



The Elizabethan- Jacobean Shakespeare's and Webster's Supernatural Drama

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ABSTRACT:

The extraordinary interest of the Elizabethan –Jacobean mind with the supernatural world is the most remarkable features of this period which covers the reigns of Elizabeth and James I, especially during the last two decades of the sixteenth and roughly the first two of the seventeenth century. The supernatural phenomena became a fascinating theme to the philosophers, writers and especially the dramatists of this period who above all others handled the supernatural phenomena with their splendid imaginations using their delicate thoughts and suggestions to make supernatural moves deep in its emotional appeal and moral implications. The theme of supernatural makes its appearance in the works of the major dramatists and treated by them with powerful skills which have never been surpassed in the history of literature. Many Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies involves directly or indirectly with supernatural including ghosts and apparitions or even a psychological hallucinations and infernal spirits or demonic powers controlled by conjuration and magic or necromantic powers. Madness and demonical possession are the condition resulting when a specific character of the tragedy affected by a supernatural. William Shakespeare and John Webster are the most notable Elizabethan Jacobean dramatists that they witnessed the reign of both Elizabeth and James. They differently treated the theme of supernatural in their tragedies; while Shakespeare was preoccupied with the ideas of the Senecan ghosts which are culminated in most of his plays, there are not so many ghosts and apparitions in the tragedies of John Webster. He surprises his audience with violence and horror. The atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty explains his sense of incompleteness and uncertainty about what lies after death. The supernatural theme seems to be the distinctive trail of the Elizabethan Jacobean drama and one of the most important unifying elements in the amazing complexity of this period.

Keywords: (Elizabethan-Jacobean, supernatural, Shakespeare, Webster, psychology)

Introduction:

To examine the background of the supernatural theme in the Elizabethan and the Jacobean drama, the native and the foreign strains as well as the Christian and the pagan traditions become the most important evident. The religious drama of the middle ages is the direct forbear of the early Elizabethan drama. Consequently, medieval Christianity as formed in the miracles and the moralities gave the Elizabethan drama its supernatural forms of ghosts and visions, saints and martyrs taken the fairies and spirits from the Anglo-Saxon lore while devils and witches were the common property of the Christian and pagan lore. Another effected element of the supernatural foundation in the Elizabethan drama is the classical tradition of the tragedies of Seneca, whose plays were translated to English in Elizabeth's early years of reign and achieved a great popularity especially among the learned and courtly classes.

The Elizabethan dramatists' first concern is the conflict between the good and evil forces. They pictured this conflict within the individual human heart as inward and subjective rather than allegorized and provide us with an insight about their thoughts regarding the conflict. The Elizabethans accepted the atmosphere of the unnatural violence and horror in Seneca's plays and took to their bosom to his ghosts which developed into the most popular figure of the Elizabethan drama. E.M.W. Tillyard in his work *The Elizabethan World Picture* argues that:

The Elizabethans kept the main medieval beliefs about the angles, but omitted or confused many of the details. (p-36)

The *Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd is one of the most popular early Elizabethan plays that made a great advance on the classical tradition of the revenge ghost. The writer succeeds in individualizing and activating the passive Senecan revenge ghost tradition and links his ghost to the main action of the play to portray him as the most dramatic figure. He has furnished the path to his successors with right clue to follow and by the turn of the century, his ghost style was the most familiar figure of the Elizabethan tragedy.

The Supernatural in Shakespeare's plays:

The English theatre was extremely affected by the Senecan ghosts during the last three decades of the sixteenth century, *Richard III* is Shakespeare's earliest play which have revenge ghost. Holinshed's *Chronicle* and the anonymous *True Tragedie of Richard III* were the sources of his play. Geoffrey Bullough in his book "*Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*" explains the relevance between Shakespeare's play with his sources and quoted from the earlier plays:

When Richard confesses to one of the lords that he sees the ghosts of all whom he has slain "come gaping for revenge"(p-338)

When we compare these works with Shakespeare's play, we notes his indebtedness to them but modifies with his unique imagination, making Richard dreaming and all the ghosts come and address him while he speaks this lines:

*I have not that alacrity of spirit,
Nor cheer of mind, that I was wont to have. (5, 3, 73-74)*

When Shakespeare uses the supernatural powers, he prepares the audience with indications of his mind's frame and manages to show his emotional and psychological insight to differentiate his drama from that of his predecessors.

Julius Caesar is another play of revenge ghost and belongs to the same category of *Richard III* in its treatment of the supernatural. Again, Shakespeare follows his sources that he uses the same apparition which comes to Brutus in his tent at Philippi in the same manner of the earlier play. Despite the critics' viewpoint to dismiss the apparition as wholly subjective but a mind hallucination, Shakespeare insists to follow his source.

Brutus:

*I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
The shapes this monstrous apparition (4, 3, 275-276)*

Brutus' words doesn't mean that the apparition is not true but only shows that he tries to persuade himself that it is his own imaginary.

Later, Shakespeare learned how to make a more sophisticated use of the curses and invocations in his plays *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. He was content that his plays should say different things at the same time and all this differences with their interpretations will form his next plays. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare was able to create a very complex impression and made use of the supernatural agency. His conception of the witches offers him different interpretations; they are malignant creatures with supernatural powers and black magic to be able of rising spirits. Instruments of darkness, as Banquo termed them, who lure individual from the path of truth. In *Macbeth*, they represent the shadow of evil and the temptation of Macbeth's heart, his deep rooted crime and his fulfillment of ambition. Macbeth and his lady were ready to be seduced and they never lay the blame on the witches for their action. These nuances work into the text of the play and make it appeal to the emotional, psychological and intellectual levels of understanding. Shakespeare was interested in the dramatic possibilities of supernatural phenomena and had made use of supernatural elements at least in six of his plays *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. In Shakespeare's plays, the supernatural world is ranged between the subjective and the objective apparitions, presented in different degrees rather than one kind.

Webster's Use of Supernatural:

Unlike Shakespeare, Webster's tragedies haven't so many apparitions or ghosts except twice in his play *The White Devil*, but they are full of powerful suggestions which build up an atmosphere swings between the natural and the supernatural. This atmosphere is created by Webster to be one of his ways to achieve his ethics and reflect them in his drama. His plots are usually full of cruelties and horrors and there is something baleful and diseased in his world of the unnatural and elaborated technique of poisoning or murder. These aspects of Webster's plays show his moral vision and imaginations which shapes his works.

The White Devil is the earliest of Webster's great works and the most attractive to the audiences by its title which portrays a devil who disguised under a beautiful appearance. F. L. Lucas in his work *The Complete Works of John Webster* explains that: *It was a common expression in Webster's time as a contrasted with the openly wicked black Devils*(p-193). The Elizabethans were fascinated by the combination of the beauty and evil in the theme of reality and appearance to produce indescribable effects. At some points of the action, the natural world seems to be melted with more mysterious and give a supernatural complexity to the whole action. This is a very integral part of the design of such writer of highly seriousness and artistry as Webster.

The theme of madness is one of the most striking examples of Webster's evocative use of the supernatural. In *The Duchess of Malfi*. He uses this theme in two different contexts. The Duchess suffers her hell in her lifestyle describing her condition in terrible words.

*I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow.
Th' heaven ore my head, seems made of molten brasse.
The earth of flaming sulphure, yet I am not mad (4, 2, 26-28)*

Webster reveals a good judgment when he chooses nature and the supernatural quality manifestations and shows the characteristic of his skills in creating the atmosphere of horror and madness throughout the play.

Shakespeare's and Webster's plays: a comparison

There are a significant difference between Shakespeare's Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. His dramatic genres were history and comedy during the first era but he preferred tragedy during the second one. Shakespeare wrote most of his tragedies during the first five years of James I reign, actually more than all his other Elizabethan tragedies. Yet, he squirreled his use of supernatural with his developed viewpoint about the human psychology. The appearance of the supernatural is firmly connected to the psychological condition of his characters.

Shakespeare's Jacobean plays are significantly different from his Elizabethan's; the most legible difference is the change in the kinds of plays he wrote. Shakespeare's dramatic genres during the Elizabethan era were history and comedy, but during James reign, his concentration turned to the tragedy. He wrote more tragedies during a five years span (1604- 1608) than he wrote during his entire Elizabethan career.

In his work *Shakespeare and Psychoanalytic Theory* Carolyn E. Brown argues that:

It has been Shakespeare scholars who have played a major role in several of the theoretical and critical development that have shaped the discipline of English studies in recent years. (p-viii)

Webster's plays when compared with Shakespeare's, they do not have large quantity of associated language with strong negative emotion. Webster's proportion in different types of emotions is fairly similar. His reputation of surprising his audience with violence and horrorseems to come from the passionate action and desire of his characters, not their words and conversations. The power of his words is qualified by the juxtaposition the negative words suggesting the shutting of the positive emotions.

The atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty in Webster's plays explains the smaller proportion of bravery and clam emotions and fewer words relates to the content than in Shakespeare's. The lack of content in Webster's plays relates to the sense of incompleteness and uncertainty about what lies after death. In Shakespeare's drama, this is also present, but in a very different configuration, as Hamlet's fear of the "*undiscovered country from whose bourn. No traveler returns*" (3.1.78-79), which aroused with the Ghost appearance.

Conclusion:

Supernatural is seems to be a distinctive trait of the Elizabethan- Jacobean drama and appear as a unifying elements in the dramatic literature of this period in which the plays written have been admired by literary critics about the artful way of disguising civil disobedience tackled through many plays. English individuals and society were struggling with the questions of identity with the monarchy change from Elizabeth I to James I. The most important question then is how to manage the mass of the contemporary society ethically, while taking the consideration of individual.

Shakespeare and Webster represent two different turning points of the English drama during the most important era in the history of England, "the Elizabethan- Jacobean". Their treatment of the element of supernatural differs according to their different sociological and psychological viewpoints. While Shakespeare keeps using this element throughout the plots of his plays in multiple cases to express his heroes psychological development, Webster inducts horror and violence to express the effect of the political environment on individual behavior.

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