than usual. They can dominate the whole action and shape the destiny of the hero by their sparing use. This shows how much Shakespeare was skilful in his artistry.

The supernatural element is not a mere illusion of the hero. The appearance of the witches has an objective existence as they are seen not only by Macbeth but by Banquo too. The supernatural element contributes to the action as it gives a confirmation and distinct form to the inner workings of the hero's mind. Thus, the witches in Macbeth are symbolic of the guilt within Macbeth's soul. Yet, the influence of the supernatural element is not a compulsive one; we never feel that it has removed the hero's capacity or responsibility of dealing with the situation in his own way. Yet, it is merely suggestive; the hero is free to accept it or to reject it. However, the hero follows the suggestive one and, in this way, the supernatural element hastens the downfall of the hero.

The supernatural in Macbeth is of two kinds first, the witches and second, the Ghost of Banquo. In our research, we shall examine the two kinds separately to determine their nature and function.

The witches in their appearance and in their supernatural powers

confirm substantially to those of popular superstitions. Shakespeare has only rejected or modified the vile or the ridiculous and has heightened whatever could touch the imagination with fear, horror and a sense of mystery. The witches are poor and worn out, thin and ugly. They are neither men nor women as they dress like women, but grow beard like men, which makes one, like Banquo, doubt their sex. They are gifted with supernatural powers. They can move invisibly through the air, ride brooms, control the storms and the most important thing that they can foresee the future, cast spells and make apparitions rise. To do their charm, they use the most detestable and vile objects: toads, snakes, grease from gibbets, etc. They are weird uncanny creatures. They owe their powers to their masters, Queen Hecate. They are beings with supernatural powers, in Harrison's point of view, but "not supernatural beings themselves." Thus, they are the witches, in all means, of popular imagination.

In their first appearance, the witches foresee the future of both Macbeth and Banquo. They greet Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane Cawdor and the king respectively. The prophecy of Banquo is the strangest as they anticipate his greatness, happiness and being father of kings. Both of Macbeth and Banquo are affected by the prophecy of the witches, but says Hudson, "while Macbeth is beside himself with excitement and

transported with guilty thoughts and imaginations, Banquo remains calm, unexcited and self-poised." As they are the personifications of evil in nature, in Boas's opinion, the witches are eager to establish contact with the guilty heart as that of Macbeth. Macbeth's first words, "so fair and foul a day I have not seen, are an expression of this connection because the first words of the witches "Fair is foul and foul is fair"⁹ are the key to the play. To them good is evil and evil is good which means evil will be good in Macbeth's eyes.

No one can deny the fact that the witches are real beings. If they had been a hallucination of Macbeth, they would have been visible only to him. That is why Banquo is also able to see them. Therefore, they are objective and real creatures with an external existence and a deeper meaning as well. In their prophecy, they open the door for the evil thoughts and desires in the heart of Macbeth. This is clearly seen on his "start" when he heard the prediction while Banquo remains indifferent. The witches, thus, represent the amazing union of the external and the internal struggle of evil and goodness inside man.

The influence of the witches on the action of the play is great. It is an indicative more than an obsessive one. The actions of Macbeth are not forced upon him by any external power; they come out of his hands only. He is very free to do whatever he likes without the orders of the witches.

Their prediction might come true without shedding any single drop of blood. Duncan might die alone because of any kind of disease or by a sudden heart attack but Macbeth wants to fulfill the prophecy quickly without waiting it to be fulfilled by itself as it happens with Banquo. They tempt Macbeth because the temptation is already within him. Banquo is not tempted because he has a clean heart and there is no temptation within his soul. The witches foretell the future for Macbeth and Banquo without saying how that future will be accomplished. In any case, the idea of carrying out the forecast by murder and blood is completely his own. In short, the witches declare future events not actions that come out merely by the character of Macbeth. When Macbeth meets the witches in the second time, the situation is a little changed. He is now thoroughly linked with evil as he is behind the murder of both the king and Banquo. In the second foretelling, Macbeth decides that he will know the answers to his inquiries and his future from the masters of the witches. Apparitions rise and disappear answering his questions without asking them, informing him with new predictions. They urge him to be bloody, bold and resolute. First, they warn him to be aware of Macduff. Then, they tell him that no man born of a woman can harm him. The final forecast is that he should not be worried until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane. Thus, they encourage him and heighten his self-confidence in which "his fall, at the end of the play, is all the greater, more sudden

and unexpected.

In their second meeting with Macbeth, the witches have still no power to compel him to do wrong and evil deeds. Yet, they have the ability to deceive him. They fill him with the feeling of self-security to act foolishly and recklessly. Macbeth has the power to reject their advice, but he does not do so because he is completely evil and wants to fulfill his dreams. No hints, plans, or any kind of schemes come from the witches for the brutal and most vicious crimes of Duncan, Banquo or the cruel slaughter of Lady Macduff and her children. The responsibility for such crimes is entirely that of Macbeth. The question remains: without the meeting of the witches, would Macbeth have acted in the same way as he does in the play. Throughout the play, Macbeth never tries to shift the burden of his guilt to the witches. They tempt him, deceive him, but never take away from him the power of independent will and action.

No critic has ever tried to lessen the influence of the witches or the influence of the supernatural. They have the effect of lifting the crime of Macbeth to a higher stage than everything else. Quiller-Couch, a critic, suggests, "we feel that we are not in the simple murder of a king but in that of a cosmic tragedy, which although it has realistic features, cannot be related to our ordinary life. Thus, the influence of the witches as this critic suggests has been intentionally left vague and indeterminate in

order to intensify its terrors. Macbeth does not sign a contract with the witches as Faustus does in Marlowe's tragedy with Satan himself. All the same, he does sign a compact with them orally, that is to say, to exchange his moral values and start murdering everyone who stands in his way to the glittering crown of Scotland. Yet, Macbeth has certainly a free will and he could have rejected the witches' suggestion, but he does not do so. It might be because of his ambition; however, he does not yield to his criminal designs before. It is certainly because of the obvious supernatural influence. Clearly, this can be shown during Macbeth's first meeting with the witches; he is brought face to face with evil, with an awful force, which he cannot resist:

Why do I yield to this suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,

Against the use of nature

Henceforth, the influence of the witches is vague, indeterminate, but all persuasive. Therefore, according to Quiller-Coch, Macbeth is like a man acting under a hallucination. He continues: "He [Macbeth] is helpless as a man in a nightmare, he may struggle, but he cannot fight; he can no more resist than a rabbit resists a weasel's teeth fastened in its neck, or

a bird escapes the serpent's transfixing eye. The witches are important elements introduced to thrill the audience. With their prophecies, they excite suspense and fear. Because evil is good for them, so it becomes for Macbeth. They are the means used by the dramatist to arouse tension and dread. They heighten and deepen the sense of horror, anxiety, mystery and fright, which pervades the gloomy atmosphere of the tragedy.

The second kind of supernatural in Macbeth is the Ghost of Banquo. Shakespeare introduced the character of the ghost in his plays for the same reason he had to present the witches i.e. to accommodate the public taste. However, his ghosts too, like the witches, are not bases of popular superstition but have a deep moral and psychological significance. Their function is either to reveal a crime or to arouse people to revenge their murder. The appearance of the ghost in Shakespearean plays has a symbolic significance. It reminds us that there are more things in heaven and earth than one can dream of in his mind, study, imagination and life. The ghost is used, as a warning to evil doers that not at all times humanity has to wake up with flesh and blood alone but also with other forces and strange modes of beings of the unseen world. It symbolizes the hidden, ultimate power that rules the universe. It seems sometimes that the ghost is a representative or a

messenger of the divine justice.

The following is shedding some light upon the character of Banquo. The personality of Banquo has been understood as the foil of Macbeth. He is, like Macbeth, a brave soldier and a successful general. Both Ross, a nobleman of Scotland, and the wounded soldier are full of praises for their generals, Macbeth and Banquo. The wounded soldier describes the two captains in the battle as eagles attacking a sparrow or lions hunting a rabbit or like cannons that burst forth more loudly when charged with more powerful ammunition. However, here the similarity between them is much sharp; Banquo is strongly contrasted with Macbeth, as an innocent man with a guilty one. Banquo is essentially honest and noble. He is also virtuous, wise and prudent. He is tempted like Macbeth, but he does not give way to temptation. Like Macbeth, he is ambitious, but he does not act to realize his ambition. Stopford Brooke, a critic, rightly points out that "Banquo is the noblest character in the play. Macbeth pays a high compliment to

Banquo's nobility, suspects him as well and so he doubts his loyalty. That is why he hires assassins to get his friend Banquo murdered to remove him from his way. Macbeth gets rid of Banquo because he has heard the prophecy of the witches and Banquo might doubt that he, "had played most foully for the crown. The witches have predicted that

Banquo's sons would be the future kings of Scotland, thus, Macbeth tries to secure his position by murdering both Banquo and his sons:

Our fears Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be feared; it is much he dares
And, to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety. There is none but he
Whose being I do fear

Because he has no guilty conscience, Banquo is not startled, like Macbeth, by the prophecy of the witches. He remains quite calm and is unaffected by their words. He understands their true nature, and says,

But it is strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths.
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us,
In deepest consequence

The Ghost of Banquo acts as an instrument of justice and punishment.

Macbeth, who sees it immediately after the murder of Banquo, is made nervous by it and so is provoked to betray himself to the assembled guests. This marks the first appearance of the Ghost after his murder. He comes to the feast to keep his promise but he enters in an unexpected manner. He is a ghost now and visible to Macbeth only. He sits on Macbeth's chair. This agitates Macbeth and makes him say things revealing his bloody deeds and making Lady Macbeth start apologizing to their guests. Hence, suspicion mounts against Macbeth: the ghost marks the beginning of the end of his bloody career.

"The ghost is a psychological phenomenon. It is an objectification or externalization of the subjective state of Macbeth." It is a creation of his guilt or his obsessed imagination and as Lady Macbeth reminds him of his seeing a dagger just before the murder of Duncan. That is why none else of the characters is able to see the ghost. It does not speak and it vanishes as soon as Macbeth takes heart and exclaims:

Hence, horrible shadow,

Unreal mockery, hence

The question now is whether the ghost of Banquo is real or unreal. The answer is clear. It is a mere hallucination of Macbeth as a result of his heated imagination and that is why no one else of the group around the dinner table has the ability to see the ghost of Banquo even the partner

of Macbeth, his cold sensible wife, Lady Macbeth.

Thus, Macbeth himself regards it as unreal ridicule, a shadow, a mere creation of his excited thoughts. Therefore, Shakespeare clearly intends the thoughtful audience to take it to be an illusion, a mental fantasy of Macbeth.

To conclude, despite the advance of science and learning, the majority of the people in the age of Shakespeare believe in witchcraft, charms, all sorts of omens and superstition. Shakespeare has to cope with his age so as to make his plays successful and watched by greatest number of audiences.