

Shakespeare's supernatural assignment

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This paper explores that role. The plays are taken up in chronological order. For each, there is first a description of the general supernatural beliefs of Shakespearean original audience, for Hamlet, their beliefs about ghosts, for Macbeth, their beliefs about witches. The next section describes which supernatural material Shakespeare took from his sources and which he added of his own. Then comes a critical summary of the scenes in each play in which the supernatural appears. Finally, there is a survey of the differing views that several leading critics have expressed about the role of the supernatural in Hamlet and Macbeth.

The paper began with the conviction that a modern audience for the two plays cannot experience them as Shakespeare intended without an informed and sympathetic understanding of what he and his contemporaries believed about ghosts and witches. It arrives at a conviction that those critics who recognize a presence of unexplainable mystery at the heart of the plays do them more justice than those critics who think that everything in them can be explained. Keywords Supernatural, ghost, witches, belief, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Macbeth

Declaration I proclaim that this bachelor thesis was done by my own and I used only the materials that are stated in the literature sources. I agree with the placing of this Born, 16 May 2007 Acknowledgement Language and Literature and with the access for studying purposes. 18 19 Jan
Wondered I would like to thank my supervisor Lucie Potpourris, Ph. D. For her help and giving advice connected with the thesis. Hamlet and Macbeth are two of Shakespearean greatest tragedies. They are great in theme, in dramatic power, and in poetry. In a less abstract way, they also have much
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in common. Both open in the country in which the action takes place, an elective monarchy, threatened by foreign invasion, and the threat comes from Norway. The murder of king is at the center of the plot of both plays. In both plays, the king's murderer, who is a kinsman of his, occupies the throne, but at the end of the drama is punished for his crime by death.

Both plays are psychological dramas: the central conflict in each takes place in the mind of the leading character. The action of *Macbeth* is based on historical events set in the distant past and somewhere else than England, Hamlet's in medieval Denmark, *Macbeth*'s in medieval Scotland. In both plays, bloody violence is a prominent ingredient: Hortatory description at the end of *Macbeth* of the events the audience has just witnessed on stage could just as truly apply to *Macbeth*: "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, ... Accidental Judgments, casual slaughter, ... Death put on by cunning and forced cause, ... Purposes mistook fall's on tenterhooks' heads" (V. 2. 363-368). But what these two great tragedies have most strikingly in common, and what more obviously than anything else sets them apart from Shakespearean other major tragedies, is that, in both, the supernatural plays a key role. The ghost of the old king in *Hamlet* and the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* are central to the plays' plots, they are a major force in determining the two heroes' actions, and from the plays' opening scenes they are an important element in establishing the plays' atmosphere.

One reason why it can feel to be said that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are two of Shakespearean greatest tragedies is that they have been written about more than any other of the tragedies, or even of all of Shakespearean plays. It has been said that *Hamlet* is the most written-about work in all of Western

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literature. Given the great interest, the fascination, even, which the two plays have had for scholars and critics down through the years, it is not surprising that every important character, every turn of plot, and every aspect of theme in them has been subject to different interpretations, sometimes wildly different interpretations.

This is certainly true of the supernatural elements in the two plays. The purpose of this paper will be to explore the forms and the roles of the supernatural in Hamlet and Macbeth. I will take up the plays in chronological order, first Hamlet, first published in 1603, then Macbeth, first published in 1606. For each of the plays, I will begin by setting out the general beliefs about the supernatural held by Shakespearean original audiences (and, it is reasonable to suppose, probably by Shakespeare himself), for Hamlet, what they believed about ghosts, for Macbeth, what they believed about witches.

Then I will describe which material on own invention. Taking up the plays themselves, I will briefly summarize and comment on the scenes in each play in which the supernatural makes an appearance of some kind. Finally, I will survey the various and often differing views that several leading scholars and critics have expressed about the role of the supernatural in Hamlet and Macbeth, and I will suggest which ones I think more persuasive and why. In all of this, I will be guided by the conviction that a modern audience for the plays, whether reading at home or watching in the theatre, cannot experience them as

Shakespeare intended without an informed and sympathetic understanding of what he and his contemporaries believed about ghosts and witches and

daggers mysteriously floating in the air. SUPERNATURAL IN HAMLET

Elizabethan belief in ghosts Most modern audience of Hamlet probably casually assume what I casually assumed when I read and saw the play for the first time: that Shakespearean original audience, and probably Shakespeare himself, believed in ghosts. We automatically tend to think that people four hundred years ago were a great deal more superstitious than we ourselves are.

Our gypsy fortune tellers, endless appetite for ghost movies, and the horoscope columns of our newspapers and magazines by themselves suggest that maybe they were not. We probably never stop to wonder what "believed in ghosts" really means. John Dover Wilson's book *What Happens in "Hamlet"* suggests, however, that to ask what the Elizabethans believed about ghosts is like asking what modern Europeans believe about God. The answer in both cases is, not one thing but a number of things. "Spiritualism ... Armed one of the major interests of the [Elizabethan] period," Wilson says (65). It is not, therefore, surprising, that where there is a lot of interest there is also difference of opinion. Wilson says that in Shakespearean time, and for a century before and after, there were basically "three schools of thought ... On the question of ghosts" (61). English Catholics, who were a minority of the population but an important (and persecuted) minority, generally believed that ghosts actually existed and were the "spirits" of the dead.

They believed that such spirits came from Purgatory, the vaguely located place between heaven and hell where the "souls" of those who in life were not good enough to go directly to heaven, and not bad enough to deserve hell, went to be cleansed of their sins and so made fit to enter heaven. "

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Purgatory' comes from Latin purge, which means to cleanse or purify. It was " a place of temporary suffering and expiation" (Concise Oxford Dictionary). Catholics believed that ghost spirits coming from Purgatory " were allowed to return ... Or some special purpose, which it was the duty of the pious to further if possible, in order that the wandering soul might find rest" (Wilson, 62). Established or official Church, generally believed like Catholics that ghosts of the dead actually existed. But since, as Protestants, they did not believe in the existence of Purgatory, they believed that ghosts came either from heaven or from hell. Those from heaven came with good intentions and those from hell with bad intentions.

While some ghosts might be angels in spirit form, Protestants thought that ghosts were in general " nothing but devils, who ' assumed' ... The form of departed friends or relatives, in order to work bodily or spiritual harm upon those to whom they appeared" (Wilson, 62). The king of England himself, James I, in 1597 (six years before he came to the English throne) published a learned treatise, *Demonology*, that set out this orthodox Protestant view of ghosts and that helped to prolong its life in England for another hundred years.

Although just about every English man and woman of Shakespearean time was a Christian, either Protestant or Catholic, not everyone believed in the real existence of ghosts. James I's *Demonology* was in fact written as an orthodox Protestant rebuttal of the ideas put forward in two works published thirteen years earlier, in 1584, Reginald Scot's *Discoveries of Witchcraft* and *Discourse upon Devils and Spirits*. Scot believed in the existence of spirits

but dismissed ghosts as either “ the illusion of melancholic minds or flat knavery on the part of some rogue” (Wilson, 64).

The fact that King James felt the need to rebut Scot, and that Cot's books were publicly burned by the hangman at the kings order (Wilson, 64), suggests that enough people found his ideas attractive to cause the authorities concern. Scholars agree that Cot's books on spirits and witches were one of Shakespearean sources for both Hamlet and Macbeth. Those who believed in ghosts, whether they were Protestant or Catholic, also generally believed that ghosts ere insubstantial, that though they were “ real” and not hallucinations, they only seemed to have a bodily form that could be sensed by touch. How ghosts could be insubstantial and real at the same time is something that maybe the Elizabethans were no more clear about than I am.) They further believed that “ ghosts could not speak unless addressed by some mortal,” and that they could be safely addressed only by scholars, since only scholars would know the Latin formulas that would protect them from harm if the ghost were an evil one (Wilson, 75-76). And, according o Wilson, all those of Shakespearean time who wrote about ghosts, whether they believed in them or not, agreed that melancholies, people suffering from depression, were especially likely to be visited by one.

Shakespearean sources for the Ghost The basic Hamlet story was known to Shakespearean time, although not necessarily to Shakespeare himself, through two works: the Latin Historic Dance (“ History of Denmark”) by the Danish writer Sax Grammatical, which was written around 1200 but was first printed in 1514; and the Histories Tragedies (“ Tragic Histories”) of 1574 by Fran??ois De Belletrist, which had been translated into English y 1608 but <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-supernatural-assignment/>

may have been known to Shakespeare some time before that in the original French (Kenneth Mir, *Shakespearean Sources*, 110-112).

Whether Shakespeare knew either of these works or is not known.

Nevertheless scholars agree tragedy from around 1589, *The Spanish Tragedy* (first published in 1592), which was one of the most popular plays of its time and started a fashion of revenge drama that lasted for several decades, and a lost play from the sass's on the same subject as *Hamlet*, which scholars refer to as "the Our-Hamlet" ("original Hamlet") and which may even have been written by Shakespeare himself but more likely was written by Kid (Mir, 110).

Whoever the author was, he got his basic plot from either the *Historic Dance* or the *Histories Tragedies* or from both (Mir, 111). There are no ghosts in the story of *Hamlet* in either the *Historic Dance* or the *Histories Tragedies*, but there is one in *The Spanish Tragedy*, so that "we may be sure that the author of the Our-Hamlet, imitating *The Spanish Tragedy*, invented ... The ghost" for his telling the *Hamlet* story. He also invented *The Mousetrap* and "the madness and death of *Aphelia*" (Mir, 112). It is known from popular jokes of the time that the ghost in the Our-Hamlet cried out "like an oyster-wife": "Hamlet, revenge! And although it is not known for certain whose ghost it was or what was its role in the play, probably they were very much like what they are in *Shakespearean Hamlet* (Mir, 110). The plot of *The Spanish Tragedy* is the reverse of the *Hamlet* plot, a father revenging the murder of his son, and the ghost in the story is not the ghost of the murdered son but of a Spanish nobleman. This ghost, accompanied from the underworld by the Spirit of Revenge, is a spectator of the plays bloody events and not an actor

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in them (Mir, 116-117). Shakespearean great innovation was to give the traditional stage ghost 'Mentality' (West, 65).

He accomplished this by making it recognizably Christian—the Ghost comes from Purgatory and not from the classical Hades, like *Kid's* ghost and many others before and after—by involving it in the plays action, and by creating a spirit that is “an epitome of the ghost lore of his time” as described by the age's leading ghost authorities, Reginald Scot in his *Discovery of Witchcraft* with its “Discourse upon Devils and Spirits” (1584), and Ludwig Elevate in his *Of Ghosts and Spirits walking by Night* (1572, 1596) (West, 64-65; Mir, 121;

Wilson, 53, 63). What Wilson calls “this unique creature of [Shakespearean] imagination” is not a bystander but “a character in the play in the fullest sense of the term” (Wilson, 53, 52). Supernatural appearances in *Hamlet* The supernatural is not only a key element in the plot and atmosphere of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*; it is a key element even though it appears in each of the plays only a very few times and most of its appearances are not for very long.

One way Shakespearean skill as a playwright could be measured is by how much he makes each of those appearances count in the action and in the audience's imagination. He gets the most out of them dramatically. In *Hamlet*, the supernatural makes even fewer appearances than in *Macbeth* and it takes only a single form, as the ghost of the dead King Hamlet, Prince Hamlet's father. Out of the plays total of twenty-two scenes, the Ghost appears in just four (I. 1, I. 4, I. 5, III. 4), and in two of them (I. 4) it does not even speak.

Of the plays like much for such a key figure until you remember that it is speaking from the dead, whose words by their nature generally carry more weight than the words of the living, especially when spoken by a king. In the opening scene of the play, set at midnight on the ramparts of the king's castle at Elisions, it appears to the two sentinels, Barnyard and Marcella, and to Hamlet's friend and fellow-student Horopito, who has been asked to come to witness what the other two had witnessed on two previous nights.

At first, Horopito is skeptical about the sentinels' report of a ghost looking like the dead king, but the Ghost's sudden appearance shocks him into belief. The two sentinels urge Horopito to speak to it. This is what Shakespearean audience would have supposed him better qualified to do than they are since, as an educated man, he would know what kind of language to use in addressing a spirit and the verbal formulas that will protect him in case it is a spirit from hell that can harm him. Horopito calls on the Ghost to speak—" what art thou that usurper's this time of night ...

Speak, speak. I charge thee, speak" (46-51)—but instead of answering, the ghost disappears. The three men agree on the Ghost's exact resemblance to the dead king, Horopito gives his opinion that " this bodes some strange eruptions to our state" (69), and then, in answer to Marseille's question why the country is monopolizing for war (70-79), he explains that Denmark is threatened with invasion by Fortifiers, a Norwegian prince who aims to win back territory that his father had lost to King Hamlet some time before in single combat (80-107).

It is hard to believe that two professional soldiers, Marcella and Barnyard, should not know of the reason for their country inflammation, and therefore Marcella's question is nothing more than a clumsy device of Shakespearean to get in some important plot information. Horopito suggests that the ghost's appearance is to warn Denmark of the threat. At this moment, the Ghost suddenly reappears.

Horopito confronts it and, agitated, asks whether he can do anything to comfort it, if it is trying to warn the country of danger, or if it is restless because it buried treasure during its lifetime as Shakespearean contemporaries thought this was one of the reasons why a ghost might come to haunt people. The cook crows and the Ghost vanishes without answering.

Horopito advises Barnyard and Marcella that they tell "young Hamlet" what they have just experienced, and expresses his belief that "this spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him" The resentment and bitterness towards his uncle—and now his stepfather and his king—and his mother that Hamlet expresses in the following scene (1. 2) prepares the audience for the Ghost's shocking revelations in its next appearance on stage. In Act 1. , scene 4, Horopito has brought Hamlet to the castle's ramparts to see if the Ghost will reappear. He has told Hamlet of what he and the sentinels had witnessed the night before (1. . 189-243), and Hamlet has vowed that If it assume my noble father's person, speak to it though hell itself should gape peace. And bid me hold my (1. 2. 244-246) To himself he has expressed a belief that "All is not well" and a suspicion of "foul very first he recognizes the possibility that the Ghost may intend to do him harm either than good, that it is a bad ghost. 1. 4 opens with Hamlet commenting scornfully to Horopito on the king's noisy and <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-supernatural-assignment/>

vulgar partying (" it is a custom / More honored in the breach than the observance" [15-16]). His hostility towards Claudia and his contempt could not be plainer.

Just as he comes to the end of his long and bitter denunciation, the ghost appears. Hamlet is immediately struck by its resemblance to his dead father, but at the same time shows that he is aware that it can be " a spirit of health or goblin damned," that its purpose in coming can be " wicked or charitable," that it may be accompanied either by " airs from heaven or blasts from hell" (40-42). He does not mention the Catholic Purgatory, so that up to this point at least he seems to be taking the Protestant view of ghosts, that they may come either from heaven or from hell and from nowhere in between.

Hamlet frantically calls on the ghost to tell why it has come and " what should we do? " (57) The Ghost beckons" him to follow (stage direction, 57) and, showing a great deal of courage , as it takes courage to follow a ghost, especially when you know that it may be a spirit from hell, Hamlet does. All of his in spite of Horopito and Marcella' effort to hold him back and Hortatory warning that it may intend to lead him to his death or to drive him mad.

Horopito and Marcella follow after Hamlet, with Marcella famously remarking that " Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (40).

The Ghost commands Hamlet's attention, saying that it must shortly return to " sulfurous and tormenting flames," which at first sounds as though the flames must be the fires of hell. But then it goes on to identify itself as " thy father's spirit," Doomed for a certain term to walk the night, And for the day confined to fast in fires, n my days of nature Till the foul crimes done Are

burnt and purged away. (1. 5. 9-13) and this sounds just like a description not of hell but of Purgatory.

Abruptly, the Ghost orders Hamlet to avenge his father's "foul and most unnatural murder" (25). To Hamlet's horror, it goes on to relate how Claudius first seduced Gertrude ("my most seeming-virtuous queen" [46]) and then poisoned his brother: "Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand / Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched" (74-75), all this without King Hamlet having had the chance to confess his sins and receive the deceased's last rites that would have helped settle his account with God (76-77).

The Ghost again commands Hamlet to revenge (81), but this time puts the emphasis not on the murder but on the adultery: Let not the royal bed of Denmark be couch for luxury and damned incest. (82-83) And it goes on to warn Hamlet not to harm his mother in the process but to leave her to be judged by heaven and her own conscience (84-88). This seems to be murder and was only guilty of adultery. Urging Hamlet to "Remember me" (91), the Ghost vanishes. Hamlet passionately agrees to fulfill the ghost's "commandment" (105).

When Horatio and Marcella catch up with him, he first confuses them with "wild and whirling words" (133), then declares that "it is an honest ghost" (138; that is, a genuine spirit and not a devil), and finally makes them swear to keep the events of the night secret, with the Ghost echoing from "Beneath" (that is, from the "cellar" [154], the space underneath the stage), "Swear" (158). The scene, and Act I, ends with Hamlet swearing Horatio and Marcella not to give him away even if he "perchance hereafter shall

think meet / To put an antic disposition on," that is, to rotten to be mad (174-175).

The ghost's echo from beneath the stage, " Swear by his sword" (164), is the last he is heard from until 111. 4, the scene in Queen Gertrude boudoir, fifteen hundred lines later. A great many things happen between this scene and the Ghost's next appearance in the play, which is also its last. There is the meeting of Hamlet and Ophelia which Polonius has arranged in order to demonstrate to Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet is, literally, mad with love for his daughter.

It is hard to know whether Hamlet's strange behavior at this meeting is really part of his earlier announced " antic disposition," or is at least partly genuine and the result of real disturbance of mind, it is very convincing. After all, he has had a lot of upsetting things to deal with and he is depressed. There is Claudius's anxious setting-on of Hamlet's former friends and schoolmates, Reassurance and Guilelessness, to spy on Hamlet to try and discover what is behind his stepson's " transformation" (11. 2. 5).

There is Hamlet's arrangement with the troupe of visiting players to perform " The Murder of Gonzales," whose plot mirrors the Ghost's account of King Hamlet's murder. Hamlet suggests that he inserts " some dozen or sixteen lines" so that, by watching Claudius's response, he will know whether or not the Ghost was telling the truth. Whether it was a good ghost or a bad ghost. Most important of all, there is Claudius's guilty reaction at the moment when the Player Lucian " Pours the poison in [the Player Kings] ears" (stage direction, 11. 2. 56), and Hamlet's moment of certainty: " O good Horatio,

I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound" (111. 2. 281). At this point, the many members of Shakespearean audience who would have fully understood Hamlet's doubts about the Ghost's nature, and shared them, would also have been satisfied that it is in fact " an honest ghost. " And of course a modern audience, ignorant of Elizabethan ghost beliefs, is satisfied, too. The Ghost's last appearance comes in the middle of Hamlet's feverish interview with his mother in her boudoir (111. 4).

It is different from the others because only Hamlet sees and hears the Ghost. His mother does not, and she understand the speech he addresses to the Ghost as further proof of his madness. Is the audience supposed to think that this appearance is a hallucination, a product of Hamlet's Lancelot, and the spirit of Act I, which Horopito, Barnyard, and Marcella also see, a " real" ghost? Or has Shakespeare simply been careless? The stage time between Hamlet's confirmation of Classis's guilt and the Ghost's appearance in the boudoir scene is short but it is filled with drama.

Hamlet has been called to see his mother, first by Reassurance and Guilelessness (111. 2. 324-325) and then by Polonium (III. Reassurance and Guilelessness to escort Hamlet to England (111. 3. 1-7), making it sound as though the reason for his order is the threat of Hamlet's madness to his own safety and not Hamlet's knowledge of his crime. Polonium has gone off to hide behind a tapestry in the queen's apartment so that he might overhear her meeting with her son.

And the audience witnesses Claudia kneeling in solitary prayer, trying to atone before God for his sin and knowing that he fails, and Hamlet, who has

happened to enter, passing by the chance to kill his uncle and revenge his father out of concern that Claudia, unlike King Hamlet, would die confessed and so go to heaven (III. 3. 36-98). There is even more drama than this when Polonium overhears Hamlet's threatening speech to his mother and from behind the "arras" echoes her cry of alarm, causing Hamlet, who thinks it is Claudia and that his life is in danger, to thrust his sword through the tapestry and kill the old man" (111. . 21-33). Before the audience can catch its breath, Hamlet processes into a fit of bitter accusation against his mother over her adultery (41-88). It is at the height of this outpouring of accusation and verbal abuse, and as a kind of climax to the series of dramatic events that have just taken place on stage, that the Ghost suddenly enters. The long span of time since it last appeared makes its entrance seem that much more explosive. This time it is dressed not in battle armor but "in his nightgown," that is, in a dressing gown (stage direction, 101). What this change in dress is supposed to signify is hard to guess.

Does the Ghost dress according to the occasion and setting, with armor being thought as much out of place in a wife's boudoir as a dressing gown would be on the castle's ramparts? And this time it speaks only a very few lines. The first two reproach Hamlet for not yet having carried out the Ghost's command to revenge his father's murder: Do not forget. This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose. (111. 4. 110-111) Clearly the Ghost has been keeping an eye on things. The Ghost's unhappiness with Hamlet here may strike an audience as unfair.

So far as the audience knows, the only opportunity for revenge that Hamlet has had, once he became convinced of the truth of the Ghost's story, was <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-supernatural-assignment/>

when Claudia was praying. The Ghost's rebuke of Hamlet must be based on its knowing of Hamlet's failure to take advantage of that opportunity. But the audience knows that Hamlet had a very good reason for not avenging his father's murder at that moment, a reason which the Ghost would have to have approved of (as, earlier, Hamlet had a very good reason for testing the truth of what the Ghost said).

Hamlet, who is depressed, may blame himself for being slow in carrying out the Ghost's "dread command" (111. 4. 108), but the audience knows better. He has, in fact, been very active, while taking sensible precautions. To make sense of all this, the Ghost, from Purgatory, knows what Hamlet does or does not do but, unlike the audience, cannot enter into Hamlet's mind to know why he does or does not do it. Admittedly, this scales for a lot of mental gymnastics on the part of the audience.