

# Supernatural Elements in Shakespeare's Plays

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**Abstract**—This paper analyzes the supernatural elements of Shakespeare's plays from several aspects. It first introduces the historical background of Shakespeare's writing career. Then, it analyzes supernatural elements in three of his great plays and introduces how the supernatural elements are represented on stage in old Elizabethan period and in modern times. Last, it provides the modern implications to the 21st century viewers of Shakespeare's plays.

**Index Terms**—the supernatural elements, ghosts, Elizabethan period

## I. INTRODUCTION

Modern humans find it difficult to believe in ghosts, witches or other supernatural beings. They couldn't understand why people in the Elizabethan period can be so serious about these things. People's intense fear towards the supernatural elements is probably due to the lack of physical knowledge about world they were living in. Shakespeare introduced many supernatural elements into his plays. Without looking at the reasons and motivations behind them, we wouldn't be able to detect the plays' underlied meanings and implications.

Shakespeare's plays are always considered to be the greatest plays in the world literary history, not only because of the beautiful language, the complex plot construction and the modern implication of their universal themes, but also because of the breathtaking literary skills applied and mysterious elements in these plays.

The supernatural elements constitute a significant part of Shakespeare's plays, whether in the romantic comedies in the early period---*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596) or in the tragedies of the second period---*Hamlet* (1601), *Othello* (1606), *Mac Beth* (1606), *Romeo and Juliet* (1607) or in his later romance---*The Tempest* (1611). All of these plays contain the supernatural elements.

## II. SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is impossible to interpret Shakespeare's plays without looking at the time he lived in. In the second half of the 14th century, the cloth industry in England grew first to rival and finally to overshadow every branch of English trade and industry. The rapid growth of English textile manufacturing in the 15th century revolutionized the character of the bulk of the county's export trade. More merchants were engaged in foreign trade. Yet, when the Turks captured Constantinople in the eastern Mediterranean, the overland route was shut off. To find a sea route to the Orient became a very important goal. Thus the business relationship with other European and Asian countries provided a good opportunity for the English people to absorb their cultures and ideas. Although the economy developed at speed, there were still some mysterious things that couldn't be explained by science at that time, so people explain the weird phenomena with their rich imagination.

England of the 17th century is a country where religion holds a dominant position in people's daily life. There are Anglicans and Catholics as well as other kinds of religion. In the Elizabethan period, despite the day-by-day development of economy, most of the peasants were still under miserable condition. They had to work hard for the landowners; because of the Enclosure Movement, they had no home to live in; the food was scarce and many people starved to death. Under such severe circumstances, they tried to resort to mysterious power for relief. They believed that people would have another life after they died.

People's belief in the superstition also has some the philosophical reasons. In 16th century England, physical science was not developed enough. There appeared a group of astrologers. As W.R Elton puts it "...although controversial, beliefs in the influence of the stars upon man's life were held by a majority of Shakespeare's audience. Indeed great astronomers such as Tycho Brade (1546---1601) and Johannes Kepler (1571---1670) were practicing astrology, and the eminent physicist, William Gilbert (1540---1603), physician to Queen Elizabeth maintained astrology views. Natural astrology (useful for metrological predictions governing such matters as the influence of planets on crops) was widely credited, but different from judicial astrology. Astrologers agreed that man's fate was determined by his planetary conjunctions.....They continued to dispute whether the determining moment was that of conceptions or that of birth. (Elton, 1986, p17).

Some literary traditions at that time can also explain the supernatural elements in Shakespeare's plays. First, Shakespeare's plays then were influenced a lot by the Greek and Roman mythology as well as the Greek dramas centuries ago. Most of the gods, goddesses, and heroes in these stories have superpowers. It is not difficult to find some traces among Shakespeare's plays the inspirations he'd got from them. The Bible, which a great part of western culture

is based on, is another source of inspiration. Early English dramas can also offer some hints to the understanding of Shakespeare's plays. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there appeared a new kind of play, in which many supernatural elements are presented to prove God's almighty power. It is called the miracle play. The whole performances for the presentation of the episodes from the Bible became more fully developed and lengthened and were linked together to form more continuous stories. It is extremely popular in London. Gradually, miracle plays were replaced by mystery play which tells the stories in the Bible. The heroes in the New Testament and Old Testament seemed to be more attractive to the English people at that time. In France, the mystery plays were rather sharply distinguished from the miracle plays, but in England, the terms were used almost interchangeably, though strictly speaking, the former refers to dramas based directly on stories from the Bible, whereas the latter deal with the legends of the Christian saints. "The mystery or miracle plays were written in cycles, consisting of a whole series of plays covering biblical stories from the creation of world through the life and passion of Christ down to the last judgment." (Chen, 1981, p74)

Finally, Shakespeare's perspective and religious belief affects the usage of some supernatural elements in the plays. Take his religious belief for instance, as a child, Shakespeare received educations on religion. When Sunday came, all the pubs and shops fairs and markets of Stratford—upon—Avon were closed. People went to the religious service. Anyone who didn't obey the rules would be severely punished. The family of Shakespeare believed in Anglican religion, however, his father might have been a puritan. His maternal grandfather's family believed in Catholicism, so probably his mother was a Catholic. Whether his parents are pious religious followers or not there is not enough evidence. There are various sayings as to Shakespeare's own religious conviction. When Shakespeare was baptized, he was Anglican (maybe it refers to the fact that he was baptized by the ritual of Anglican). But some scholars maintain that Shakespeare obeyed the Anglican service. This is probably because of the fact that if he didn't, he would have attracted the attention of the municipal government, which always treated dramas with certain hostility. Other scholars say that he was a Catholic. No matter what kinds of religion he believed in, there is no doubt that he was very religious.

### III. THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN HIS PLAYS

In his early romantic comedy---*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the author presents the readers a wonderland full of magic and enchantment: the beautiful scenery of the forests and the rejoiced fairies and spirits in a summer night. *Mid-Summer Night's Dream* tells a story between two Athen couples---Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius. At beginning, both Lysander and Demetrius fell in love with the same girl, Hermia. Despite Helena's intense affection for Demetrius, he refused her courting. Oberon, the king of the fairies, out of sympathy, instructed one of his fairies Puck to apply love potion on Demetrius eyelids in order for him to fall in love with the next person he saw. However, Puck's mis-application of his enchantment led to both Lysander and Demetrius falling for Helena. After a series of bizarre and hilarious situations, the enchantment was reversed and things were set right again. The supernatural elements in this play reflect the writer's optimism towards love and human morality. The little spirit---Puck, serves as a main thread in this play, by using his magic power; he brings the relations between three pairs of lovers into a series of changes. From time to time, the play arouses among the audience great astonishment and confusion as well as laughter. Because of the naughty spirit and their magical power, the plot always takes sudden turns which one would never expect and it is full of situational irony. Shakespeare in this play uses magic to embody supernatural power of love to create a surreal world. Unlike his latter tragedies, the supernatural figures are benign characters who tried to help human being. Their meddling with human's love affair is out of good will rather than wishing them harm. Plus, the supernatural characters are more humane. The fairies bear great resemblance to humans in terms of their emotions. The bickering between the fairy king Oberon and fairy queen Titania are somewhat like the ones among human couples.

*Oberon: Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.*

*Titania: What! Jealous Oberon. Fairies, skip hence: I have forsworn his bed and company.*

*Oberon: Tarry, rash wanton! Am not I thy lord?*

*Titania: Then, I must be thy lady; but I know....*

*Oberon: How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,*

*Glance at my credit with Hippolyta? (Act 2, Scene 1)*

Despite a series of torments and inflictions, the tension of the play is ultimately resolved which probably manifests Shakespeare's optimism toward the world and human nature. Puck is kind of protagonist in the play who is depicted as extremely lovely though a little bit mischievous. He brings a lot of laughter to the audience and is considered one of the favorite characters in Shakespeare's comedies.

Different from the first period of his plays, in his second writing period---the period of great tragedies, there is no longer merriness and laughter. The appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet* leads to the prince's revenge. The three witches' prophecy in *Macbeth* results in the murder of the king. Here, *Hamlet* is taken as an example.

The Ghost in *Hamlet* is perhaps one of the most fascinating and enigmatic characters in Shakespeare's plays. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost appeared 3 times. It made its first appearance in front of two soldiers---Bernardo and Marcellus and Hamlet's good friend Horatio who told about its existence to Hamlet. Through talking with the Ghost, Hamlet was told that the Ghost was his deceased father and was also informed about the truth of his father's death. It turned out that Hamlet's uncle--- Claudius poisoned his father, married his mother and became the king. The Ghost made its third appearance in Gertrude's closet. He rebuked Hamlet for not carrying the revenge. In this play, the Ghost is subjected to

many interpretations by the scholars. While the Ghost's first two appearances were proved by different people, the third appearance is considered by some experts merely a hallucination of Hamlet. In Act 3, Scene 4, when Hamlet came to confront his mother, he saw his father's ghost in the queen's closet who urged him to speak to his mother. Gertrude, the queen, on the other hand could neither hear the Ghost nor see him as Hamlet claimed.

**Queen:** *To whom did you speak this?*

**Hamlet:** *Do you see nothing there?*

**Queen:** *Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.*

**Hamlet:** *Nor did you nothing I hear?*

**Queen:** *No, nothing but ourselves.*

**Hamlet:** *Why, you look there! Look how it steals away!*

*My father in his habit as he lived...*

**Queen:** *This is the very coinage of your brain!*

*This bodiless creation ecstasy is very cunning in. (Act 3, Scene 4)*

The Ghost in the play can neither be labeled as evil nor good. When Hamlet was first told about the existence of the Ghost, he doubted his honesty and quite suspicious of his intention.

*My father's spiritual arms! All is not well;*

*I doubt some foul play; Would the night were come!*

*Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds with rise,*

*Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes (Act 1, Scene 2)*

Is it what it appears to be or is it a misleading friend? The appearance of the Ghost and what he pushed Hamlet to do partly drove Hamlet mad or as some scholars explained, the Ghost is nothing but a hallucination of Hamlet. The Ghost also foreshadowed Claudio's death and Hamlet's madness. He told Hamlet that Claudius killed him by putting poison into his ears and urged him to take revenge and kill Claudius who was indeed killed by his own nephew. What's more, in his conversation with Hamlet, he warned Hamlet of the possible madness "But howsoever thou pursue this act, Taint not thy mind or let thy soul against thy mother aught" (Act 1, Scene 5). The existence of the Ghost has added a tune of sadness and sorrow in the play.

If in the first two periods, the supernatural serves as a thread to link the plot together, the supernatural elements in *The Tempest* have become the main content of the story. The play is different from all other dramas of his. It resembles *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in having a supernatural atmosphere and presence of many supernatural beings (Ariel resembling Puck) but it has a much more serious theme than that in the earlier play where we find nothing but "cross purpose in love". There is the idealized figure of Prospero---the duke-turned-philosopher-magician, plus the Utopian dreams of Gonzalo and running through all is the presence of magic employed everywhere by Prospero until he breaks the wand and dismisses Ariel towards the end of the drama. "There is not only the mixture of the comic with the tragic, the farcical (particularly in the episodes involving Stephano and Trinaldo) with what is downright serious (the plot for murder), but there is a hotchpotch of gods and goddesses, all made possible by magic." (Chen, 1981, p169) In *The Tempest*, the supernatural power lied in the hands of a human being. The protagonist---Prospero, the Duke of Milan, was obsessed with sorcery and neglected daily matters. After his brother's attempted murder of him, he escaped to an island and sought revenge twelve years later. He conjured up a big storm and caused the ship carrying his brother to wreck on the island he was living. He then separated his brother---Antonio and his fellowman to different groups, each one cutting off from their loved ones. Because of his manipulation, the situation descended into chaos. His enemies suffered the similar torments and inflictions he used to have. Prospero ask his servant Ariel---a spirit to guide his groups to him. The conflict was finally resolved through his forgiveness. Unlike *Hamlet* and *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream* whose human characters have to leave up their fate in the hands of ghost and fairies, the human being in *The Tempest* seized control of everything. Throughout the play, Prospero used magic to manipulate other characters both human and non-human. Even though Ariel is a spirit who possessed many forms of supernatural abilities, he was nothing but a slave who must carry out what Prospero needed him to accomplish, as can be seen in Act 1, Scene 2.

**Prospero:** *Dull thing, I say so!*

*When I arrived and hear thee, that made gape*

*The pine and let thee out.*

**Ariel:** *I thank thee, master.*

**Prospero:** *If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak*

*And peg thee in his knotty entrails, till*

*Thou hast howled away twelve winers.*

**Ariel:** *Pardon, master;*

*I will be correspondent to command,*

*And do my spriting gently. (Act 1, Scene 2)*

Shakespeare wrote this play at the end of his career. His reflection on supernatural powers and supernatural being perhaps had changed along with his perspectives toward the world. During the time he wrote his tragedies, the supernatural being are something untouchable, terrifying and beyond human's knowledge, as can be seen in Hamlet's famous soliloquy wondering about the aftermath of death. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare showed human's capability of

mastering super power and using of it to their own ends. Shakespeare's belief in what human beings are capable of is clearly manifested in this play.

#### IV. THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS ON STAGE IN OLD ELIZABETHAN PERIOD AND IN MODERN TIMES

Shakespeare's plays whether in modern times or in ancient times are frequently staged and televised because of their popularity.

The staging method in the Elizabethan theatre is very simple and interesting. The stages were in the center of the audience, when the actors were acting; the audience crowded the stage from the front and two sideways. So the actors were very close to the audience. The stage was about 5 or 6 feet high. The floor of the stage can be opened; the actors who played the ghost or spirits would appear and disappear through this door. When the door was open, it could also serve as a grave. It maybe seems to be too simple for the modern audience to believe, but that's how the play was acted at that time. As Russel Jackson puts it "*The Tempest* has many dreadful objects in it as several spirits in horrid shapes flying down from the sailors, then rising and crossing in the air. And when the ship is sinking, the whole house is darkened and shower of fireballs upon'em. Lightening, and several claps of thunder, to the end of the storm, accompanies this. Subsequent producers of *The Tempest* would also find the storm an irresistible challenge to the skill of the scenic artist. With the attraction of music, song and scenery, it must have been a splendid show, but it lacks the ambiguities and mystery of the original play" (Jackson, 1986, p25). With the coming of the 21st century, as the technology develops, more and more modern equipments, costumes have been applied on the stage, so what seems to be impossible to achieve in the Elizabethan period can now be easily achieved. People don't have to worry about scene of "flying witches" any more. Audience can get much more visual enjoyment than before.

#### V. THE MODERN IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY VIEWERS OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

As modern human beings, it's very difficult to believe in the witches or ghost in Shakespeare's plays. However, it doesn't mean people don't have tendency to believe it.

When human beings are in danger, they tend to resort to some kind of supernatural power for help. Even if a person is not a religious believer, he or she when encountering difficulty, would say, "God, please help me!" or similar appealing to the divined power. So being superstitious is reckoned to be a natural tendency for human beings. When people are traumatized, they tend to comfort themselves by saying "It's fate!" If people don't believe in the supernatural power, there wouldn't be so many expressions related to "bad luck" in almost all languages. If people don't believe in the supernatural power, astrology wouldn't be in nowadays the most popular branch of science. Many people believe "certain future events must occur regardless of our present actions or choices...for fate indifferently assign each person to the predetermined course of events." (Elton, 1986, p22)

Shakespeare implied fatalism in *Romeo and Juliet*. The main reason of this love tragedy is the feud between families, but the direct reason is still a series of accidental events. In the play, fate, as a kind of supernatural power plays a significant role. If the man who carried the letter wasn't delayed, if Juliet woke up half an hour earlier, or if Romeo arrived half an hour late, things would totally change. After finish reading or watching the play, people couldn't help feeling a great sympathy for the tragic fate of these two young lovers.

Prescience also plays an important part in the play. It is a feeling of knowing what will happen in the future. Romeo's dream is a prescience of the image of Juliet, dead in her tomb, that Romeo will see later on for real. There is a lot in the play which looks forward or foreshadows events to come; it all bounces back to the introduction, the prologue sonnet which tell us of the "star-crossed lovers".

*The prologue*

*From forth the fatal loins of these two foes*

*A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;*

*Whose misadventur'd piteous overshadows*

*Doth with their death bury their parents' strife. (Prologue, line 6,7,8)*

It is probably from here that you would begin your investigation of supernatural elements in the play. There is one thing about Mercutio's curse: Mercutio says "A plague on both your houses". This "plague" is foreshowed in the scene where Friar John was prevented from delivering the letter to Romeo because he ended up quarantined in a plague house. He did foreshow events. And those events fall into the category of fate, hinted at the initial line, "a pair of star-crossed lovers..." indeed; Romeo and Juliet are destined for a certain fate, because they are "star-crossed". But no one can predict anything, except Shakespeare.

Besides Shakespeare, two other famous writers believe in the supernatural power. Hardy is a fatalist; Emerson is a transcendentalist who believes in nature as symbolic of the spirit of God. They have a large group of followers, and their works deserves researching even today. Whether people believe in the supernatural or not, it is something very enigmatic. Plus, there is a question worth discussing that if people don't believe in ghost, why should they believe in God?

In short, metaphysical things that haven't been explained by science yet will always be appealing to human beings. That is one of the reasons why the supernatural elements in Shakespeare's plays have enduring charm and can give

some implications to modern people.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Looking back the literary history in Britain, there is no other English writers who can combine the history with the supernatural elements so skillfully than William Shakespeare did. The cultural and ideological mixtures of different European countries as well as the ancient heritage from Greek and Roman dramas are the breeding ground for his plays. The ghosts, fairies and fatalism implied in his plays push the plot steadily to climax, and every turning point takes the audience and readers by surprise. The supernatural elements in his plays pose great controversy and provide a ground for debating for many literary critics for centuries. Whether modern man believes in these supernatural elements or not, Shakespeare's plays are still packing a large number of audiences into theatres today. Without the witches, the ghosts, the visions and apparitions, they might have been dull and tiresome. Even today's readers need some motivations to read, and these ancient superstitions of spirits enhance the play drastically.

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