

Supernatural in Shakespeare: The Use of Ghosts in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III*

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Theater's fascination with ghosts dates back to the early Greek Tragedies and peaks in the Elizabethan Era of Theater. This was, in part, due to Shakespeare and his use of ghosts in a very strategic manner that not only plays on the supernatural beliefs of the time but also serves a narrative purpose. Ghosts, or apparitions, are supernatural spirits of the deceased that appear in the tangible world. Elizabethan England was very superstitious; a large part of this was due to the church propelling supernatural ideas for their own agenda. The church, the people's belief in ghosts, and the theatrical history of spirits all culminate within three of Shakespeare's plays: *Richard the III*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's use of Ghosts within his plays not only coincides with the popular belief in ghosts during the time but also serves a narrative goal in advancing the plot or suggesting the character's mental state.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the Protestant church controlled a majority of the supernatural beliefs within England. The church often used the superstitious nature of the populous for its personal gain, in particular with their views on ghosts and the afterlife. In a combination of previously held Catholic beliefs and the modern Protestant views, ghosts were believed to be souls trapped in purgatory: "burial rituals were not performed correctly or who had unfinished business which required closure; suicides, women who died in childbirth, or people who died suddenly and tragically without time for confession and absolution," (Mark). There were even rituals that could be performed to lay spirits to rest by members of the church or affiliated. Shakespeare took this belief and used it to propel the ghosts in his plays and make them more believable.

Shakespeare has two types of ghosts within his plays: the vengeful spirit and the dream/externalized apparition. The vengeful spirit is the ghost of a person who wants revenge on their killer or has unfinished business in the terrestrial world. An example of this is the Ghosts of Hamlet's Father in *Hamlet*. The Ghosts of King Hamlet, as he is referred to in the script, was killed by Claudius so he could steal his wife and his throne, former King Hamlet wants Prince Hamlet, his son, to avenge him. This version of the ghosts directly communicates with the tangible world and asks someone to enact revenge for them.

The second type of ghost appears in dreams or in externalized states that only a few characters and the audience can see. This type of ghost can be closer linked to the mental state of the character than apparitions. Examples of this are in *Richard the III* and *Macbeth*. Macbeth sees four ghosts in his narrative, but only one is an externalized ghost. The ghosts represent a mixture of the title character's madness and supernatural belief. On the other hand, Richard and Richmond in *Richard the III* see ghosts in their dreams as a result of their anxiety about the upcoming battle. These ghosts help set the tone and suggest the mental state of the characters seeing or dreaming them.



In *Richard the III*, Shakespeare uses the ghosts to suggest the mental state of his characters, giving one a moral boost while the other is belittled. Before this scene, Richard the III manipulates and kills all his political rivals and family members so he can obtain the throne. He uses a multitude of underhanded methods to obtain the throne until the conflict with Richmond escalates into a battle for the throne. The night before this battle, in scene X.III, the ghosts of all the people Richard has killed come to discourage him and encourage Richmond in their separate dreams. The dreams start with Prince Edward, who Richard killed early on in the play, coming to haunt his killer by saying, “Let me sit heavy on thy soul tomorrow. Think how thou stabb’st me in my prime of youth at Tewkesbury. Despair, therefore, and die,” (Shakespeare, *Richard the III*, X.III. 118-19). When the ghosts speak to Richard, they end their speech with the phrase “Despair and die,” because they want him to fail, imitating the vengeful spirit. On the other hand, when the ghosts interact with Richmond, they are cheering for his victory and end with more positive phrases to ease his anxiety; “Ghosts of Anne: ... (To Richmond) Though quiet soul, sleep thou a quiet sleep. Dream of success and happy victory. Thy adversary’s wife doth pray for thee,” (X.III. 162-64). There are some scholars who do believe the ghosts are not figments of the imagination but actually appeared, such as John Mullan, who states in his paper “Ghosts in Shakespeare”:

“Yet we cannot simply turn these ghosts into figments of the tyrant’s tormented psyche. In Richmond’s camp we find the opposing leader talking of having had the ‘fairest-boding dreams / That ever ent’red in a drowsy head’ (5.3.227–28). He tells his attendant lords that ‘souls whose bodies Richard murther’d / Came to my tent and cried on victory’ (5.3.230–31), seemingly confirming the events of the night,” (Mullan).

The appearance of these apparitions suggests the state of anxiety both men are in. Richard’s anxiety prays on his guilt while Richmond’s anxiety uses the deceased to boost his courage.

Shakespeare’s use of ghosts to suggest an estranged mental state is also seen in *Macbeth*, except, in this play, it shows how the title character’s guilt is slowly eating away at his mind. During a banquet set shortly after the ordered the death of Banquo, Macbeth sees his dead peer sitting in his seat. Macbeth cries out that Banquo’s ghost is in his seat, but it makes him appear mad to the lords and embarrasses his wife. Lady Macbeth chastises him for acting insane in front of their guest, causing the lords to ask about his health. She insists he is just stressed, and this is simply an episode, but Macbeth is insistent that Banquo is there;

“Macbeth: Prithee, see there! Behold, look, lo! How say you? Why, what care I? [to Ghost of Banquo] If thou canst nod, speak too. If charnel houses and graves must send those that we bury back, our monuments shall be maws of kites,” (*Macbeth*, III.IX. 69-74).

This display of madness starts the downfall of house Macbeth. This is not the only ghost he sees, as he sees more supernatural specters when he speaks with the witches he keeps in his charge.

While the former ghost suggests a state of mind, the three other apparitions Macbeth sees are summoned by the witches he keeps in his employment and are used to set the tone and foreshadow the downfall of House Macbeth. Shakespeare, throughout the play, displays how

superstitious Macbeth is and how desperate he is for the throne, even going to the lengths of using magic to aid him in his quest by predicting the future. The three ghosts all serve the purpose of foretelling Macbeth's future and downfall, which causes him great confusion and distress. The first ghost is an armed head who calls "Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff; Beware the thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough," (XI.I. 71-72). This specter causes Macbeth to be agitated and insist on a second foretelling. The second one, a bloody child, recites the famous lines "Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn /The power of man, for none of woman born /Shall harm Macbeth" which mean no person born from a woman can kill Macbeth, making him believe he is invincible (XI.I.78-80). He calls a final ghost to try and clear some of the mixed prophecies he received from ghosts one and two. The final ghost, a crowned child with a tree in his hands, describes the battle between Macbeth and MacDuff that concludes the play: "Be lion-mettled, proud; and take no care /Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are: /Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until /Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill /Shall come against him," (XI.I.89-93). This ghost unveils the end of the tragedy to Macbeth and the audience, but until it is performed do either understand the full meaning. The witches and ghosts drive Macbeth into further madness and are used to propel him further into madness; "If this be taken for actual prophecy, it much be remembered that its part in the drama is still solely the effect it has upon the mind of Macbeth, driving him to seek safety in further wrong-doing, and thus impelling him more swiftly and more surely to ruin," (Doak 323). These ghosts do not fit in either category but lean more towards the vengeful spirits. They serve a tonal and narrative purpose as they display the end of Macbeth's life and provide a tone of doom and mysticism that resides over the final act of the play. These more "supernatural" ghosts play into the narrative and characterization of Macbeth as someone who works closely with and believes in the supernatural.

Unlike the ghosts in Shakespeare's other plays, the ghost of the late King Hamlet is used purely for narrative rather than to suggest a mental state or set a tone. The ghost of Hamlet's father brings light to the inciting incident and propels the plot forward. In the first scene of the play, two guards, Barnardo and Horatio, see the spirit of the recently dead king. They report this to Hamlet, who is mourning the loss of his father, at a celebration of his mother and uncles' wedding and crowning. Hamlet at this point has no reason to think his father died of unnatural causes and has no drive for revenge. It is not until Hamlet talks with the ghosts of his father that the plot of the play starts. Hamlet's father explains to his son how he died, who killed him, why, and that he needs his son to get revenge on his behalf;

Ghost: I am thy father's spirit,

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night

And for the day confined to fast in fires

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their
spheres,
Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end,
Like quills upon the fearful porpentine.
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O list!

If thou didst ever thy dear father love— (*Hamlet*. I.X. 9-23)

Before his father gave him this mission, he had no drive or purpose. Some scholars such as Brett E. Murphy look at the scene as an attempt for closure on both Hamlet and his father's part; "If we set aside the Ghost's death and the task with which Hamlet has been commissioned, we might be able to understand this line as a gesture of closure and comfort from father to son..." (Murphy 118). The purpose of this scene is both the beginning of the plot and a proper goodbye between father and son. The ghost of old King Hamlet is also the closes depiction to a traditional Elizabethan ghosts displayed within the three plays.

Hamlet's father is the closest to the definition of a ghost in Elizabethan times that Shakespeare displays in his plays. He is a spirit in purgatory who died suddenly and tragically with unfinished business in the tangible world. This speech also cast him in the role of vengeful spirit and casts the play as a 'revenge tragedy' – a drama in which the main motive is revenge for a crime or injury that is real or imagined. This genre of tragedy was very popular in the Elizabethan era as it provided a great amount of catharsis for the audience, both rich and poor. Vengeful spirits were often used in revenge tragedies either as a catalysis or to provide some

other narrative point to the plot. This is the purpose the late King Hamlet's ghost serves in *Hamlet*, as his appearance is the introduction to the main plot of the play.

Shakespeare use of ghosts not only propels the narrative forward, but also addresses the popular belief in ghosts at the time. Most of his popular plays include ghosts in some manner, such as being the catalysis in *Hamlet*, providing tone and characterization in *Macbeth*, and displaying the character's mental state in *Richard the III*. Each play provides a different kind of ghost that plays on the belief of the Elizabethan people. Even though the vengeful spirit is the closest to the Elizabethan definition of ghosts, the externalized and dream ghosts also play on the belief that ghosts are people in purgatory with unsettled business. Though the definition and attitude towards ghosts and the supernatural has shifted over the years, Shakespeare's characterization still remains popular amongst writers of all mediums today.

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