



## READING OF GHOSTLY APPEARANCES WITH A REVELATION VIEW IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND *MACBETH*

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### Résumé

La consultation prophétique pour l'action à entreprendre aussi bien que la mort d'un proche sont souvent source de peur et de rappel d'un manquement ou d'une tâche non accomplie. Ces aspects du surnaturel dans Hamlet et Macbeth semblent être incompris par la plupart et font souvent objet de plusieurs interprétations. Dans cette perspective, la présente étude nous a permis de faire la lumière sur ce rôle éveilleur du surnaturel dans l'accomplissement d'une destinée. Ainsi la théorie de la Réponse du lecteur nous a été d'une grande utilité dans nos analyses dans l'utilisation que Shakespeare a fait du surnaturel dans ses pièces de théâtre Hamlet et Macbeth, s'agissant des fantômes et sorcières combinée à comment il exploite le patrimoine culturel de son pays notamment de croyances et de superstitions de l'époque élisabéthaine. Il ressort des analyses faites des pièces Hamlet et Macbeth que les fantômes servent de catalyseurs dans la mesure où le surnaturel a une intime relation avec le caractère des principaux personnages et par ricochet avec ses proches.

**Mots clés :** fantômes, surnaturel, sorcières, apparition

### Abstract

The prophecy in advance of an action to be taken as well as the death of someone or a relative seems to be most of time a source of fears or a guidance to take as flowchart for the achievement of a goal. Those dimensions of the supernatural seem to be misunderstood by many, and sometime it is subjected to many interpretations. For that purpose, the current research work aims at enlightening on the reminder role the supernatural plays in the accomplishment of a destiny. So, thanks to the Reader-Response theory, the use Shakespeare makes of the supernatural in Hamlet and Macbeth as far as ghosts and witches are concerned are shown and deciphered with the view on how the author exploits the cultural heritage of the country; the beliefs and the superstitions of the Elizabethan era. In short, it is observed in Hamlet and Macbeth that, the ghosts are used as catalysts and mind re-sharper in the sense that the supernatural is always placed in the closest relation with the main characters.

**Keywords:** Ghosts, supernatural, witches, appearance.

## Introduction

In the days of William Shakespeare there was a strong belief in the supernatural. As a result, the supernatural is a recurring issue in most of his plays. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the supernatural is an integral part of the structure of the plot. It provides a catalyst for action, an insight into characters, and augments the impact of many key scenes. The supernatural appears to the audience in many varied forms. In *Hamlet*, there appears perhaps the most notable of the supernatural forms, the ghost. However, in *Macbeth*, not only does a ghost appear but also a floating dagger, witches, and prophetic apparitions make appearances. Therefore, the role of the supernatural is very important in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

This supernatural element certainly cannot, in most cases, if in any, be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters. Furthermore, it does contribute to the action, and is, in more than one instance, an indispensable part of it. But the supernatural is always placed in the closest relation with the character. It gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence; to the sense of failure in Brutus, to the stifled workings of conscience in Richard II, to the half-formed thought or the horrified memory of guilt in Macbeth, to suspicion in Hamlet. Moreover, its influence is never of a compulsive kind. It forms no more than an element, however important, in the problem which he has to face. And we are never allowed to feel that it has removed his capacity or responsibility for dealing with this problem.

### 1. The Elizabethan belief in the supernatural

In *Macbeth*, the supernatural is manifested through witches, apparitions and a ghost. To Macbeth the witches foretell that he will be Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland: "All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be king hereafter". (1-II-50) And when he realizes that he is trapped and doomed to die, he curses the supernatural powers which have led him astray. The witches show him apparitions which give him promises concerning his fate, but the last apparition is no other than Banquo's ghost, which brings Macbeth back to his latest crime.

They show him eight kings, with many more reflected in a mirror, with the ghost of Banquo following them. For Macbeth, although Banquo has been murdered by his orders, Fleance, Banquo's son, has escaped, and is destined to be the father of a line of kings. Although Macbeth has won the throne, it is foretold that his children will never follow him in a royal line. Another manifestation of the supernatural is the vision Macbeth has a little while before he murders the king. Macbeth sees the vision of a dagger placed ready for him to clutch. Drops of blood appear on it.

In two plays, portents, once more, fill the heavens, ghosts rise from their graves, an unearthly light flickers about the head of the doomed man. But in *Macbeth*, the supernatural effect is quite different. The solemn majesty of the royal Ghost in *Hamlet*, appearing in armour and standing silent in the moonlight, is exchanged for shapes or horror, deeply seen in the murky air or revealed by the glare of the cauldron fire in a dark cavern, or for the ghostly face of Banquo badged with blood and staring with blank eyes. Thus, embodying the Elizabethan belief about the supernatural, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* give us various illustrations of its manifestations as exemplified precedently, and then confirm that, in the Elizabethan period, the supernatural played an incontestable role in society.

## 2. Father Hamlet's ghost in action for its Soul Sake

In *Hamlet*, old Hamlet's secret murder justifies the apparition of the ghost, because young Hamlet needs to be told about it so as to have a solid motivation for revenge. Moreover, the ghost's task is not easy because of Hamlet's indolence.

In fact, in the two plays under study, the ghost plays different roles. A ghost, appearing in the form of Hamlet's father, makes several appearances in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. It first appears to the watchmen, Marcellus and Bernardo, along with Horatio near the guardsmen's post. The ghost says nothing to them and is perceived with fear and apprehension. It is not until the appearance of Hamlet that the ghost speaks, and only then after Horatio has expressed his fears about the Hamlet's ghost which seems to follow him everywhere. The ghost asks Hamlet to seek revenge for the king's death and Hamlet is thus propelled to set into action a series of events that ends in his own death.

The conversation between the ghost and Hamlet serves as a catalyst for his later action and provides insight into Hamlet's character. The information the ghost reveals incites Hamlet into action against a situation he was already uncomfortable with, and now even more so. Hamlet is not quick to believe the ghost, and thus, an aspect of Hamlet's character is revealed. Having no suspicion of the ghost after the production by players, Hamlet encounters the ghost next in his mother's room. In this scene the ghost makes an appearance to Hamlet. Hamlet is now convinced of the ghost and he no longer harbours any suspicion. He now listens to it: "Speak to her, Hamlet" (I-v-90)

The supernatural occurs four times in the course of *Macbeth*. So it takes form first in all the appearances of the witches. Secondly, it appears in the form of Banquo's ghost. It is thirdly observable in the apparitions with weirds' prophecies. And finally, it takes the form of "air-drawn" dagger that guides Macbeth towards his victim.

Of the supernatural phenomena present in *Macbeth* the witches are perhaps the most important. The witches stand for Macbeth's evil ambitions. They are the catalysts which unleash Macbeth's evil aspirations. Macbeth believes the witches and he wishes to know more about the future so after the banquet he seeks them out at their cave. He wants to know the answers to his questions regardless of whether the consequence to be violent and destructive to nature. The witches' answers to Macbeth's requests, add further unnatural ingredients to the cauldron and call up their masters. This is where the prophetic apparitions appear. The first apparition is Macbeth's own head (later to be cut off by Macduff) confirming his fears of Macduff. The second apparition tells Macbeth that he cannot be harmed by anyone born of woman. This knowledge gives Macbeth a false sense of security because he believes that he cannot be harmed, yet Macduff was not of woman born, his born. This leads to Macbeth's downfall. A child with a crown on his head, the third apparition, represents Malcolm, Duncan's son. This apparition also gives Macbeth a false sense of security because of the Birnam Wood's prophesy.

The appearance of Banquo's ghost provides insight into Macbeth's character. It shows the level that Macbeth's mind has recessed to. When he sees the ghost he reacts with horror and upsets the guests. Macbeth wonders why murder has taken place many times in the past before it was prevented by law – "statute purged the gentle weal" – and yet the dead are coming back.

The final form of the supernatural is the "air-drawn" dagger which leads Macbeth to his victim. When the dagger appears to him, Macbeth finally becomes victim to the delusions of his fevered brain. The dagger points to Duncan's room and appears to be covered in blood. The dagger buttresses the impact of his key scene in which Macbeth slays King Duncan. However, the ghost is not the only motivating force behind the revenge tragedy in *Hamlet* because other motivating forces are underneath.

We can notice that young Hamlet appears for the first time in the second scene of the play, dressed in black, which is an implied criticism of the royal marriage which has just been celebrated. Although young Hamlet dislikes Claudius and regards him as a usurper of the throne, he appears to be a competent and even an amiable ruler. Claudius, after referring diplomatically to his marriage, dispatching ambassadors to Norway and giving Laertes permission to return to France, he urges young Hamlet to stop his excessive mourning, and not to return to Wittenberg. The audience, having already seen the ghost, is aware that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark". (I-v-90), and will sympathize with young Hamlet's feelings about his mother's hasty remarriage, especially as marriage with a deceased husband's brother was not permitted without a special dispensation.

The youngster first soliloquy is designed to show his state of mind before his interview with the ghost. He is profoundly shocked by Gertrude's marriage to his uncle in less than two months after her first husband's death, although he has no conscious suspicion that his father has been murdered or that his mother had committed adultery. He wished suicide were permissible, he compares the world to Eden after the fall, he contrasts Gertrude's two husbands, the godlike one and the bestial one, and, with a tendency to generalize characteristic of him, he assumes that all women are like his mother.

His depression and his tears are underlined by his initial failure to recognize Horatio; but he rouses himself sufficiently to make the bitter witticism about the funeral baked meats, and his cross-examination of the three men who have seen the ghost reveals that his intelligence has not been blunted by his grief. It is apparent from the four-line soliloquy at the end of the scene, in which he speaks of "foul play" and "foul deeds", that he now suspects that his father has been murdered.

In the further scene, before the appearance of the ghost, young Hamlet spoke on the drunkenness of the court, which leads him to generalize on the way "some vicious mole of nature" (I-iv-24) or some bad habit outweighs a man's good qualities and destroys his reputation in the eyes of the world. Young Hamlet had already referred, in the second scene, to the drinking habits of the new court, and one function of this speech is to show the deterioration of Elsinore in the reign of Claudius. Another function, equally important from the theatrical point of view, is to distract the attention of the audience so that they are surprised by the reappearance of the ghost, and this function is aided by the extreme complexity of the syntax, which would require the undivided attention of the audience.

When the ghost appears again, in the Closet scene, it is to remind young hamlet of his unfulfilled task, and to protect Gertrude from the knowledge of Claudius' crime. The visitation of the ghost confirms the prompting of his prophetic soul that some foul deed has been committed. The ghost has then cast Hamlet in the role of avenging angel, when all his faculties cry out for him to be a moral scourge. The ghost has asked him to be active, but his disposition is to be reflective, intellectually questioning, and in moral terms, admonitory.

But what are the means and effect of the ghost? And in particular, why does Shakespeare make the ghost so majestically a phantom, giving it that measured and solemn utterance, and that air of impersonal abstraction which forbids, for example, all expression of affection for young Hamlet and checks in young Hamlet the outburst of pity for his father? Whatever the intention may have been, the result is that the ghost affects imagination not simply as apparition of a dead king who desires the accomplishment of his purposes, but also as the representative of

that hidden ultimate power, the messenger of divine justice set upon the expiration of offences which it appeared impossible for man to discover and avenge a reminder of a symbol of the limited world of ordinary experience with the vaster life of life of which it is but a partial appearance.

The appearance of the specter means a breaking down of the walls of the world and the germination of thoughts that cannot really be thought. Chaos has come again. So far, it is clear now that the ghost is solely concerned about speeding young Hamlet to revenge and to protect the queen (which is the purpose of the second visitation by the ghost). The ghost, through all that precedes, seems not to be the only instigator of the revenge tragedy in *Hamlet*. Jealousy seems to be another cause. The question that is raised here is to know the reason why the ghost is apparent to everybody in Act I and only to young Hamlet the second time?

In Act I, the ghost appears four times. In the first scene, it appears twice to Bernardo, Marcellus and Haratio as to confirm that the account Bernardo and Marcellus are giving to Haratio about its first two appearances to them is true. Then, Haratio cannot doubt anymore because the ghost appears "In the same figure, like the king that's dead" (I-i-41). He even asserts "before my God, I might not believe this without the sensible and true avouch of mine own" (I-i- 56-58). But it does not say anything despite Haratio's two injunctions; "Speak; speak, I charge thee, speak", (I-i-51).

The third time we see it again is in the fourth scene. It appears to young Hamlet, Haratio and Marcellus. This time, it beckons young Hamlet to go away with it to a removed ground. Although it does not speak to them it shows clearly that it needs young Hamlet. Maybe it does not want to speak to him in the presence of anyone else, and this is well proved by its fourth appearance. This occurs in the fifth scene of Act I when we see only the ghost and young Hamlet, the former making confidences to the latter. This is the first time we notice that the ghost speaks and speaks to young Hamlet alone. It gives its true identity to him before revealing its unnatural murder and its author.

The ghost is visible to everybody in the first Act while in Act III, it is only visible to young Hamlet. But why is this so? It might be because, on the one hand, Marcellus, Bernardo and Horatio are not involved in the sin, while on the other hand, Gertrude is the sinner for marrying the dead king's brother and within so short a time after the death of her husband. Moreover, a ghost, in Shakespeare's day, was able, for any sufficient reason, to confirm its manifestation to a single person in company.

At the beginning of the play we have this intimation, conveyed through the medium of the received religious idea of a soul come from purgatory, so in the

end, conveyed through the similar idea of a soul carried by angels to its rest, we have an intimation of the same character, and a reminder that the apparent failure of young Hamlet's life is not the ultimate truth concerning him.

### 3. Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

While considering the peculiarities in the tragedy, it will be agreed that, while young Hamlet certainly cannot be called in the specific sense a "religious drama", there is in it, nevertheless, both a freer use of popular religious ideas, and a more decided, though always imaginative, intimation of a supreme power concerned with human evil and good, than can be found in any other of Shakespeare's tragedies. And this is probably one of the causes of the special popularity of this play just as *Macbeth*, the tragedy which, in these respects most nearly approaches it, has also the place next to it in general esteem. A ghost also appears in the case of *Macbeth*. But here it is a mere hallucination.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have then plotted and executed Duncan. The King of Scotland's murder in his castle has been skillful enough to let everybody believe that his attendants have committed the crime. They have killed Duncan to hurry on the fulfillment of the witches's prophecy according to which Macbeth will be the king. But the witches have also foretold that Banquo will be the root of generations of the kings, which Macbeth would not digest, and from then on would look for any opportunity to get rid of him. It is in purpose that he has invited Banquo to a banquet in his castle. But Banquo never attended that banquet because he was killed before it took place. However, the couple Macbeth has organized the banquet.

Then Banquo's ghost intervenes to stop the feast. The ghost of Banquo comes and sits down in Macbeth's place at the table. But only Macbeth can see it. While "digestion", "health", "sauce", and "meat" are being enjoyed, Banquo's ghost breaks into the festivity, disperses it, throws it into disorder, "Against this life-forms of feasting, conviviality, social friendliness and order, comes a death, a ghost, smashing life-form with phantasms of evil and guilt: an unreality, a "nothing", like the air-drawn dagger, creating chaos of order and reality, dispersing the social unit. It is the conquest of the real, the life-giving by the unreal and deathly. It corresponds to the murderous deed whose "hideous trumpet" (II-iii- 87) waked the "downy-sleep" (II- iii- 81) of Macbeth's guests at Inverness, raising them to walk like "spirits" (II- iii- 84) from death, like young Hamlet's father, shattering at that dead hour all a natural peace and rest". That is John Wain's opinion of the ghost. This point of view is not different from the general one according to which a ghost is a soul or specter of a dead person, usually

appearing as a living being or as a nebulous likeness of the deceased and occasionally, in other forms.

Banquo's ghost has come to replace the whole being of Banquo. Indeed and based on tradition, when you are invited you should come; the least courtesy is to come. And, when you cannot come, you reply to or you let your host know that you cannot. It seems that it is in that logic that Banquo's ghost finds its importance by making its apparition at the banquet in order to fulfill either of these two obligations.

Macbeth has invited Banquo, Macbeth has killed him, and only he can see his ghost. And we cannot say that all this is a mere accident. The appearance of the ghost seems to occur to counteract Macbeth who does not mind at all Banquo's absence at the feast. In fact, he does not mind because he knows the truth and is utterly sure that Banquo would never come. It seems that Banquo's ghost appears to accuse Macbeth of his fault which nobody knows, and of which he does not care. It comes to haunt the state banquet of Macbeth. It comes to torment Macbeth. Normally, after killing Banquo, Macbeth should feel safe from his enemies, but fate quickly descends upon him in a most horrible form, the form of the ghost, Banquo's ghost. This is a terrible punishment both for his crime and also the evil pretence of expecting Banquo to be at the banquet.

So, the ghost appears and only Macbeth, the sinner, can see it. The appearance of the ghost does not leave Macbeth indifferent. It moves him. The other guests cannot see the ghost, but they can notice its effects on Macbeth. They can notice that he is being moved; that's why Lenox asks: "What is it that moves your highness?" (III- iv- 49-50). Macbeth cannot hide the reason or the object of his trouble then and straightforwardly answers with another question; "Which of you have done this?" (III-iv- 48). This question cannot be answered by the guests because they know nothing of what it is about. At such a level of conclusion, any other guest would react the same way. They seem completely confused and start becoming suspicious about Macbeth. Throughout the fourth scene of Act III lots of Macbeth's speeches raise suspicion.

In fact, right at the beginning of the banquet, when Banquo's ghost enters and sits in Macbeth's place, and the others cannot see it but only Macbeth can see it, suspicion has been planning. All the others notice that a place is reserved for Macbeth, but the latter can see no free place. Instead, he sees Banquo's ghost and is affected by this sudden appearance. The others can then notice that something is wrong with him. Their suspicion starts from this moment.

The suspicion and probably the confusion increase when Macbeth keeps on this incontestable self-accusation: "Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake thy gory locks at me" (III-iv-50-51). The guests are then quite sure that "something is rotten



in the state of Denmark" and choose to leave. The after-effects of such a situation on them is that they may continue being suspicious about Macbeth. But they do not leave because Lady Macbeth asks them to stay. She covers up the incident to dissuade them from any suspicion. Yet, the strategy does not work for it is clearly shown that Macbeth has probably committed a crime.

The consequences of the appearance of the ghost on Macbeth arouse suspicion of him because of the conflict he is having with somebody we do not know and cannot see but for a reason we may guess since most of his speeches allude to it.

When the ghost has appeared, Lady Macbeth has not seen it, and maybe she cannot see it. But she has known it must be there. This, perhaps because of she has been informed about everything of her husband's fault and trouble that she has quickly understood him and has even tried to rescue him. Could she do otherwise as a partner, a wife and a lover, whose duty is also to be truthful to her husband mainly when the latter is in trouble? She knows the crime committed by her husband mainly when the latter was in trouble. She also knows the crime committed by her husband towards Banquo. Now at the banquet, Banquo is missing and suddenly her husband starts speaking to somebody nobody else can see, referring to something wrong which has been done against that same unknown person. To prove or to show her care and her love for her husband, she has to save him from shame. Shame, because the guests might, at last, understand everything about what is happening. In other words, they could understand that something is wrong, a crime has been committed by their host and that, now he is sorry for what he has done, he is having remorse. That his conscience is troubled as Cain was, in the Holy Bible, after killing his brother Abel. So, the ghost's appearance at the feast reveals or lets any reader think that Lady Macbeth loves her husband, he is careful of he is welfare and would not like to let him fall into trouble. This explains her first excuse:

My lord is often thus,  
And hath been from his youth: pray you, keep seat;  
The fit is momentary; upon a thought  
He will again be well. If much you note him  
You shall offend him, and extend his passion;  
Feed, and regard him not (III-iv-53-58)

Everything is then quite clear. What else could be expected from a wife? Lady Macbeth has done the least she can. To let the royal banquet split so easily, so unworthily, would be a great shame for the royal family. Thus, she has promptly decided to save the honor of the royal family. By attributing Macbeth's trouble to a simple or an ordinary discomfort which often occurs to him and does not last long, she really wants the feast to continue. She did not want the royal renown to be spoilt; she vividly opposed herself to the guests to prevent them from

discovering the truth. As a matter of fact, the appearance of the ghost consolidates the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth.

The appearance of the ghost at the banquet is so important that it can constitute a scene in itself. When a banquet starts, it is expected to continue in joy, in peace, and not to be interrupted by a phantom or ghost as occurred in *Macbeth*. Here the ghost came to the banquet to trouble it, to disturb it. It came just at the instant when the feast was about to start. Nobody could see it except Macbeth. But its effect on Macbeth had repercussions on the whole feast. Macbeth organized the banquet, and he was disturbed and he suddenly started feeling unwell. The suddenness of his trouble surprised the guests and could not let them enjoy the banquet. Since then, neither the guests nor Lady Macbeth could be in the mood to enjoy anything, and were, on the contrary, made anxious by Macbeth's disturbance. If only any of them could do anything to make him recover, it would be helpful. But they could do nothing but sympathise. Only Lady Macbeth, as she could guess the origin of her husband's disturbance, might have done something to help him recover. Unfortunately, she did nothing because she could not do anything. The problem was beyond her ability. All she could do and did in fact, was to prevent the guests from asking Macbeth questions so as not to make him tell everything about his crime. Instead of having only subject of preoccupation, which would be the banquet, the appearance of the ghost has suddenly become another subject, and not the least, of preoccupation. It even surpassed the banquet as it succeeded at last in putting an end to it. Thus, the whole scene has suddenly changed from a banquet scene to a ghost's scene.

The first appearance of Banquo's ghost was at the banquet, and its purpose was to haunt the banquet and to torment Macbeth. It probably came to reproach Macbeth. But despite this, Macbeth would not decide to put an end to his wicked instincts. He still had in mind the witches' prophecies which foretold that Banquo would be the root of many kings. Despite his crime against Banquo, he was still obsessed by that prophecy. That's why he decided to consult the witches once more to know much more about the future. Three apparitions came to satisfy his curiosity. The first, an armed head, warned him against Macduff: "Macbeth! Beware Macduff; Beware the Thane of Fife-Dismiss me-Enough" (IV-i-71-72). He wanted to know more about this, but the spirit would not obey his orders. The second, a child covered in blood, said he needed fear "none of woman born". (IV-i-80)

The third, a child, with a tree in its hand, said that Macbeth would not be defeated until the wood of Birnam moved to the hill of Dunsinane. But Macbeth was still not satisfied; he wanted to know whether in fact Banquo's children, and not his own, would be kings in the future. Then there was a display of eight kings, the last carrying a mirror which reflected many more; and the ghost of Banquo followed

them. These stood for the future kings of Scotland, and were the heirs of Banquo. When Macbeth was consulting the witches, the second appearance of Banquo's ghost was more significant than the others.

Indeed, the ghost's reappearance is, like the phantasmal dagger, a "horrible shadow", an unreal mockery, and it opposes the natural joys of feasting and "health", life-forms, life-forces, just as Macbeth's original "horrible imagings", the "horrid image" of the proposed murder, unfixed his hair and made his heart beat wildly "against the use of nature", shook his "state of man" and smothered "function" in "surmise". So the evil makes of unity, "love", feasting and social order a chaos, dispersing and disintegrating society. The disorder thought is important, running throughout Shakespeare and vividly apparent: order is the natural grouping of life-forms, disorder a desecration of the ties of hospitality, blood-relationship and allegiance.

## Conclusion

The supernatural is a recurring aspect in many of William Shakespeare's plays. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the supernatural is an integral part of the structure of the plot. In these two plays, the authors give insights about the manifestations of the supernatural in its various forms notably as a weird, ghost, air-drawn dagger and prophecy. Through this way of plotting, Shakespeare, on the one hand, would like to call his reader attention on his or her wrongdoings towards his counterparts. His writings are an invitation of people to avoid catching the life expectancy of our neighbors. On the other hand, the playwright is showing his reader the dimensions that can take the supernatural to correct misconduct or to achieve a goal. In fact, the supernatural provides a catalyst for action by the characters. It supplies insight into the major players and it augments the impact of many key scenes. The supernatural appeals to the audience's curiosity of the mysterious and thus strengthens their interest.

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