

Dorota J. Wiśniewska

**SUPERNATURAL AGENTS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND:  
THE GOTHIC MODE IN *HAMLET* AND *MACBETH***

Fear of insanity is a fundamental source of terror in Gothic literature. In the Gothic moral universe, madness is a fitting punishment for the guilty; but it is also the prior cause of evil as only a distorted mind can plan and put into effect the act of destruction. The benevolist conviction that man is basically good, and that evil is a perversion of God's Reason, contends here with the fear that it may be outside the individual's power to choose good over evil, and reason over madness. Yet what is the secret agent that manipulates human mind and will, that turns a man insane in order to make him evil? In Shakespeare's two tragedies it is the Supernatural. This term embraces the areas above or beyond the material realm and is the usual designation for the hierarchic planes, fantastic creatures and demonic forces which exist in cosmic and parallel dimensions and which rule and direct the character's existence.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the Ghost in *Hamlet* and the Witches in *Macbeth* are inevitably bound with another Gothic quality – madness.

Belief in the supernatural is a feature of all societies and although its meaning and significance may differ from one community to another there appears to be a certain consensus in the view that creatures and forces of the Supernatural have specific abilities to transcend both time and space, cross the divide between life and death, move between the invisible and the visible and travel freely within both the spiritual and the material. Most importantly, however, the Supernatural is a superior force, which can intervene in human affairs.

The Ghost in *Hamlet* fulfills all the demands of popular superstition. In the first place it comes in strange and creepy circumstances, at the dead of night: "Tis now struck twelve" (1.1.7). It appears dead in the garments

---

<sup>1</sup> David Punter, *The Romantic Unconscious: A Study in Narcissism and Patriarchy* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), p. 121–126.

worn in mortal life. Horatio describing it to Hamlet says, "A figure like your father, / Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pie" (1.2.199–200). Its appearance arouses terror of the sentries on the platform before the castle at Elsinore, not only due to the sinister surroundings, but mainly because its intentions are not yet revealed. In Shakespeare's times it was a common belief that these supernatural forces break into human life and the world of everyday in the form either miraculous or horrifying. Such forces range from the benevolence of angels and guiding spirit to the terrifying satanic entities. Ghosts were also thought to appear before a great crisis in human affairs, to give a warning, to reveal a hidden treasure, or to complete a personal affair: to revenge a foul deed and to exact justice.<sup>2</sup> In the *History of Magic and Occult*, Seligman presents yet another version of the ghosts' genesis. They did not find peace in their graves because they had committed evil, neglected to accomplish something important during their lifetime, or taken a secret with them to the grave. They return, but having been separated from life, they behave in unnatural and incomprehensible ways. They walk without moving their legs, they haunt the places which they used to like, unable to forget the delights of life which became unavailable to them. At times they seem completely insane, re-enacting their former deeds and frightening their beloved ones with their unearthly behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

After the first visit of the old Hamlet's specter, Horatio and the soldiers try to determine its cause, and agree that the threat of a war with Norway must be the explanation. Hamlet agrees to join the group on the platform. Coleridge has called attention to Shakespeare's extraordinary psychological knowledge in the writing of the dialogue of this scene. It is natural for men when facing a strange and terrifying ordeal to try to distract their anxious minds by remarking on the trivial and the familiar. Thus Hamlet and the soldiers speak of the weather and the hour of the night, observations which add dramatic importance to describing the Ghost's visit.<sup>4</sup> Again, in the uncanny conditions, in the "dead vast" when there is a "nipping and eager air," the terrible unearthly visitant glides through the darkness. Up to this point Hamlet was incredulous, but all his doubts vanish on the instant. When he addresses the spirit, which beckons him to follow it, Horatio tries to dissuade the willing Prince, for the ghosts were credited with the vile intention of enticing men to self-destruction: "What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord, / Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff

<sup>2</sup> *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/ Transgression*, ed. Kenneth Graham (New York: AMS Press, 1989), p. 123–128.

<sup>3</sup> Kurt Seligman, *The History of Magic and the Occult* (New York: Howmony Books, 1997), pp. 186–191.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas M. Raysor (London: J. M. Dent and Son, 1960), p. 274–275.

/ That beetles o'er his base into the sea," (1.4.68-71) (These are prophetic words indeed). Hamlet disregards his friend's plea and follows to hear the ghostly tale of his father's murder and his mother's infidelity. At this moment the true reason of the Ghost's arrival is revealed to Hamlet, as well as to the reader: to "revenge his (Claudius') foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25).

The ambiguities of the perception of the Ghost coincide with those of our perception of Hamlet himself. When we first see Hamlet (1.2) he is the melancholy, embittered outsider in a court that is, outwardly at least, harmonious, orderly and presided over by a dignified king. Hamlet's initial reaction to the Ghost's revelation of murder is passionate: "Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge" (1.5.30-32) but temporary. As the play progresses, he shows an awareness of the tension within him between emotion that wishes to efface memory, and reason that wishes to dwell on it:

Now, whether it be  
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on the event -  
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward - I do not know  
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, . . . (4.4.39-44).

He also shows his awareness of his lack of self-control in the speech before his confrontation with Laertes:

Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.  
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,  
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.  
Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,  
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;  
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy (5.2.222-228).

Hamlet's case has been argued in contradictory theories, seeing him either as a solitary hero in the midst of the corrupt court<sup>5</sup>, or perceiving him as a sick soul in the surrounding atmosphere of light, air, and warm humanity.<sup>6</sup> Dover Wilson points out the obsessive excitability of Hamlet, as in each of the scenes when scolding one of the ladies he comes back twice onto the stage, each time more unreasonable, as if he could not make

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. West, *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), p. 56-68.

<sup>6</sup> George Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretation of Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 25.

himself stop.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile psychologists have elaborated the view that he is a standard manic-depressive type, in whom long periods of sullen gloom, often with actual forgetfulness, are followed by short periods of exhausting excitement, usually with violence of language.<sup>8</sup> Hamlet's madness is revealed in his worst behaviour towards Ophelia. Though he has excuses for treating her badly – he punishes her savagely for taking part in the plot against him – he has practically forced her to behave like a passive observer, beginning with his melodramatic silent visit. The question arises here as to the extent of the power of the Supernatural over the minds of mortal men and women. Ophelia loses her wits when she is placed between the two masculine extremes of the extrovert father and the introvert lover, torn in opposite directions and quite incapable of any form of integration. Father and lover both contribute to her ultimate loss of identity. In her madness the disintegration of her personality takes its inevitable course: faced by divided loyalties that are irreconcilable, her consciousness is split into apparently meaningless fragments. Hamlet is essentially a passive figure called upon to take an active role in the accomplishment of revenge. Because the motive of the revenge is established early in the play, we are catapulted immediately into the central psychological conflict between reason and passion, which results in Hamlet's decentered self, and his mental fragmentation. He cannot be either "the sweet prince" or the "arrant knave": he must be both; but his nobility remains only latent, on the surface there is disaster and evil. (The presence of Hamlet's second self, his otherness, constitutes one more Gothic motif in Shakespeare's tragedy – that of the *doppelgänger*.) Shakespeare "prepares the soil for the seed" to be planted by the Ghost. Before Hamlet sees or even hears of his father's specter, he unburdens his soul in the soliloquy:

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,  
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,  
 Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!  
 How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable  
 Seem to me all the uses of this world! (1.2.137–142)

The Ghost would not have obtained the ear of Hamlet had the Prince not been depressed by the loss of his father, the hasty remarriage of his mother, his own exclusion from the throne, and the unworthiness of his

<sup>7</sup> John Dover Wilson, "The Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Problems of Its Transmissions;" an essay in critical bibliography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), p. 222–234.



uncle. We may presume that the Ghost has a convincing meaning only as a part of Hamlet's mind, and merely activates the insanity lurking in the Prince's tortured soul. The question of Hamlet being possessed by the Ghost arises when the Prince appears as a silent spectacle in Ophelia's closet, pale, sighing, as if "loosed out of hell" (2.1.80). Most importantly, however, it is his position of being acted on rather than acting that is commensurate with the impression of being possessed. This theory finds its justification at the end of Act Two when Hamlet tells himself that the Devil could be taking advantage of "my weakness and my melancholy" (2.2.597). Certainly, Horatio feared that the Ghost might tempt young Hamlet "toward the flood" or "to the dreadful summit of the cliff/ That beetles o'er his base into the sea." The sea is later coupled with madness when Gertrude describes her son as "Mad as the sea and the wind," and Rosencrantz, referring to Hamlet's soliloquy, speaks of the Prince's "sea of troubles." Thus we may presume that the Ghost indeed might "draw" Hamlet to "madness". Yet the Prince dies in ignorance of his own disease that, in fact, causes his death.

In *Hamlet* the Supernatural agent workes by connecting with the latent thought of the human being who is to carry out its purposes. So it is in *Macbeth*. Yet, while in *Hamlet* the Ghost had such a limited power that the goal of his mission was not, in fact, accomplished, the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* achieve their vile purpose in the ruin of a great and noble character. In their form the Supernatural enters into the Scottish tragedy; and the wholly evil designs of these half-earthly, half-supernatural beings control events and extend an ever-present and irresistible influence over the characters. Even when they are not visible, the audience remains acutely conscious of their presence. They seem to hover unseen in the background, producing the sense of gloom and terror, which permeates the tragedy. Coleridge in *Shakespearean Criticism* writes:

The exquisite judgment of Shakespeare is shown in nothing more than in the different language of the Witches with each other, and with those whom they address: the former displays a certain fierce familiarity and grotesqueness mingled with terror, the later is always solemn, dark and mysterious.

He continues: "They were awful beings, and blended in themselves the Fates and Furies of the ancients with the sorceresses of Gothic and popular superstition. They were mysterious natures: fatherless, motherless, sexless."<sup>9</sup> Their bisexual nature also puzzles Banquo and Macbeth:

<sup>9</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

What are these,  
 So withered and so wild in their attire,  
 That look not like th'inhabitants o'er the earth,  
 And yet are on't? – Live you, or are you aught  
 That man may question? You seem to understand me,  
 By each at once her choppy finger laying  
 Upon her skinny lips; you should be woman,  
 And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
 That you are so (1.3.39–47).

They appear in dark, dismal, and creepy circumstances. They are always accompanied by thunder, which from earliest times has sent a superstitious shudder through the minds of mortals. For their first meeting with Macbeth they choose a blasted heath overcast by fog. (The fog in which they appear later invades Macbeth's mind.) They can vanish as easily and suddenly as they appear – they fade away. Most importantly, however, divination and foretelling future events is the province of the Weird Sisters. The whole play turns upon their prophecies. The first, that Macbeth will be thane of Glaims, thane of Cawdor, and king, persuades the ambitious man to murder Duncan and seize the crown. The promise to Banquo that he will be father of a line of kings leads to his death at the hands of Macbeth and the return of his ghost to assist in the murderer's undoing. This concludes the first half of the tragedy. The second is prefaced by a new set of prophecies.

Wills points out that contemporary criticism questions the role of the Witches in converting a noble man into an unscrupulous murderer, as they merely symbolize inner struggle of Macbeth with himself. They are rather theatrical expressions of his conscience and happen inside. Therefore, the Witches and the Ghost alike are nothing but vivid symbols of the frontiers of the mind, and the Weird Sisters have no authority over the fatalistic power to do violence to the human will.<sup>10</sup> These opinions, which tend to perceive the Ghost and the Witches as some post-Freudian psychological depth, in fact are little concerned with the Supernatural as the seventeenth century conceived it. King James, who was involved in a famous trial that took place in 1590, in which his cousin, the Earl of Bothwell, was denounced as a wizard, wrote in his *Daemnologie*: "Sorceresses can make men and women love or hate one another; they can raise storms, in the measure that God will permit it. They can render the man maniacal; they can dispatch spirits to haunt men and houses; they can cause people to be possessed. The witch's evil is inflicted upon sinners as a punishment, upon godly people who are guilty of a great sin or exhibit weakness in

<sup>10</sup> Garry Wills, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 43–44.

faith, and also upon the best, in order to try their patience."<sup>11</sup> And so the temptation, evoked by the Witches, does not mean to leave alone Macbeth, the noblest of men. Through his wife he has strong and legitimate claims to the crown. Duncan himself is a usurper; and when the King appoints his son Malcolm as his heir, Evil winds another tentacle round the thane. Macbeth finds temptations assail him through his wife's incitements. Although Lady Macbeth is an instrument of further pressure to bear on Macbeth, we realize all the time that the wielders of this instrument are the unseen Sisters. Lady Macbeth shares with her husband the fault of ambition, but when temptation comes to her she, unlike her spouse, makes no attempt at resistance, but is impatient to "snatch the promised fruit." Macbeth is not conquered without a struggle. He attempts to delay matters: "We will speak further" (1.5.72). When Lady Macbeth urges him to the breaking point, he makes a last desperate effort to resist the devil: "We will proceed no further in this business" (1.7.31).

Eventually, Lady Macbeth wins him to the foul deed and succeeds because Macbeth wants to be king and believes he must move Duncan out of his way. Lady Macbeth takes the role of the Weird Sisters; now she is the temptress. She is also equated with the Witches in more specific ways. As Mark Rose points out "the first scene opens with the Witches alone, after which Macbeth enters and they hail him by his various titles. The fifth scene opens with Lady Macbeth alone, practising witchcraft . . . And when Macbeth enters she, too, hails him by his titles."<sup>12</sup> She increasingly resembles the Witches on the heath. The most horrid deed and her unfulfilled womanhood eventually usher her transformation into the female-male grotesque which parallels the bisexual nature of the Sisters, revealed in the opening scene. Also her invocation of the "murd'ring ministers" (1.5.45) as her children has particular resonance within the context of witchcraft. Her changing function is marked by her psychological change as well. After Duncan's murder, while Macbeth is painfully aware of the significance of what they have done, she seems to be unmoved by this horrific act. Her behaviour does not become disorganized, as his does, because she proves able to defend herself, at least for a time, by denial, which saves her from recognizing the significance of their deed: "A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight" (2.2.21). Yet, what she says contains warning that her "defence" might break down: "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so it will make us mad" (2.2.33-34). Yet Lady Macbeth's mind, which seemed to be untouched by the violent experience, eventually surrenders to the villainy of the deed they have committed. Feelings are not easily disposed of, and she too

<sup>11</sup> James I of England, "Daemnologie in Form of a Dialogue", in: *The History of Magic and the Occult*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Kurt Seligmann (New York: Harmony Books, 1983), p. 412.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Rose, *Shakespearean Design* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 113-114.

sees the horror and suspicion evoked in others. The "thick-coming fancies / That keep her from her rest" (5.3.38–39), as we see her in her sleep-walking scene, recapitulate the horrifying experiences she has been through. Her continual washing of her hands is in sharp contrast to her easy assertion after the murder of Duncan that "a little water cleans us of this deed" (2.2.67). Her guilt and remorse are expressed in half-conscious speech and unclear metaphors. Her mental crisis results in tragedy: "She dies by self and violent hands" (5.8.71).

While her serious breakdown progresses, Macbeth's fear and mistrust are also a part of encroaching disorder. Immediately after the murder Macbeth becomes highly sensitive to noise, which reflects not only his general alertness, but also some disturbance in his behavior. This is indicated by his ineptness in bringing the daggers from the "site of crime." He, too, becomes preoccupied with the bloodiness of his hands, which cannot be washed clean by "all great Neptune's ocean." His world is falling apart – "the frame of things disjoint." His hope of restoring security recedes: "We will eat our meal in fear," and will be afflicted by "terrible dreams," he says to his wife (3.2.16–18). The hallucination of Banquo in the banquet scene, where the usurper and his queen are entertaining the Scottish nobles in the castle at Forres, reflects the growing disorder in Macbeth's thoughts and feelings. That he hallucinates is no doubt; no one sees the specter but Macbeth. The ghost is "the very painting of his fear" (3.4.61). (He had a similar experience earlier when he believed he saw a dagger floating in the air before his eyes.) In his horror at seeing the Ghost, he accepts him as real, but then dismisses him as "horrible shadow! Unreal mock'ry."

Freud finds it "impossible to guess" how in a short space of time "the hesitating, ambitious man" can turn into "an unbridled tyrant, and his steely-hearted instigator into a sick woman gnawed by remorse."<sup>13</sup> The theory which emerged together with the Gothic revival, almost two centuries after Shakespeare had published his tragedies, seems well suited to explain this dilemma. Though perhaps it was Shakespeare's unconscious literary operation, he made his characters inhabit the most sinister Gothic castles in the gloomiest part of the world. In the light of Romantic theory, the dwellings add to yet another Gothic dimension of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Gothic fiction is characteristically obsessed with old buildings as sites of human decay. The Gothic castle is not only an old sinister building; it is a house of degeneration, even of decomposition; its living-space darkening and contracting into the dying-space of the mortuary and the tomb.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 109–122.



Doubling as both fictional setting and as a dominant symbol, the castle reverberates with associations which are simultaneously psychological. As a manifestation of folk-psychology, this Gothic dwelling place is also readily legible to our post-Freudian culture, so that we can recognize in its structures the crypts and cellars of repressed desire, and the attics and belfries of neurosis . . . Though such explanation is possible it seems that the Supernatural, both for Shakespeare's contemporaries and for the post-Freudian readers, remains the ultimate answer; the Witches are particularly effective in disorganizing Macbeth's and his wife's minds. It is during Macbeth's first encounter of the Weird Sisters when they not only prophesy his fate, but determine his character and mind. The course pursued by the supernatural agents in persuading mortals to act according to their evil will is depicted in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the two tragedies of Shakespeare's great but gloomy period, when the Unseen assumed for him so terrible an aspect. (It seems that Shakespeare's attitude towards the Supernatural coincides with his general view of human existence, when two traumatic events occurred in his life – the death of his father and son.<sup>14</sup>) But, while the Ghost in *Hamlet* intervenes to revenge a great wrong and fails in his mission (for the Prince hesitates, doubts and finally is moved to kill the murderer at the same time annihilating the innocent participants of the tragedy), in *Macbeth* the Weird Sisters succeed though they are directed by motiveless desire to win and destroy. Yet unlike the Ghost who had "perfect conditions and circumstances" to possess Hamlet, the Witches would not have had hold upon Macbeth if they had not played upon his secret ambitions. The Supernatural in *Hamlet* reveals the past and is corroborated; in *Macbeth* it reveals the future and its prophecies are fulfilled. Finally, Hamlet's "intrinsic" feeble mind develops into insanity, and his disease results in tragedy; in the Scottish tragedy the characters' madness is the consequence of their most horrid crime.

Various as the results of the Supernatural agents' manipulations might be, both in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* they serve as the activators of the most hideous and repulsive corners of human mind in order to make people commit the most appalling deeds. The unquestionable role of the Supernatural not only reveals the outstanding potential of Shakespeare's imagination, his knowledge of the readers' expectations but, most importantly, proves that the fascination with psychological aspects of human nature had existed long before Dr. Freud brought it to relief.

---

<sup>14</sup> S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1987).