

Witches' Brew and Fairy Dreams: A Genre Study of Shakespeare's Use of the Supernatural
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Near the end of the opening scene of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's three Weird Sisters proclaim in unison that "fair is foul, and foul is fair," providing us, as readers, with perhaps the best understanding of the play's theme and the tragic downfall of its central character. That this revelation -- this pronouncement that all is not well in Scotland -- comes from a supernatural or otherworldly source is very telling and gives us, I believe, ample cause to further explore the function of the supernatural within the drama. A genuine understanding of Shakespeare's reliance on the spirit world, however, cannot be reached without examining the supernatural's role in a more comedic work as well, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There, it is also put to considerable use, but with far different results. By contrasting these results with those achieved in *Macbeth*, I hope to attain a better awareness of the mythical, ghostly, and preternatural in Shakespearean works.

As critic Cumberland Clark writes, "*Macbeth* is the Shakespearean play into which the Supernatural enters most largely." From the opening lines, where the three witches are announced with a boom of thunder and flash of lightning, the play seems completely infused with the supernatural, almost drowned in its influence. "Even when the witches are not visible," writes Clark, "the audience remains acutely conscious of their presence. They seem to hover unseen in the background, producing that sense of gloom and terror which permeates the tragedy."

Given that the three have promised to do just that -- to "hover through the fog and filthy air" -- and the fact that they reappear throughout much of the play as, most likely, a harbinger of doom and Macbeth's impending downfall, I find it difficult to discredit this view of the supernatural as a dominant element in the unfolding drama. The witches are as crucial to the play as the death of Duncan or Macbeth's tragic flaw of ambition.

Yet the supernatural can be found throughout Shakespeare's body of work -- early or late, tragedy or comedy. In the case of comedic work, the use of the otherworldly is perhaps most striking in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (although witchcraft and the mysterious are recurring motifs in other plays, like *The Comedy of Errors*). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the supernatural elements take part in the action and do, in fact, partly direct that of their mortal counterparts. Oberon, Titania, Puck and the whole realm of Fairies are no less supernatural than the apparitions that foretell Macbeth's ascension and later death, and they are no less important to the overall text. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also provides us with a remarkable contrast to *Macbeth*, as the former was (as Clark writes) Shakespeare's "first supernatural play," while the latter was written much later in the playwright's career. A comparison of the supernatural in both plays, then, is necessary in order to fully appreciate its use in either.

In *Macbeth*, the supernatural specters of the Weird Sisters perform a very specific function, and, as L.W. Rogers writes, "it is clearly impossible to call the occultism in *Macbeth* incidental." Rather, these supernatural elements set the somber tone of the play, and, in prophesying the full extent of Macbeth's tragedy, the witches serve as "the foundation and the culmination" of the play.

When one of the three sisters cries, "By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes" to announce the approach of Macbeth, we understand these words are meant as more than mere stage directions -- more than simply a means to introduce Macbeth's character into a particular scene. Macbeth truly *is* wicked, having murdered Duncan, the king, and taken his place -- having fulfilled the prophecy foreseen by the witches and stepped onto the path that, as the otherworldly Hecate proclaims, "shall draw him on to his confusion" or ruin.

The sisters, then, are a constant reminder to the audience of the darkness that consumes Macbeth, of the unholy acts that he has committed and the tragedy that he brings upon himself. When Hecate reminds the three that "security is mortals' chiefest enemy," we can (especially upon subsequent readings) view this as a foreshadowing of Macbeth's undoing, a sign of the true tragedy that is to follow. For while Macbeth may

indeed "spurn fate, scorn death, and bear his hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear," he cannot escape the consequences of the witches' prophecy.

While the supernatural is also put to substantial use in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, its effect on the play is remarkably different. There, rather than cast the action in somber shadows as in *Macbeth*, the otherworldly Fairies enhance the comedic nature of the text. They can be viewed, in fact, as comic plot devices, created not so much to comment on the action of the play as to move it along. They are active participants rather than passive observers, affecting the outcome rather than simply reminding us of its inevitability.

Another of the most striking differences between the supernatural entities in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from those found in *Macbeth* is also one of the most immediate. Whereas the first lines uttered in *Macbeth* are spoken by one of the Weird Sisters, the first heard in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are those of the undeniably mortal Theseus. "In the palace the human element is supreme," writes Helen Hinton Stewart, "human reasoning, human laws prevail; but the moment we enter the wood we feel that we are on enchanted ground -- the forest, for the time being, has become fairy-land."

Our first view of *Macbeth's* world is colored by the ominous visions of its three witches, visions that will come to haunt Macbeth as his actions fulfill prophecy. We do not enter the Fairies' realm, however, until the beginning of the second act, long after the human players have been established. By then, we have already met the young lovers -- Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius and Helena -- and the other mortals that will complete the tale, and we have been introduced to the basic dilemma or situation they must face. Oberon, Titania, Puck and the rest enter simply to complicate the plot and drive the story toward its happy ending. They provide what Clark calls "mischievous interference"; they are not observers or seers so much as catalysts for the plot -- fairies ex machina.

This role, then, while seemingly more direct and active, is ultimately less influential or pervasive than that of the supernatural in *Macbeth*. The Fairies participate in the action, have far more lines to speak, but their effect on the central characters is not lasting. While the bulk of the play *is* set in their enchanted, dream-like wood, these inhuman creatures do not "hover unseen in the background" or remind us continuously of their presence. They exist for the necessities of plot; they do not provide us with any real insight into the characters or their motives.

There are two very simple explanations for this noticeable difference. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that *Macbeth* is a tragedy and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy. As a general rule, comedies rely more heavily on plot or narrative structure, while drama tends to focus more on the intricacies of character. It is quite natural, then, for the supernatural in *Macbeth* to exist as a window into the characters and their impending tragedy, while the Fairies (as I have attempted to show) exist in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* more as a backdrop to the tale, a device to facilitate the plot.

The second explanation requires some knowledge of the beliefs in the supernatural held in Shakespeare's time. While fairies often found their way into Elizabethan works of literature -- most notably in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Ben Jonson's *Oberon, the Faery Prince* -- witchcraft held center stage in their fears of the supernatural. Suspected witches were, indeed, often put to death, and Shakespeare (as well as his audience) would have been well aware of this fact. Therefore, we should not be surprised that the supernatural elements in *Macbeth* are ultimately more threatening and seemingly real than those in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For as Clark writes, "Whereas Titania's fairies have little or no influence over mortals...the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* accomplish their vile purpose in the ruin of a great and noble character." Witchcraft was a far more serious theme in Elizabethan England than the unreality of the fairy realm, and the two plays thus reflect that difference.

A final revelation about the nature of the supernatural in these two Shakespearean works comes with Puck's final words -- words that do in fact close the final act of the play. "If we shadows have offended," he tells the audience, "think but this and all is mended, that you have but slumbered here while these visions did appear." The play makes ample use of the supernatural, but all of it, we are at length told, is no more

than a dream, a fantasy devised for our amusement and delight. *Macbeth*, however, is concerned with darker supernatural elements whose impression is far more lasting than a lovers' madcap chase through a woodland dream.