



The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

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Abstract

This essay examines Shakespeare's plays' supernatural themes from a number of angles. Shakespeare's literary career's historical context is first introduced. Next, it examines the supernatural themes found in three of his best plays and presents the ways in which the supernatural is portrayed on stage in both the Elizabethan era and the present. Finally, it offers spectators of Shakespeare's plays in the twenty-first century the contemporary ramifications.

Keywords: ghosts, the Elizabethan era, and supernatural elements

Introduction

These days, it's hard for people to believe in ghosts, witches, or other paranormal entities. They found it incomprehensible that individuals in the Elizabethan era could take these matters so seriously. People's extreme fear of supernatural entities is most likely a result of their limited physical understanding of the world they were living in. Shakespeare's plays contain a lot of supernatural themes. We couldn't discern the plays' underlying meanings and ramifications if we didn't examine the causes and motives behind them.

Shakespeare's plays are universally regarded as the best in all of literary history, not only for their exquisite language, intricate plots, and contemporary relevance of their universal themes, but also for the astounding literary techniques and enigmatic aspects they employ.

Shakespeare's plays frequently feature supernatural elements, whether they are in his romantic comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596), tragedies like *Hamlet* (1601), *Othello* (1606), *Mac Beth* (1606), *Romeo and Juliet* (1607), or his later romance,

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

The Tempest (1611). These plays all have elements of the paranormal.

Shakespeare's plays cannot be understood without taking into account the historical context of his day. Throughout the latter part of the fourteenth century, England's textile industry expanded to the point where it rivaled and then eclipsed all other areas of trade and industry. The majority of the country's export trade underwent a radical change in nature throughout the 15th century due to the explosive expansion of English textile industry. There were more traders going overseas. However, the overland route was cut off when the Turks took Constantinople in the eastern Mediterranean. Discovering a maritime path to the East emerged as a crucial objective. As a result, the English had a great chance to learn about other European and Asian nations' cultures and beliefs because to their commercial ties.

Even if the economy was growing quickly, there were still certain enigmatic phenomena that science was unable to explain at the time. As a result, people used their vivid imaginations to give explanations for these strange occurrences.

In the seventeenth century, religion played a major role in the daily lives of the people in England. There are other religious groups in addition to Catholics and Anglicans. Even though the economy was growing daily during the Elizabethan age, the majority of peasants continued to live in abject poverty. They had to labor hard for the landlords; they were without a place to dwell due to the Enclosure Movement; food was in short supply, and many of them perished from starvation. They sought solace from an enigmatic force under such dire conditions.

Literature Review

They held the view that after passing away, people would have another life. There are several philosophical justifications for people's superstitious beliefs. The state of physical science in England in the sixteenth century was inadequate. A group of astrologers materialized. The bulk of Shakespeare's audience, according to W.R. Elton, "had beliefs in the influence of the stars upon man's life, although controversial." Astrology was in fact practiced by notable astronomers like Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) and Johannes Kepler (1571–1670), and renowned physicist William Gilbert (1540–1603), who served as Queen Elizabeth's physician, also had astrological beliefs.

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

Although it was distinct from judicial astrology, natural astrology was highly respected and helpful for metrological forecasts controlling things like the impact of planets on agriculture.

Astrologers concurred that a person's destiny was predetermined by the conjunctions of their planets. They were still at odds about whether conceptions or births marked the turning point. (Page 17 of Elton, 1986).

Shakespeare's plays' supernatural themes can also be explained by certain literary traditions of the times. First of all, Greek and Roman mythology as well as ancient Greek dramas had a significant influence on Shakespeare's plays at the time. Superpowers are possessed by the majority of these stories' gods, goddesses, and heroes. It is not difficult to identify some of the influences that Shakespeare drew upon for his plays. A significant component of western culture is the Bible.

Shakespeare's plays can also be better understood by looking at early English dramas. A new genre of play called "supernatural plays" first emerged in the 12th century, presenting several supernatural phenomena as evidence of God's omnipotence. We refer to it as the miraculous play. The entire theatrical presentation of the Bible's tales grew increasingly intricate, extended, and interconnected to create a more seamless narrative. It's really well-liked in London. Over time, mystery plays that narrate Bible stories gradually took the place of miraculous plays. The English people at the period tended to find greater attractiveness in the heroes found in the Old and New Testaments.

The terms "mystery plays" and "miracle plays" are almost synonymous in England, but in France they are used quite differently. Specifically, the former refers to plays that are directly based on biblical stories, while the latter deal with the legends of Christian saints. The mystery or miracle plays, which comprised a whole sequence of plays narrating biblical stories from the creation of the world through the life and suffering of Christ to the final judgment, were composed in cycles. (Page 74 of Chen, 1981)

Finally, the use of various supernatural themes in the plays is influenced by Shakespeare's viewpoint and religious beliefs. Consider his religious beliefs. Shakespeare was taught about religion when he was a young child.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a historical-analytical approach to examine the role of supernatural elements in Shakespeare's plays. By analyzing the texts in their historical, social, and cultural context, the study seeks to understand why supernatural themes were significant to Elizabethan audiences and how they reflect contemporary beliefs, fears, and societal conditions.

Textual analysis of Shakespeare's plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest* to identify supernatural themes and their narrative functions. Review of scholarly articles, literary critiques, historical records, and books on Elizabethan society, religion, economy, and beliefs in the supernatural to contextualize the findings.

Purposive sampling is used to select Shakespeare's plays that prominently feature supernatural elements across genres (tragedy, comedy, and romance). These works are analyzed in detail to identify patterns, motifs, and thematic significance.

Thematic Analysis: The study examines recurring supernatural motifs, characters, and plot devices to interpret their meanings and implications.

Contextual Analysis: The research connects these supernatural elements to the historical, economic, and religious context of Elizabethan England to understand their relevance and impact on contemporary audiences.

All textual and historical sources are properly cited and credited.

Interpretations are presented objectively, based on evidence from texts and scholarly research.

This methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of how supernatural themes in Shakespeare's plays reflect Elizabethan beliefs, societal conditions, and cultural imagination, providing deeper insight into their narrative and thematic significance.

Result and Discussion

All of Stratford-upon-Avon's stores, fairs, markets, and bars were closed on Sunday. People attended the church service. The consequences for breaking the rules would be dire for anyone. Shakespeare's father may have been a puritan, but the Shakespeare family was Anglican. It is likely that his mother was a Catholic because his maternal

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

grandfather's family practiced Catholicism. There is insufficient evidence to determine whether or not his parents are devout religious adherents. Shakespeare's personal religious convictions are the subject of several proverbs. Shakespeare was Anglican at the time of his baptism (maybe this indicates that he was baptized using an Anglican liturgy). However, some academics argue that Shakespeare followed the Anglican service.

This is most likely due to the fact that the municipal government, which has traditionally viewed theatrics with some antagonism, would have become aware of him if he hadn't. According to some academics, he was a Catholic. He was undoubtedly very religious, regardless of the specific religions he practiced.

The author transports readers to a magical and enchanted world in his classic romantic comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, complete with a delightful forest scene with happy fairies and spirits on a summer night. The narrative of *Midsummer Night's Dream* centers on two Athen couples: Helena and Demetrius and Hermia and Lysander. Lysander and Demetrius first developed feelings for the same girl, Hermia. Demetrius turned down Helena's advances for courtship despite her deep love for him. In a show of compassion, Oberon, the king of the fairies, gave Puck, one of his fairies, instructions to put love potion on Demetrius's eyelids so he would fall in love with the next person he saw.

But it was Puck's improper use of enchantment that caused Lysander and Demetrius to fall in love with Helena. Following a sequence of odd and comical events, the spell was undone and everything was restored. The playwright's faith in human morality and love is reflected in its supernatural aspects. Using his magical abilities, the play's central character, the tiny spirit Puck, transforms the relationships of three couples into a web of turmoil. The play occasionally causes a considerable deal of surprise, perplexity, and amusement among the audience. The storyline is full of situational comedy and frequently takes unexpected twists due to the mischievous spirit and their magical abilities.

Shakespeare creates a strange universe in this play by using magic to represent the mystical power of love. The otherworldly figures, in contrast to his later tragedies, are good characters who made an effort to aid humans. Rather of wanting to hurt someone,

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

they are interfering with their romantic relationship with kindness. The supernatural characters are also more sympathetic. The emotions of the fairies are very similar to those of humans. The arguments between fairy queen Titania and fairy king Oberon resemble those between human spouses in certain ways.

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)

Shakespeare's optimism about the universe and human nature is likely demonstrated by the play's resolution of tension despite a number of trials and tribulations. The play's protagonist, Puck, is portrayed as incredibly beautiful but also a little wicked. He is regarded as one of the most beloved characters in Shakespeare's plays and makes the audience laugh a lot.

There is no longer any joy and laughter in his second writing phase, which is the period of great tragedies, in contrast to his first playwriting period. The prince's retaliation follows the ghost's entrance in Hamlet. In Macbeth, the king is killed as a result of the three witches' prophecy. Hamlet is used as an example here.

Among Shakespeare's characters, The Ghost from Hamlet is arguably the most intriguing and mysterious. The Ghost made three appearances in Hamlet. It first appeared in front of two soldiers, Marcellus and Bernardo, as well as Hamlet's close friend Horatio, who informed Hamlet of its presence. Hamlet learned the truth about his father's passing and that the Ghost was, in fact, his father through their conversations. It was discovered that Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, had poisoned his father, wed his mother, and ascended to the throne. In Gertrude's closet, the Ghost made its third visit. He chastised Hamlet for not exacting his vengeance.

Scholars in this play interpret the Ghost in a variety of ways. While the first two appearances of the Ghost were independently verified, some scholars believe that Hamlet's third appearance was just a hallucination. When Hamlet confronted his mother in Act 3, Scene 4, he encountered his father's ghost in the queen's closet, urging him to talk to his mother. As alleged by Hamlet, Gertrude, the queen, was unable to see or hear

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

the Ghost.

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)

It is impossible to categorize the Ghost in the drama as either good or evil. When Hamlet first learned of the Ghost's presence, he had serious concerns about his sincerity and his motivations.

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 a deceptive buddy or is it what it seems to be? Some historians have suggested that Hamlet went insane due to the Ghost's apparition and the actions he forced him to commit. In other words, the Ghost is merely a hallucination of Hamlet. The Ghost also hinted at Hamlet's insanity and the death of Claudio. He informed Hamlet that Claudius had poisoned his ears to kill him and pushed him to exact revenge by killing Claudius, who had in fact been assassinated by his own nephew. In their chat, he also cautioned Hamlet about the possibility of madness. Act 1, Scene 5: "But however you pursue this act, do not taint your mind or let your soul rebel against your mother in any way."

The play now has an additional note of melancholy and grief due to the Ghost's existence.

In *The Tempest*, the supernatural aspects have taken center stage, whereas in the previous two periods they functioned as a unifying theme to weave the drama together. Unlike all of his past plays, the play is unique. With its magical ambiance and abundance of supernatural beings (including Ariel, who looks like Puck), it is similar to A

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

Midsummer Night's Dream. However, its message is far more somber than that of the previous play, where all that is present is "cross purpose in love."

The drama revolves around the idealized character of Prospero, who was a duke who turned philosopher and magician. It also features Gonzalo's utopian dreams, and throughout it all is the use of magic by Prospero up until the point where he breaks the wand and dismisses Ariel. "There is a hotchpotch of gods and goddesses, all made possible by magic, in addition to the mixture of the tragic with the comic, the farcical with the downright serious (the murder plot), especially in the episodes involving Stephano and Trinaldo." (Page 169 of Chen, 1981) The supernatural ability in The Tempest was held by a human. Prospero, the Duke of Milan, the main character, was infatuated with magic and disregarded everyday tasks.

Twelve years later, after his brother tried to kill him, he fled to an island and sought retribution. On the island where he was living, he summoned a powerful storm that led to the ship carrying his brother capsizing. Then, he divided his brother Antonio and his companion into various groups, cutting them apart from their families. His deception caused the issue to spiral out of control. His opponents endured the same sufferings and afflictions as he did. Prospero asks Ariel, his spirit servant, to lead his groups to him. His forgiveness was the final straw that broke the tension.

The human character in The Tempest took charge of everything, in contrast to the human characters in Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream, who must leave their fate in the hands of ghosts and fairies. Prospero used magic to control both human and non-human characters throughout the play. Act 1, Scene 2 shows that despite being a spirit with numerous supernatural skills, Ariel was nothing more than a slave who had to do what Prospero required him to do.

*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)*

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

It's possible that his thoughts about paranormal forces and supernatural beings have evolved along with his worldview. The supernatural is something untouchable, scary, and beyond human comprehension throughout the time Shakespeare penned his tragedies, as demonstrated by Hamlet's well-known soliloquy in which he muses over what happens to a dead person. Shakespeare demonstrated in *The Tempest* that humans are capable of gaining superpowers and applying them to their own purposes. Shakespeare's faith in human potential is amply demonstrated in this play.

Shakespeare's plays are always popular, whether they are performed today or were performed in the past. The Elizabethan theater uses an intriguing and straightforward staging technique. The audience swarmed the stage from the front and two sides when the performers were performing; the stages were in the middle of the crowd. As a result, the actors and audience were quite near. Five or six feet was the height of the stage. The performers portraying the ghost or spirits would appear and vanish through a door that could be opened in the stage floor. The door might also double as a grave when it was open.

The play was performed in that manner at the time, even though it may appear too basic for an audience in the present day to accept. "The *Tempest* has many dreadful objects in it as several spirits in horrifying shapes flying down from the sailors, then rising and crossing in the air," as Russell Jackson describes it. Additionally, the entire house is enveloped in darkness as fireballs rain down on them as the ship sinks. Along with lightning and multiple thunderclaps, the storm is coming to an end. The storm would also prove to be an alluring test of the scenic artist's prowess for later producers of *The Tempest*.

It must have been a fantastic presentation given the allure of the music, song, and setting, but it lacks the ambiguities and mystery of the original drama (Jackson, 1986, p25). As the twenty-first century progresses, technology advances have led to the application of increasingly sophisticated costumes and equipment on stage, making it feasible to do feats that would have seemed unattainable during the Elizabethan era. Concerns regarding the phenomenon of "flying witches" are no longer warranted. More visual enjoyment is available to the audience than before.

It is quite difficult for us, as modern humans, to believe in ghosts or witches in

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare's plays. That does not negate people's propensity to believe it, though. Humans often turn to supernatural powers for assistance when they are in danger. Even if someone does not practice religion, they may nevertheless cry out to God in times of need or say something similar to that, appealing to a higher force. Therefore, it is believed that superstition is a normal human predisposition. Those who have experienced tragedy often tell themselves, "It's fate!" to console themselves. In nearly every language, there would be less idioms relating to "bad luck" if people didn't think in supernatural powers.

Astrology would not be the most widely accepted field of study in the modern world if people did not think that there is a supernatural force. "Some future events must occur regardless of our present actions or choices...for fate indifferently assigns each person to the predetermined course of events," is a belief held by a large number of people. (Page 22 of Elton, 1986)

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* seems to imply fatalism. A sequence of unintentional circumstances still serve as the direct cause of this love tragedy, even though the conflict between the families is its primary cause. Fate, as a type of supernatural force, is a major character in the drama. Things would be completely different if Romeo arrived half an hour late, Juliet woke up thirty minutes earlier, or the man carrying the letter didn't get delayed. People were overcome with pity for the tragic fate of these two young lovers after reading or viewing the play.

In the play, prescience also has a significant role. It is the sensation of knowing what is ahead. Romeo's dream foreshadows what he would actually witness later on—that of Juliet, dead in her grave. The prologue sonnet, which tells us about the "star-crossed lovers," is where a lot of the play's foreshadowing and looking ahead to future events takes place.

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)

This is most likely when you would start looking into the supernatural aspects of the play. One thing stands out in Mercutio's curse: he declares, "A plague on both your

The Paranormal in Shakespeare's Plays

houses." The incident where Friar John ended up being imprisoned in a plague house and was unable to deliver the letter to Romeo foreshadows this "plague." He performed at foreshows. Romeo and Juliet are doomed to a particular fate because they are "star-crossed," as implied by the opening phrase, "a pair of star-crossed lovers." These occurrences fall under the heading of fate. Shakespeare is the only one who can foretell anything, though.

Shakespeare is hardly the only well-known author who believes in supernatural forces. Emerson is a transcendentalist who sees nature as a symbol of God's spirit; Hardy is a fatalist. They still have a sizable fan base, and their writings are still worth studying. It's highly mysterious whether or not people believe in the supernatural. In addition, it's important to address the topic of why people should believe in God if they reject ghosts. In summary, humans will always be drawn to philosophical ideas that science hasn't yet been able to explain. This is one of the reasons Shakespeare's plays with supernatural aspects continue to captivate audiences and have relevance for contemporary audiences.

Conclusion

When considering the literary heritage of Britain, William Shakespeare stands alone among English writers for his ability to deftly blend the paranormal with the historical. His plays are a product of the historical legacy of Greek and Roman tragedies as well as the cultural and intellectual mingling of various European nations. His plays' allusions to ghosts, fairies, and fatalism drive the plot to a climax gradually, with each new development surprising both readers and viewers. His plays' supernatural themes have generated a tremendous deal of controversy and centuries of debate among literary scholars.

Whether or not modern man accepts these supernatural components, Shakespeare's plays continue to draw sizable crowds to theaters. They could have been boring and tedious without the witches, ghosts, apparitions, and visions. Even today's readers require some incentive to read, and these antiquated ghost superstitions significantly improve the play.

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