

Odsjek za anglistiku  
Filozofski fakultet  
Sveučilište u Zagrebu

## **The Fantastic in Shakespeare:**

### ***Hamlet and Macbeth***

(Smjer: Engleska književnost i kultura)

Kandidat: Petra Bušelić

Mentor: dr. sc. Iva Polak

Ak. godina: 2014./2015.

Listopad, 2015.

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## 1. Introduction

Shakespeare's plays have been analysed from such a vast variety of perspectives that hardly anything seems to be left to say. Not only have they set in motion the tireless machinery of literary interpretation, but it seems that any major literary theory has been subjected to the "Shakespeare test". However, this is not the case with the theory of the fantastic, which is why this paper will focus on this theoretical perspective.

The plays selected for analysis in this paper are Shakespeare's two tragedies prominently featuring supernatural or fantastic occurrences: *Hamlet* (1603) and *Macbeth* (1606). Although they have been studied from numerous perspectives, producing a discouragingly large body of competing interpretations, they have not been analyzed from the perspective of the theory of the fantastic. Thus the aim of this paper is to analyze *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* through the lens of Todorov's theory of the fantastic.

The basic methodology employed in the analysis is that of close reading. The analysis will focus on the scenes in which the Ghost of Old Hamlet appears in *Hamlet*, and on the Witches' scenes in *Macbeth*, as well as the scenes featuring the Ghost of Banquo and some other minor fantastic occurrences. Hopefully the new approach will provide a framework to all the competing responses to those supernatural occurrences, as well as shed additional light on the interpretation of those scenes within the plays as a whole, and trace the way in which Shakespeare used the supernatural for dramatic purposes.

## 2. Todorov's Theory of the Fantastic

It would be impossible to overestimate the importance of Shakespeare as touchstone and inspiration for the terror mode, even if we feel the offspring are unworthy of their parent. Scratch the surface of any Gothic fiction and the debt to Shakespeare will be there. To begin with there are the key scenes of supernatural terror that are plundered by Walpole and then by many other fiction writers: the banquet scene, the vision of the dagger, and the visit to the cave of the three witches in *Macbeth*; the phantasmagoria of the tent scene in *Richard III*; and above all, the ghost scenes from *Hamlet*. (Clery 30)

The fact that there has not been an attempt to analyse the supernatural in Shakespeare through the lens of the theory of fantastic or fantasy in its broadest sense probably has to do with a reluctance of relating Shakespeare to “fantasy”, it being perceived a “low-brow” genre literature, incommensurate with the canonical author. Attebery notes that “many readers would never think of including Shakespeare or Dante under the heading of fantasy” because they associate it with “a popular storytelling formula that is restricted in scope, recent in origin, and specialized in audience and appeal” (294). But Clery's words point out the indebtedness of the fantastic literature to Shakespeare, and reveal Shakespeare as the “touchstone for the terror mode”. The analysis in this paper requires an approach to fantastic literature that could be applied to a variety of texts, and equally accommodate both Shakespeare and 19<sup>th</sup>-century ghosts stories. It has to be a *structural* approach, and this is (contradictorily, as will be discussed later) provided by Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic as proposed in his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Todorov defines fantastic literature as a *genre* (19), a group of texts sharing the same structure; the fantastic is the “underlying grammar” behind the group of texts. According to Todorov,

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of the reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for the neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (25)

The important question here is who hesitates – the character or the reader? Todorov claims that “The fantastic implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated” (31). It is *the implicit reader’s hesitation* that is postulated by Todorov as the first condition of the fantastic (31).

His second condition is that the hesitation should be *represented within the text* – in other words, the character(s) also hesitate(s); however, this condition does not always have to be fulfilled, says Todorov (32). The third condition of the fantastic is that *the reader assumes a certain attitude towards the text*: a fantastic text must not be read as either *allegory* or *poetry* (32). As Todorov concludes, the first and third conditions constitute the genre of the fantastic (33). Thus the full definition of the fantastic as a genre is the following: “The fantastic is based essentially on the hesitation of the reader – a reader who identifies with the chief character – as to the nature of an uncanny event [...] requiring a certain type of reading” (157). To further elaborate his model, Todorov claims that,

The fantastic, we have seen, lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from “reality” as it exists in the common opinion. At the story’s end, the reader makes the decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous. (41)

Todorov also establishes the two transitory sub-genres, *fantastic-uncanny* and *fantastic-marvelous*, “works that sustain the hesitation characteristic of the true fantastic for a long period, but that ultimately end in the marvelous or in the uncanny” (44). The hesitation, however, does not necessarily have to be sustained “for a long period”: it can be resolved and later on questioned again, since the reader’s conclusions about the text are constantly revised in the course of reading. The fantastic-uncanny constitutes “the supernatural explained” by coincidence, the influence of drugs, tricks and prearranged apparitions, illusion of the senses, and madness (44-5). These “excuses” or explanation can be divided into two groups: in the first group, as Todorov says, “there has been no supernatural occurrence, for nothing at all has actually occurred: what we imagined we saw was only the fruit of a deranged imagination (dream, madness, the influence of drugs)” (45). In the second group, the events indeed occurred, “but they may be explained rationally (as coincidences, tricks, illusions)” (45).

Furthermore, whereas fantastic-uncanny provokes fear, fantastic-marvellous provokes wonder. Brooke-Rose further elaborates on this model:

If the supernatural eventually receives a natural explanation, we are in the Fantastic-Uncanny; if the events are not supernatural but strange, horrific, incredible, we are in the Uncanny (with the accent on the reader's fear, not on his hesitation). On the other side of the line, if the supernatural has to be eventually accepted as supernatural, we are in the Fantastic-Marvellous; if it is accepted as supernatural at once, we are in the Marvellous (with the accent on wonder). Presumably, then, on the left of the line, in the Fantastic-Uncanny, not only is the reader's hesitation resolved but his fear is purged; whereas on the right of the line, in the Fantastic-Marvellous, this fear is turned to wonder. (64)

The analysis will present how Shakespeare's two plays respond to the model, and whether texts themselves really do thematise the hesitation. However, to state this at the onset, Todorov's work would not allow such an attempt: although he sets out to establish an abstract, ahistorical model (hence the *structural* approach), by the end of the book he ends up in a historic definition, undercutting his own achievement: Brooke-Rose notes that, "Having postulated theoretical possibilities as a concept, in practice [he] relies wholly on historical genres to elaborate his own theory of the Fantastic" (62).

Todorov claims that the fantastic cannot simply be equated with supernatural, and all the works in which the supernatural appears: "We cannot conceive a genre which would regroup all works in which the supernatural intervenes and which would thereby have to accommodate Homer as well as Shakespeare, Cervantes as well as Goethe" (34). And this is the main point of departure of this paper from Todorov: his model will not be employed as a theory of the *genre*, but as a theory of *mode*. As Attebery asks, "Can any definition accommodate *Alice in Wonderland*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Golden Ass*, *The Odyssey*, and perhaps even *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy*?" (294), claiming that this breadth "belongs only to fantasy-as-mode", not "fantasy-as-formula", whereas "fantasy-as-genre" occupies a middle ground between the two (302). Attebery retains *fantasy* as a term designating the genre, and *fantastic* designating a mode (304), the terminology adopted in this paper. Todorov's draconian restriction of his theory to 19<sup>th</sup>-century prose narratives suggests that fantastic literature has neither predecessors nor continuators, as confirmed by Ziolkowski: "It is an oversimplification to suggest that the fantastic as a mode has no history" (127). Ziolkowski claims that Todorov "blurs the issue [of defining *fantasy* and *fantastic*] by calling the fantastic a literary *genre* and by subordinating his entire study to the confused and confusing chapter 'Literary Genres.' The problem turns out to be largely terminological. What

Todorov calls a theoretical genre, however, is better described as a ‘mode’” (124). In addition, as Ziolkowski goes on, “Todorov argues that ‘the fantastic has had a relatively brief life span’ – from the end of the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century (from Cazotte to Maupassant)”, but “is guilty here of confusing the mode with the genre“, because “the fantastic, being a mode, can manifest itself only in specific genres” throughout history (127). A similar stance is assumed by R. Jackson (1981), who also proposes a reconfiguring of Todorov’s “definition of the fantastic as a mode, which then assumes different generic forms” (35), but she places it between the opposite modes of the marvellous and the “mimetic”, i.e. “realistic” mode (32), leaving the “uncanny” in the domain of psychoanalysis. Jackson also believes that Todorov’s “fantasy as it emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is one of these [generic] forms” of the fantastic as a mode (35). Furthermore, unsatisfied with the “evanescence” of the fantastic as Todorov devised it, Brooke-Rose proposes that “the pure Fantastic is not so much an evanescent *genre* as an evanescent *element*” (63). Hume goes even further and defines fantasy inclusively, not as a genre or a mode, but as an impulse behind the creation of all literature, equally significant as mimesis (24), but to which we are “curiously blind” since “our traditional approaches to literature are based on mimetic assumptions” (3). Hume defines fantasy as “*any departure from consensus reality*” (21), and claims that every literary work is a characteristic blend of the fantastic and mimetic impulses. Moreover, in literary history it was in fact mimesis that enjoyed a relatively short life-span of popularity and predominance (in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism). Although Hume’s view of fantasy is compelling, it will not be adopted in this paper because it is too far removed from Todorov’s model, necessary for the analysis of the fantastic scenes in Shakespeare’s plays.

Taking all that has been said into consideration, this paper adopts a position in which the fantastic is a *mode* manifested in multiple genres, and the analysis will focus on how the fantastic mode is manifested in two Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Todorov’s theory approached as a model, as an interpretative instrument or strategy, is of far more applicable than he had perceived, as the results of this analysis will hopefully show.

In the application of Todorov’s model in this paper another problem arises considering the fact that it was devised for the analysis of prose narratives. Even Hume, who offers the broadest definition of fantasy, including virtually all forms of literature, notes that drama presents complex problems for fantasy since “mimetically representing the supernatural on stage is difficult” (163). However, the supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* does not require elaborate mise-en-scene, nor is this paper primarily concerned with the plays’ staging. Hume

notes that “insofar as a work has a story line, it can use any of the kinds of fantasy available to prose narration” (163). Therefore Todorov’s model in this paper will be modified for the analysis of dramatic works by dividing the narrator’s function into characters’ responses and stage directions. In other words, although a tragedy does not have the narrator to indicate the interpretation of the supernatural event, these clues will have to be extracted from dialogues and stage instructions.

Another point is to be made here: the age of Shakespeare’s plays makes critics prone to underestimate both the author and his original audience as rather “naive”, superstitious, and credulous. For example, Astle claims that “Historically speaking, prior to what we refer as to ‘Enlightenment’, there could be no such hesitation. The supernatural was accepted as a part of life. Witches and God co-existed with men and women, and a story could, in Todorov’s terms, be ‘marvelous’, but never ‘fantastic’” (168). It is a simplistic statement, homogenizing all the competing responses, but also religious doctrines of the Early Modern Period, as will be shown anon. As Hume points out, “Fantasy following the Enlightenment certainly is different from traditional fantasy in many respects, but [...] the impulse to depart from consensus reality is present for long as we have had literature. It merely relies on a different logic and a different scope of reality” (30). Astle’s attitude is reflected in 20<sup>th</sup>-century “allegorical” readings of Shakespeare (as will be discussed anon), or 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century “antighostism” (Bloom 161). But as Rabkin argues, the “source of the fantastic depends not at all on the reader’s perspective on the world, but rather on the reader’s willing participation in the text” (170); it depends on the willing suspension of disbelief as a prerequisite for approaching literature in general. Rabkin posits that every literary work sets its ground rules, its “decorum” which has to be observed, and the fantastic springs from contradicting the rules established by the text: “One of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspective enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted” (170). Therefore the analysis in this paper will first try to establish the ground rules of the two plays through close reading, in search of the clues the texts provide so as to mark the contradiction or breach of those rules. As Todorov argues, “The fantastic springs from not the supernatural event itself”, but represents “a certain *reaction* to the supernatural” (158, emphasis mine), and the analysis will therefore focus on the reactions – of the protagonist, other characters, and the reader, both early modern and contemporary. Since Shakespeare’s plays were written for stage, theatrical audience will be taken into consideration as well. In dealing with the early modern audience, historicising is necessary to an extent, but special caution will be required



so as not to historicise excessively and render the interpretation anachronistic (as is the case with Astle's reading mentioned above). The rest of the paper deals with applying Todorov's theory of the fantastic, modified as explained, on Shakespeare's two tragedies: *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

### 3. *Hamlet*

Except in *Hamlet*, the ghost characters appear in three other Shakespeare's plays: besides some passing references to the ghost-lore in *Henry VI*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, the ghosts have stage presence in Shakespeare's tragedies: in *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, and after *Hamlet*, in *Macbeth* (Moorman "Shakespeare's Ghosts" 192). In *Richard III* eleven ghosts appear on stage, but they appear in a dream and signal Richard's experience of guilt, which renders them uncanny. In other words, the ghosts are not real but are the result of a guilty conscience; they are "dream phantoms" (Greg 393). However, an alternative interpretation is possible: in a split or simultaneous staging of the scene (V.3), the ghosts are visible to two characters simultaneously (to Richard and his adversary Richmond), which produces a marvellous reading of the ghosts – i.e. the ghost are real – the interpretation advocated by E. E. Stoll (222). In *Julius Caesar*, the ghost of Julius Caesar appears to Brutus as he is reading in his tent, but "his drowsy brain wanders vaguely" (Greg 394) and, as Moorman believes, "there is much to show that Shakespeare permits us to regard this ghostly visitation as the hallucination of an overwrought mind" ("Shakespeare's Ghosts" 194), i.e. as belonging to the uncanny. Greg draws the same conclusion: "Clearly, he [Brutus] is merely awaking from a bad dream" (395). But E. E. Stoll disagrees, claiming that the ghosts of both *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar* are real, representing "the murdered appearing to the murderer" (229). This dilemma on the reality of the ghosts is raised on a much larger scale in *Hamlet*, where the text itself underscores the doubt, as will be presented here.

Finally, as Moorman claims, although Shakespeare borrowed the ghosts from his sources (except the Ghost of Banquo in *Macbeth*) and the Senecan<sup>1</sup> tradition, "they depart from Seneca's manner in making absolutely no reference to the under-world of classic mythology" ("Shakespeare's Ghosts" 193). Instead, the ghosts' classical origin is substituted

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<sup>1</sup> The link between Seneca and Elizabethan playwrights is traced by Moorman in his study "The Pre-Shakespearean Ghost" (85-95).

for a superstition drawn from native ghost-lore (Moorman “Shakespeare’s Ghosts” 193). Furthermore, as Moorman claims, “The Shakespearean ghost is at once the embodiment of remorseful presentiment and the instrument of divine justice” (“Shakespeare’s Ghosts” 192), drawing on the Protestant doctrines at the time, and “it is in *Hamlet* that Shakespeare makes by far the fullest use of the belief in ghosts current in his own day” (196). What is more, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare introduced another novelty: As Moorman claims, “Whereas, in the plays of his predecessors, the ghost was a mere machine, a voice mouthing vengeance, it now became endowed with personality” (“Shakespeare’s Ghosts” 192), the change signalled in stripping it of “its ‘foul sheet’ and ‘leather pilch,’ and arraying it in the garb which it had worn before mortality had been put off” (192). Thus, according to Moorman, unlike the ghosts of *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, the Ghost in *Hamlet* “stands on a different footing” (“Shakespeare’s Ghosts” 192).

### 3.1. “Who’s There”: Enter Fantastic Ghost

*Hamlet* sets out with “Who’s there?” (I.1 1), a frightened cry set forth in the night. The characters of Marcellus, Bernardo and Horatio are involved in a vivid discussion about “this thing” (I.1 21), “our fantasy” (I.1 22), “this apparition” (I.1 28), “it” (I.1 29) – the suspense is built in the first forty lines of the play, before the Ghost appears for the first time. This brief section represents the instance of the “pure” fantastic: Horatio says: “tis but our fantasy / and will not let belief take hold of him” (I.1 23-24) because the characters are not sure whether what they have seen is something real or an illusion. As Todorov argues, “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty” (25): it is “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). The characters obviously hesitate, but does the reader? The problem is that in judging the Ghost the early modern and contemporary responses may be opposed. If fantasy is “any departure from consensus reality” (Hume 21), it has to be observed that consensus reality is different for the early modern and contemporary reader. Moreover, what constitutes the consensus reality in the early modern period is a highly disputed matter, inextricable from religious beliefs (discussed presently). However, following the clues the text provides – the inability to identify “this thing” – both the early modern and the contemporary reader will hesitate in this scene. Furthermore, a fantastic element is an effective plot trigger, as Todorov notes: “What could better disturb the stable situation of the beginning [...] if not precisely an event external

not only to the situation but to the world itself?” (165). Even Voltaire, one of Shakespeare’s greatest critics, who otherwise considered *Hamlet* “a gross and barbarous piece” (qtd. in Bloom 83), declared the Ghost a dramatic success.<sup>2</sup> The exquisite atmosphere of *Hamlet*’s opening scene has been pointed out by many critics; e.g. Coleridge speaks of “the admirable indefiniteness of the first opening out of the occasion of all this anxiety” (qtd. in Bloom 159).

When the Ghost enters, the comments of the characters reveal the frenzy of their thoughts and ideas: it is “*in the figure like the king that’s dead*” (I.1 41, emphasis mine); “looks a not *like the king?*” (I.1 42), “Is it not *like the king?*” (I.1 58). Relentless questioning of “the thing” and the fact that none of them believes the Ghost to be the actual king, but rather something *like* the king, lays the grounds for suspicion for the audience. Not only does it signal that they should employ some interpretative strategies – what is this “thing”? – but also that the code here is in a given aspect over-determined. As Brooke-Rose claims, “A code is over-determined when its information [...] is too clear, over-encoded, recurring beyond purely informational need. The reader is then in one sense also over-encoded [...], but in another sense he is treated as a kind of fool who has to be told everything, a subcritical (*hypocrite*) reader” (106). However, it is an example of the ambiguous relationship between the over- and under-determination, because the excess of information does not help the reader to resolve the situation, it only adds to its strangeness. In discussing the discourse of the fantastic, Todorov notes that “the fantastic constantly makes use of rhetorical figures [...] because it originates in them” (82), and identifies expressions such as “as if”, “as though” – and in this scene the “likes” abound, as special markers of the fantastic. Thus the rhetoric of the opening scene in *Hamlet* confirms its placement in the fantastic. Horatio, “the scholar”, is asked to speak to the thing:

What are thou that usurp’st this time of night  
Together with that fair and warlike form  
In which the majesty of buried Denmark  
Did sometimes march? By heaven I charge thee, speak. (I.1 46-49)

Marcellus, voicing the superstitions of his time, as Wilson claims (75), believes only a scholar is qualified to speak to the ghost, either because the common belief was that the

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<sup>2</sup> “It is neither useless, nor brought in by force, but serves to convince mankind, that there is an invisible power, the master of nature. [...] I will go still further, and venture to affirm, when an extraordinary circumstance of this kind is mentioned in the beginning of a tragedy, when it is properly prepared, when things are so situated as to render it necessary and even looked for and desired by the spectators; it ought then to be considered as perfectly natural: it is at the same time sufficiently obvious, that these bold strokes are not to be too often repeated” (Voltaire qtd. in Bloom 106).

ghosts were to be addressed (moreover, exorcised) in Latin, or because he is aware that the spirit is dubious and has to be approached with caution. Whatever the reason, the audience and the reader should by now be alarmed and start questioning the ghost. As Prosser argues, “For the first time, they [Shakespeare’s audience] were to consider whether a stage ghost was a good spirit or an evil one, and they were to do so on religious principles” (102). Moorman shares Prosser’s position, claiming that Shakespeare “for the gibbering of tortures of Tantalus in which the earlier Senecan ghosts had taken delight, he substituted the ghost-beliefs current in England of his time” (“Shakespeare’s Ghosts” 192). Prosser’s analysis shows that Horatio’s address to the Ghost is revealing in many respects: Horatio asks the Ghost “what” are you, not “who”, which implies that he does not take it for a human being, but a spirit; and he accuses the Ghost of “usurping” the “form” of the late king – the Devil was notorious for taking on various forms, especially of relatives, to serve his vile purposes. Furthermore, “this time of night” points to the time convenient for an evil spirit to rise; “warlike” informs the audience and the reader that the Ghost is wearing armour, which does not make it look benevolent; and the most important fact, on being charged *by heaven* to speak, the Ghost is offended and “stalks away” (Prosser 106-10).

After its first appearance, the Ghost is established as at least a suspicious spirit, the impression which will be confirmed by its second appearance. The Ghost “bodes some strange eruption” (I.1 68-69) to the state of Denmark and brings to the forefront its political affairs, both domestic and foreign. The most important thing to be noted here is that the characters no longer doubt the Ghost’s existence: as Bernardo asks, “Is not this something more than fantasy?” Indeed it is; even the sceptical Horatio, invited to the scene to judge it as a voice of reason, has to agree: “Before my God, I might not this believe / without the sensible and true avouch / of mine own eyes” (I.1 56-8). The *three* characters (even four, including the first guard, Francisco) have seen the Ghost, the audience has seen it – it is a rather firm confirmation of the existence of the Ghost. Yet, the supernatural event receives no explanation. Just as the characters, the reader decides that “new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena”; therefore, as Todorov claims, “we enter the genre of the marvelous” (41). But before the scene finishes, the Ghost returns. This time Horatio tries to stop it by crossing its path (“Stay, illusion!” I.1 127) and eagerly charges it to speak, offering several motives for its appearance: whether there is “any good thing to be done”, whether he has come to prophecy the country’s fate, or whether he has buried some treasure. Here again Horatio, according to the Protestant principles and beliefs, does the right thing

when confronted with what is probably the Devil, who assumed a familiar shape to deceive and abuse the souls of the living. However, the Ghost does not answer Horatio because *the cock crows* and “it started, like a *guilty* thing / upon a fearful summons” (I.1 148-9, emphasis mine). Marcellus further explains that in folk and Christian traditions, the crowing of the cock is a sign of God’s presence, light and grace. The Ghost must have escaped it because it is *guilty* – of being a devil. Prosser provides several tests, both Protestant and Catholic, to try the Ghost according to the evidence of doctrinal beliefs in Shakespeare’s time: first of all, both churches agreed that a departed person cannot return among the living, therefore the ghost could be either a good or a bad spirit (103). Furthermore, if it appears at midnight, on the battlements, to a melancholic (as later to Hamlet), demanding an action opposed to the teachings of the Church – revenge (Prosser 108-12), according to Protestant criteria, it comes from Hell. Nevertheless, for Catholics there was a third option – Purgatory. As Prosser goes further, the Catholic had some specific criteria to test the spirit: to see whether its response to the invocation of God is *offence* (“It is offended.” (I.1 50)), whether its tone of voice is bass, whether its purpose is not to fulfil God’s commandments and whether it is proud, frowning and angry (“So *frowned* he once when, in an *angry* parle / He smote he sledged Polacks on the ice” (I.1 62-3, emphasis mine)). If these criteria are not met, the apparition is not a humble soul from Purgatory beseeching prayer for its miserable soul (Prosser 114-6), but the Devil. As Prosser claims, this first scene puts the Ghost in the Christian context and thus entices the audience to question it by Christian criteria. It is important to note that the Ghost leaves characters in the play and the audience in fear and doubt *before* they become affected by Hamlet’s emotional and biased response to it.

The result of the analysis up to this point is that the whole Act I, Scene 1 can be designated in Todorov's terms as fantastic-marvellous: it starts with hesitation and ends in the characters’ and readers’ belief in the Ghost’s existence. However, this assertion is not without loose ends. The first factor that undermines this conclusion is the explicit instance of *fear*: Francisco is “sick at heart” (I.1 9), Marcellus is afraid of “this dreaded sight” (I.1 25), Horatio is “harrowed” with “fear and wonder” (I.1 44), “tremble[s] and look[s] pale” (I.1 54); all of which points to the domain of the uncanny. Todorov says that “in the texts linked to the uncanny [...] the emphasis is on the reactions which the mystery provokes” (50), while “The marvelous, by way of contrast, may be characterized by the mere presence of supernatural events, without implicating the reaction they provoke in the characters” (47). As Todorov further argues, “the uncanny realizes [...] only one of the conditions of the fantastic: *the*

*description of certain reactions, especially of fear. It is uniquely linked to the sentiments of the characters and not to a material event defying reason*” (47, emphasis mine), and this is precisely how the reactions of the four characters who saw the Ghost (Marcellus, Bernardo, Horatio and Hamlet) are represented in the text. Moreover, “the sentiment of the uncanny originates in certain themes linked to more or less ancient taboos” (Todorov 48); and, as Freud claims, “Everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light” (79). Claudius’ sins – fratricide, regicide and incest – were to remain hidden, yet they recur in the shape of the Ghost.

Whereas the contemporary reader may balance between the fantastic-marvellous and fantastic-uncanny interpretations of Scene 1, the early modern audience had to employ additional interpretative strategies since the scene is immersed in the religious disputes between Catholics and Protestants (especially perceived in Horatio’s and later on in Hamlet’s reaction). For Wilson, the Ghost is the hero of the first part of the play, “the linchpin of *Hamlet*”, and the instrument which sets the plot in motion (52-3). Exploring the contemporary works on spirituality, and owing much to Moorman’s analysis already quoted in this paper, Wilson arrives at the conclusion similar to Prosser’s – the Ghost raises questions about Elizabethan spiritualism and puts the play in a Christian context. The outward sign of a new, original ghost-character is the change in costume: wearing armour (and later a nightgown) instead of the traditional sheet, the ghost looked more “realistic” and majestic on the stage (Wilson 56-8). The ghost is not a common stock apparition, it calls forth contemporary theological debates about ghosts, which are embodied in the characters of Marcellus and Bernardo, Horatio and Hamlet. As Wilson argues, they represent the “three typical points of view on the question of apparitions” (61): the superstitious, Protestant and Catholic. As Wilson claims, Marcellus and Bernardo “typify the ghost-lore of the average unthinking Elizabethan, and Shakespeare uses Marcellus as the mouthpiece of the traditional point of view which was that of pre-Reformation England” (67). Spirits cannot appear in the material form, they are “incorporal air” and the mention of Christmastide also provides a religious background for Scene 1. Superstitions are also represented in the play elsewhere – according to Wilson, the lines “Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio” refer to the belief that a ghost could not speak until addressed by a human (75), while crossing the path of an evil spirit (“I’ll cross it though it blast me” (I.1 127)) provoked the risk of falling under its malign influence. Finally, the already mentioned the crowing of the cock was a commonplace for an omen (Wilson 75-7). As Wilson goes further, Horatio and Hamlet are students of Wittenberg, “the

very cradle of Reformation”, therefore they share scholarly Protestant philosophy on spiritualism.

Wilson argues that while Catholics believed departed souls might return from Purgatory for some pious purpose, Protestants widely believed in apparitions, but considered most of them to be devils. Nevertheless, they did not believe a departed soul may ever come back. However, for the analysis of the early modern response to the Ghost the important thing is that the Ghost, although not being a real person, is still real: even though the Ghost’s origin is questioned frantically, its *existence* is not. For the early modern readers (the implicit readers), Hell and Heaven (for Catholics also the Purgatory) were *real* places. Thus the Ghost’s origin can obtain a rational explanation, shifting Scene 1 under the domain of the uncanny, or to be more precise, fantastic-uncanny. As Todorov argues, when “[the reader] decides that the laws of reality remain intact”, and they do, for the early modern audience, “and permit an explanation of the phenomena described” (that the Ghost is from Hell/Purgatory), “we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny” (41).

The only perspective supporting the reading of the scene as belonging to the fantastic-marvellous for the early modern audience is the third perspective – the scepticism of Reginald Scot, the author of *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), one of Shakespeare’s sources (Wilson 63), whose representative is Horatio. According to Wilson, sceptics believed “apparitions are either the illusion of melancholic minds or flat knavery on the part of some rogue” (64). Nonetheless, Horatio is not only a sceptic, he is also a Protestant and he *does believe* the Ghost exists: “My lord, I think I saw him yesternight” (I.2 189), he says to Hamlet, “My lord, the king your father” (I.2 191). The contemporary readership fits into the category of the sceptic response. In *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye notes that “The appearance of a ghost in *Hamlet* presents the hypothesis, ‘Let there be a ghost in *Hamlet*’. It has nothing to do with whether ghosts exist or not or whether Shakespeare or his audience thought they did. A reader [...] who dislikes *Hamlet* because he does not believe that there are ghosts [...] clearly has no business in literature” (70). Cox, in his discussion on English Gothic theatre, finds himself in Frye’s camp when he states: “the playwright must either follow Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in making the ghost real, or [...] eschew the supernatural” (131). It is ironic that Freud would here join the group of the sceptics: “If [the author] chooses to stage his action in a world peopled with spirits, demons and ghosts, as Shakespeare does in *Hamlet* [...], we must bow to his decision and treat his setting as though it were real for as long as we put ourselves into his

hands” (83). For Freud as a reader of *Hamlet*, it is a marvellous narrative.<sup>3</sup> Bearing in mind all that has been said about the religious disputes of the Early Modern Period, for religious early modern audience Act I, Scene 1 belongs to the fantastic-uncanny type. For early modern sceptics and the contemporary reader, it belongs to the fantastic-marvellous, but the case is definitely not clear-cut since even the contemporary reader senses the ambiguity of the ghost’s representation, the atmosphere of fear as a signal of the uncanny, and balances between the uncanny and marvellous.

The clash of the three worldviews is even more stressed in the third appearance of the Ghost – its revealing to Hamlet, since he occupies an unsteady position on the brink of the three standpoints: Hamlet is a student of Wittenberg, therefore a Protestant; he is a sceptic, which is revealed in his idea of the “Murder of Gonzago” / The Mousetrap, a play within a play designed to test the Ghost’s words; and he verges on being a Catholic – while Horatio and Marcellus swear “by heaven” (I.5 120, 124), Hamlet swears “by Saint Patrick” (I.5 136), the legendary keeper of the Purgatory. Whereas Horatio struggles with his scepticism, Hamlet racks his brain with whether the Ghost is his father, an angel or a devil. “Angels and ministers of grace defend us! / Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned / Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell” (I.4 39-41) – although he is prone to jump to the Catholic conclusion that the spirit *could* be his father, he firstly uses his Protestant theological presuppositions as weapons. However, after only thirty lines of the face-to-face conversation with the Ghost, he suddenly delivers: “Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift / as meditation or the thoughts of love / may sweep to my revenge” (I.5 29-32). Both the early modern audience and the contemporary reader sense that his response is somehow hasty; this is the germ of Hamlet’s questionable madness. Even more worrying is his decision, “from the table of my memory / I’ll wipe away all trivial fond [foolish] records, / all saws [wise sayings] of books, all forms, all pressures past [...] and thy commandment all alone shall live / within the book and volume of my brain” (I.5 98-102). These can be interpreted as words of a lunatic or at least of someone haunted by an unhealthy obsession. Hamlet is lapsing into madness, which signals the uncanny interpretation of the Ghost for both the early modern audience and the contemporary reader.

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<sup>3</sup> Holland notes that among Shakespeare’s plays, “*Hamlet* was his [Freud’s] favourite; he would include it and *Macbeth* in a list of ‘the ten most magnificent works of world literature’. The supernatural element, the Ghost, caught his attention in this play as it did in *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream*. Though he was himself an uncompromising materialist, he respected the poet’s right, so to speak, to the unreal” (165).



Another argument in favour of the assumption that it is the uncanny that is at work here is the fact that *Hamlet* complies with some essential notions of Freud's concept of the uncanny. The first is the notion of the double, the *Doppelgänger*, in the play represented by the Ghost. At the beginning of the play, the characters insist that it is *like* the late King, but not the real King – the Ghost is his double. Freud states that “The double ‘becomes the ghastly harbinger of death’” (86), and Hamlet confirms it: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.4 90), “The time is out of joint” (I.5 191). As Cuthbert claims, “For Freud, the *Doppelgänger* is the archetypal figure of the uncanny, embodying the return of the repressed, of all that ‘should have remained hidden but has emerged’ to haunt the security of the psychic household”. Claudius’ repressed crime returns in the shape of the Ghost, haunting and threatening the fragile peace of the Danish court. Moreover, Freud adds, “Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and *dead bodies*, to *the return of the dead*, and to *spirits and ghosts*” (91, emphasis mine). As Freud goes further, “We also call a living person uncanny, usually when we ascribe evil motives to him” (92). The Ghost’s motive, revenge by murder, is hardly benevolent.

### 3.2. Putting on the “Antic Disposition”

After the private encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet is (too) eager to assure it remains a secret. In the “cellarage scene” (I.5), he makes Horatio and Marcellus swear to silence in a hysterical movement on the stage. Added that the oath they are pursuing is *threefold* and if it counted in that the cellarage on stage is often referred to as “Hell”, the scene strikes the imagination as a performance of a demonic ritual. But what surprises the audience and the reader most is Hamlet’s attitude towards the Ghost. He addresses it as “boy”, “old mole”, “truepenny” – all the terms imply that the Ghost is in a way inferior to Hamlet or that they are at least close (servants were addressed as “boy”; “truepenny” is an “old fellow”), and the humorous side of the expressions, even the overtones of mockery, should not be excluded. Moreover, these are all ways to address a devil; “mole” and “pioner”<sup>4</sup> work under ground, in “Hell”. The impression is that Hamlet does not take the Ghost too seriously, which is “wondrous strange” (I.5 167) if the implication is that he makes his friends swear a pact with the Devil. Wilson interprets the scene claiming that Hamlet and the Ghost have created a show to trick (primarily) superstitious simpleton Marcellus: “Father and son seem to be

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<sup>4</sup> Prosser notes that demons were believed to frequent mines (140).

playing into each other's hands in order to hoodwink an inconvenient witness" (81). Since it is unclear why the Ghost would indiscriminately appear to various witnesses in Scene 1 and added that the "swearing team" is moving *away* from the Ghost and that Hamlet's attitude is condescending, this interpretation seems far-fetched. Indeed it is a show, but it is Hamlet's show. At this point he mentions putting on "an antic disposition" (I.5 175), which signals he is only *playing* to be mad; therefore explaining his behaviour only by means of his lunacy seems insufficient. What *is* clear about this scene is that Hamlet wants to keep the secret of the Ghost to himself. He tells Horatio to mind his own business (though he is aware it offends him), for now he trusts the Ghost: "It is an honest [genuine] ghost, that let me tell you" (I.5 138), "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your [Protestant] philosophy" (I.5 169), "Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio" (I.5 136) – even if the cellarage scene was designed to convince Marcellus that the Ghost came from Hell, Hamlet does not believe that: the only place in Shakespeare's England from which Hamlet's departed *father* could have returned is Catholic Purgatory. When Hamlet gives credence to the Ghost's claim that it is his father, he is lapsing into Catholicism. Prosser, on one hand, interprets this scene as a proof that Hamlet does not believe in Purgatory (140-2), but Wilson, on the other, believes he does (70). In the play itself the Ghost is hinting at its Purgatorial origin:

*I'm thy father's spirit*  
*Doomed for a certain term to walk the night*  
*And for the day confined to fast in fires*  
*Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature*  
*Are burnt and purged away.* (I.5 9-12, emphasis mine)

Although emotionally driven to trust him, Hamlet still feels the urge to test the Ghost, for a student of Wittenberg cannot give up too easily on his doctrine and the caution it preaches. However, with its frenetic movement on the stage, the impression this scene inscribes on the reader and the audience is that Hamlet is a lunatic. His urge for secrecy is excessive; he drives away *Horatio*, the carrier of reason (and scepticism) and his friend. Yet, the audience and the reader cannot be sure of his state, since there is a possibility that he is only assuming madness as a role, as putting on an "antic disposition" suggests; and the issue is never resolved in the play. Apart from the madness, the play's abundance in taboos also points to the uncanny. Beside fratricide and incest of Claudius, the list encompasses regicide and revenge (these were considered taboos in the Early Modern Period, since the belief was

that King was appointed directly by God and only he had the right to judge human deeds), suicide and murder. Ironically enough, Freud himself will deny the uncanny reading of *Hamlet*. Positioning it on almost the same level with fairy tales, in which “the world of reality is left from the very start” (97), he says that “the ghostly apparitions in *Hamlet* [...] may be gloomy and terrible enough, but they are no more really uncanny than is Homer’s jovial world of gods” (97). Again, *Hamlet* is a marvellous play for Freud; not even fantastic-marvellous, since “the world of reality is left from the very start” in his reading. However, it is not true that the world of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* completely changes the “reality as we know it” (e.g. the Ghost does not fly, shift shapes etc) – it is quite the contrary.

Before this last appearance of the Ghost, the reader is warned several times that Hamlet is mad, in an over-determined manner as in Scene 1. The reader thus senses his lunacy is somehow forced on them, the examples being Polonius’ claims: “I have found / The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy” (II.2 48-9), “Your noble son is mad” (II.2 92). But Hamlet defends himself: “I am but mad north-northwest. When the / wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw” (II.2, 321-2); in other words, he is mad when he wants to be, when it fits his purpose. The following words reveal that he has not lost his mind completely:

The spirit that I have seen  
May be a devil, and the devil hath power  
T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps  
Out of *my weakness and my melancholy*  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. *I’ll have grounds*  
*More relative than this.* The play’s the thing  
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king. (II.2 537-544)

Hamlet’s reasoning is *reasonable* – he is not sure whether he is to trust the Ghost or not, for there is a possibility that it is a devil (here he employs his Protestant teachings). He is aware of the fact that he is a melancholic: this pertains to the theory of four bodily fluids or “humours”, in which one’s character is phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine or melancholic, depending on the humour that prevails. An excessive amount of “the black bile” leads to melancholy and mental illness, with the result that a person is prone to seeing apparitions. This Hamlet’s explanation, if proven to be up to the point, would render the Ghost uncanny, because according to the early modern beliefs and interpretation of the “empirical” world, his

seeing a ghost can be rationally explained. Moreover, he seeks another proof that Claudius is guilty and does not want to rely solely on the Ghost's claims. If the King proves not guilty during the show, "it is a damned ghost that we have seen, / and my imaginations are as foul / as Vulcan's stithy" (III.2, 81-2). In that case the audience and the reader would be dealing with the uncanny, because Hamlet is clearly mad (and aware of it). But the show proved Hamlet was right (which equals he was not mad): "O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound" (III.2 281-2) – now he utterly believes the Ghost.

The last appearance of the Ghost in the play occurs in Gertrude's bedroom. However, the scene does not settle the question of the reality and nature of the Ghost, nor of Hamlet's madness; it only complicates it further. Deeply agitated, Hamlet attacks his mother for her sins, doing the exact opposite of what the Ghost commanded, "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught" (I.5 85-6). The Ghost interrupts Hamlet's avalanche of reproach, but is visible only to Hamlet, which Gertrude interprets as madness:

Queen: To whom do you speak this?

Hamlet: Do you see nothing there?

Queen: Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

Hamlet: Nor did you nothing hear?

Queen: No, nothing but ourselves.

Hamlet: Why, look you there! Look how it steals away!

My father, in his habit as he lived!

Look where he goes even now out at the portal!

*Exit ghost.*

Queen: *This is the very coinage of thy brain.*

This bodiless creation *ecstasy*

Is very cunning in.

(III.4 131-139, emphasis mine)

The queen's interpretation that Hamlet invented the Ghost functions as a signal of the uncanny. Only the mad Hamlet can see the ghost, but there is a rational explanation to it. Yet, Hamlet is heard pronounce: "It is not madness / that I have uttered" (142-2): only now, in his frenzy, he has perhaps lost the credibility. Yet again, E. E. Stoll warns that it was characteristic of ghosts to appear to one person only, even when that person is in company of others (219), and the impression of the scene is that the Ghost appears to prevent Hamlet from hurting his mother (in addition to "whet thy [his] almost blunted purpose" (III.4 111)): "O, step between her and her fighting soul! / Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works" (III.4

113-4) – the Ghost exculpates Gertrude and demands mercy for her soul from Hamlet. Thus the purpose of the Ghost’s visitation, as well as the explanation for the fact that it is visible to Hamlet only, would render the scene not uncanny, but marvellous, and thus also solve the inconsistency of this scene with those of Act I, where the Ghost is visible to several characters. The Ghost no more appears in the play and the issue of its reality is never resolved in a definite manner. Neither is the issue of Hamlet’s (feigned) madness.

### **3.3. The Ghost Comes in Such a Questionable Shape**

From “yets” and “howevers”, the shifts from the pure fantastic to the fantastic-uncanny or marvellous-uncanny in Scene 1, over the indeterminacy between the marvellous and the uncanny resulting from the equally dubious character of Hamlet’s madness after the third and fourth appearances of the Ghost, to the end of the play which does not resolve the ambiguities, it is clear that *Hamlet* is a complex play in terms of how it treats the supernatural. Everything from Scene 1 onwards is subject to two different interpretations: the Ghost is real and the Ghost is not real, therefore Hamlet is mad and Hamlet is not mad. However, the two perspectives are not clear-cut, but confounded. Although the dilemma seems to be a trivial one, the manifold responses of both the readers and the critics prove the contrary because the text continually revises its conclusions. Since the text perpetually invites the audience and the reader to question it, it also invites them always to hesitate – that is why *Hamlet* as a whole can be said to belong to the Todorov’s fantastic. But it is not the only possible response to the play – the existence of the Ghost can be denied by the audience/reader and seen as the product of Hamlet’s madness, thus be read as an uncanny narrative, or the Ghost can be accepted from Scene 1 as the play’s supernatural element and result in the marvellous. It is this forever ambiguous character of the play that has produced a scholarly “subjectivity vs. objectivity of the ghost debate”.

The debate was especially lively in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, instigated by the most prominent Shakespearean scholar of the time, Sir Walter Wilson Greg, and his paper “Hamlet’s Hallucination” (1917). Influenced by the emerging discipline of psychoanalysis, Greg challenged the orthodox “obvious and naive interpretation” of the play (395), and maintained that “the Ghost’s story was not a revelation, but a mere figment of Hamlet’s brain” (401). Hence the Ghost was “an hallucination produced by auto-suggestion” (417), and, in the case of the other three witnesses, “a freak of collective suggestion” (410). In other

words, Greg advocated for the “subjective ghost” interpretation, the uncanny reading of the play. However, even Greg admitted that “Shakespeare, it must be supposed, expected his ghost and its story to be generally taken on the stage at their face value” (419), but the *true* interpretation – the Ghost is a hallucination – was reserved for the “judicious” folk. Although the majority of critics dismissed Greg’s interpretation,<sup>5</sup> in 1956 Orgel still claims: “The play does not really need the ghost at all” (1619). The “subjective ghost camp” includes critics who read the play allegorically, assigning a symbolic reading to the Ghost, thus undercutting the fantastic, as Todorov warns (32).

Greg’s paper was so provocative that it actually prompted Wilson’s study of Elizabethan spirit-lore in *What Happens in Hamlet*, which has in turn given rise to further and wide-spread study of Elizabethan pneumatology and the “Ghost’s denomination” debate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with proponents such as Prosser, arguing that the Ghost comes from Catholic Purgatory (nowadays a view adopted by the majority); Semper<sup>6</sup> claiming it comes from Protestant Hell; and Battenhouse<sup>7</sup> placing it in paganesque tradition. Finally, amidst that debate, West (1955) proposed that Shakespeare deliberately mixed the pneumatological evidence “to keep the audience a little uncertain about it”, and that “he did so for the sake of dramatic impact” (1111). As West points out, if Shakespeare had constrained the Ghost to one particular religious doctrine, he would have lost some part of dramatic purpose. West’s words are echoed by Kallendorf: “By attempting to reduce the Ghost to Catholic, Protestant, or pagan, the ‘Ghost critics’ were missing the point. I believe the Ghost appears Catholic one moment, Protestant the next, and pagan the third precisely because he, like Hamlet, tries on different identities in the course of the play” (80-1). Thus, as West concludes, the “ambiguity is deliberate” (1111) and “the ghost of King Hamlet is never explicable” (1115). So even if it is accepted that the Ghost is represented as real (for the early modern audience), is it marvellous for the contemporary readers, the sceptics. However, this interpretation is undermined by Scene 1, the very opening, with its over-determination of fear and strangeness, and the last, in which the Ghost’s appearance is paired with Hamlet’s madness, which undercut the marvellous. In one scene represented as a majestic, threatening figure, then to Hamlet as a poor wronged soul suffering Purgatorial fires, in the next sneered at as a “boy” and “old mole”, in the last full of Christian forbearance and arguably invisible – there is no telling.

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<sup>5</sup> See Maguire 78-87.

<sup>6</sup> See Semper 222-234.

<sup>7</sup> See Battenhouse 161-192, and Joseph 119-140.

Hamlet's reactions, with whom the audience/reader is inclined to identify, are equally unreliable: at first he is sceptical, then fearful and astonished, then he utterly believes the Ghost, then he mocks it, then he fears it is a devil, then believes it again, and finally, never mentions it again, even during the execution of its commandment which has started the whole ordeal. Why does Hamlet fear the Ghost when he believes it to be real and mocks it when he believes it to be a devil? West suggests that "it is gratuitous to make a special enterprise of *deciding* anything about the nature of the ghost. Perhaps we ought simply to receive its dramatic force as it reaches us" (1117). The Ghost "stole the show" precisely in being ambiguous and any definite explanation would reduce its dramatic impact. The ambiguity "gives the ghost 'vitality'" (West 1114) and provides a platform for the audience and the reader to identify with Hamlet, making sure they pay attention and follow through his predicament.

In introducing the Ghost, Shakespeare not only obtained a valuable dramatic device to set the plot in motion and maintain its atmosphere, he provided the foundation for the reader's identification with the protagonist. The moral is not thrust upon the audience and the reader by a Senecan chorus; in sharing Hamlet's hesitation, the audience and the reader are absorbed into his dilemma as the backbone of the play.

To sum up, the "subjectivity vs. objectivity of the ghost debate" can be relabelled in Todorov's terms as the "uncanny vs. marvellous" debate, with Greg as the "standard-bearer" of the uncanny camp, Wilson as one of the most notable proponents of the marvellous camp (the Ghost was real for Elizabethans, but not for the contemporary reader), and West as one of the few advocates of the fantastic front; with which the paper is most prone to side. However, even the critics who advocate the objectivity of the Ghost have granted this interpretation only to the Ghost of *Hamlet*, while they still believe other Shakespeare's ghosts to be unreal. The dissenting minority is represented by E. E. Stoll, who claims all of Shakespeare's ghosts are real.

## 4. *Macbeth*

*Macbeth* is another Shakespeare's play on usurpation deeply influenced by the supernatural – it features one ghost, but a far more influential role is played by another supernatural element, the Witches. However, since the analysis so far has dealt with the ghost figure, the analysis of *Macbeth* here starts with the Ghost of Banquo.

### 4.1. The “Unreal Mock’ry” of Banquo’s Ghost

The ghost of *Macbeth* appears in the middle of the play, in the banquet scene (III.4), following directly after Macbeth ordered the murder of Banquo and his son Fleance, whereby the former was murdered, and the latter fled. As Dyson claims, “it is in this scene that the whole play turns over” since it starts with Macbeth still hoping to take his place as king, but ends in his knowledge that the crisis in his journey toward damnation has passed (370). The banquet was prepared in honour of Macbeth as new king, and the scene is interwoven with irony, for the Ghost appears when Macbeth hypocritically utters: “Were the graced person of our Banquo present” (III.4 41), and sits in Macbeth’s place at the table. The joke is on Macbeth because the Ghost mockingly usurps his royal chair as Macbeth usurped the throne, for which he “played most foully” (III.1 3). Macbeth is the only character who can see the Ghost: “The table’s full” (III.4 47), he says when the lords offer him to sit, and accuses them of trickery: “Which of you have done this? [...] Thou canst not say I did it” (III.4 49-51). Macbeth does not doubt the existence of the Ghost – he is overwhelmed by the vision, and Lady Macbeth scorns him for it:

This is the very painting of your fear.  
This is the air-drawn dagger which you said  
Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts,  
Impostors to true fear, would well become  
A woman’s story at a winter’s fire,  
Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!  
Why do you make such faces? When all’s done,  
You look but on a stool (III.4 62-69)



Lady Macbeth dismisses the belief in the supernatural as a woman's weakness, which diminishes Macbeth's masculinity: "Are you man?" (III.4 59); "What, quite unmanned in folly?" (III.4 75) In stating that the Ghost is the product of his weakness and fear, and that fear being the "impostor to true fear", Lady Macbeth interprets the Ghost as uncanny. Macbeth is captured by his vision, insisting that it is real: "If I stand here, I saw him" (III.4 76), just as Hamlet insisted in the closet scene with Gertrude. As Macbeth goes further: "This is more strange / Than such a murder is" (III.4 83-4). Having, however, recovered his composure, Macbeth asks for wine to "drink to th' general joy o' th' table" (III.4 90), but again (hypocritically) toasting to "our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss. / Would he were here!" (III.4 91-2), he once more summons the ghost. This time Macbeth's attitude towards the Ghost is changed – although still shaken ("Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves / Shall never tremble", III.4 103-4), he defies it: "Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee! / Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold; / Thou hast no speculation in those eyes / Which thou dost glare with" (III.4 94-7). And as soon the "horrible shadow" (III.4 106), the "unreal mock'ry" (III.4 107) exits, Macbeth "is man again" (III.4 109). Now even Macbeth pronounces the Ghost "unreal", and claims it was a product of his fear and guilt, a hallucination: "My strange and self-abuse [hallucination] / Is the initiate fear that wants hard use. We are yet but young in deed" (III.4 143-5), i.e. his fear is a beginner's one. Thus by the end of the scene even Macbeth interprets the Ghost as uncanny.

The uncanny interpretation of the Ghost of Banquo is embraced by the majority of critics: as Greg points out, "the suggestion that it [the Ghost] is anything but the creation of Macbeth's conscience has never found much favour with English critics. And rightly so" (394). Moorman claims that "the ghost of Banquo is the outcome of the play of Macbeth's frenzied imagination upon his deep sense of insecurity" ("Shakespeare's Ghosts" 196). But E. E. Stoll believes the Ghost of Banquo to be equally real for the early modern audience as that of *Hamlet* (and *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, for that matter): Banquo's behaviour at the table – occupying the royal chair "as a token that his seed shall sit hereafter" (206) and his vengeful attitude mean that it could not be a mere figment of Macbeth's imagination (207). The uncanny interpretation, claims E. E. Stoll, obliterates the irony, "the Elizabethan meaning" of the play (209), and at that point Macbeth no longer exhibits guilt which would provide the explanation for the uncanny experience. Simply put, the Ghost does not behave like a hallucination – pushing someone from their stool comes across as more of a prank than as the unconscious working through a trauma. In fact, Macbeth's reactions point to both the

uncanny and marvellous interpretations of the Ghost: at first he believes he is being tricked, then he is afraid, and finally he defies it and discredits it by calling it an “unreal mock’ry”, acting more annoyed than frightened and guilt-ridden. As Dyson sees it, Macbeth usurped the natural order,<sup>8</sup> and the Ghost of Banquo represents that nature turning on him: “If we wish, we can psychologize this moment of insight and say that Macbeth is mad; or we can moralize it and say that his conscience has caught up with him. The fact remains, however, that it is not presented in either of those ways. It is presented as a fact, a vision of life” (374).

Thus the interpretation of the Ghost of Banquo has two viable options: the uncanny one, in which Macbeth’s guilty conscience conjures Banquo’s (unreal) ghost, and the marvellous one, in which the Ghost belongs to the Senecan tradition (more precisely, the early modern appropriation and adaptation of that tradition) of the vindictive ghost bringing personal retaliation on the person who wronged it. However, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth reject the marvellous interpretation, which is further undermined by reiterated depictions of Macbeth’s “unstable” condition, marking the uncanny: “How is’t with me when every noise appals me?” (II.2 61); “we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep / In the affliction of these terrible dreams” (III.2 18-9), “Better be with the dead [...] Than on torture of the mind to lie / in restless ecstasy” (III.2 20-2). The decision between the uncanny and marvellous interpretations of the Ghost of Banquo is based on both the Ghost’s behaviour and Macbeth’s perceived (non-)experience of guilt. Finally, it can be argued that the Ghost of Banquo is presented in such a way that it simultaneously provokes both interpretations – the uncanny and the marvellous one, resulting in the fantastic hesitation between the two.

Furthermore, there are two more instances in the play where Macbeth experiences the supernatural (leaving the Witches for consideration until the next section), and both those instances are closer to the fantastic or fantastic-uncanny interpretations, being related to Macbeth’s straightforward experience of guilt: in reproaching Macbeth for succumbing to fear and hallucinations, Lady Macbeth reminds him and the reader of the two fantastic instances which occurred immediately before and after his murder of Duncan (II.1–II.2). As Lady Macbeth says about the Ghost of Banquo, “This is the air-drawn dagger which you said / Led you to Duncan” (III.4 63-4), referring to the scene as Macbeth sets out to murder King Duncan:

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<sup>8</sup> On what constituted the natural order, “the divine degree” in the Early Modern Period, as well as what consequences were brought about by its breach or usurpation, see Tillyard.

Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? (II.1 34-40)

Unlike the ghost scene, where Macbeth is in full belief in the supernatural and everyone else in full disbelief, this scene starts as pure fantastic – as Macbeth hesitates whether what he sees is real or unreal, the audience and the reader hesitate with him. Macbeth himself offers alternative explanations – the daggers are real, and the daggers are not real, but a product of his “heat-oppressed brain”, an uncanny hallucination. He opts for the latter interpretation, and the dilemma resolves in the uncanny: “Mine eyes are made the fools o’ th’ other senses” (II.1 45), “There’s no such thing” (II.1 48). And yet, later on, Lady Macbeth reports that she had “laid their daggers ready – / He [Macbeth] could not miss them” (II.1 11-2), whereby the audience and the reader get a rational explanation why the daggers appeared before Macbeth “out of nowhere” – she placed them there. So maybe the daggers after all *were* there, but it seemed to overwhelmed Macbeth that they were apparitions. A theatrical performance must decide whether to put the physical daggers in Macbeth’s hands or not (or maybe retain the ambiguity by obscuring the audience’s view of Macbeth’s hands in some way); but the text remains ambiguous – maybe the daggers were real; after all, he did use them to murder Duncan. Because of the reader’s hesitation, the “dagger scene” can alternatively remain unresolved, and be classified as fantastic. A. Stoll offers the same interpretation: “The play itself, mischievously taking on the role of Lady Macbeth, further attenuates Macbeth’s conscience by suggesting that the dagger is real, a material weapon. For in the next scene surfaces a pair of real daggers whose materiality is all too obvious” (137). Just after Lady Macbeth charges Macbeth with thinking “so brainsickly of things”, she discovers the incriminating daggers in his hand: “Why did you bring these daggers from the place?” (II.2. 45). Thus, as A. Stoll goes on, “The audience is left wondering whether there wasn’t an actual dagger on stage in the previous scene – a prop that went unnoticed. Such an effect depends largely on staging, but by making both Macbeth’s vision and the murder weapon daggers,

Shakespeare leaves the audience as uncertain as Macbeth” (137).<sup>9</sup> Both interpretations of the scene are valid: the fantastic resolving in the uncanny (fantastic-uncanny) and the pure fantastic. The only thing certain is that Macbeth returns from Duncan’s chamber with two bloody daggers and has “done the deed” (II.2 14).

As for the other fantastic instance, while Macbeth reports the murder of Duncan to his wife, he mentions that he “heard voices”: “Methought I heard a voice cry ‘Sleep no more!’” (II.2 38), another uncanny event explained by his thinking “so brainsickly of things”, as Lady Macbeth interprets his report: “Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane [...] Go get some water” (II.2 47-9). However, the voices the reader cannot judge since they are not presented but only reported on. In fact, Lady Macbeth is always there to dismiss Macbeth’s uncanny experiences, and the reader must either side with her or identify with the protagonist. Hence, the choice conditions the classification of those scenes as fantastic-uncanny or fantastic-marvellous in Todorov’s terms. It should be noted here that whereas the “air-drawn daggers” and voices start as instances of the fantastic which do or do not resolve in the uncanny or marvellous, the Ghost of Banquo is presented as both uncanny and marvellous and its interpretation *results in*, not starts with, the final fantastic reading.

But for whatever interpretation the reader opts, the Ghost of Banquo is not comparable to the Ghost of *Hamlet*: it does not invoke religious doctrines, but more importantly, it appears in one scene only, it does not speak, and it does not present the protagonist with the initial moral dilemma. Nonetheless, *Macbeth* is a play equally immersed in the supernatural as *Hamlet* is, only the structurally equivalent role to Old Hamlet’s in *Macbeth* is played by the Witches, the Weird Sisters (from OE *wyrd*, meaning “fate”, and pertaining to Anglo-Saxon Fates and classical Parcae, who govern human destiny). Whereas *Hamlet* opens with the ghost scene, which sets the tone and the atmosphere of the play and triggers the plot, bearing consequence for the entire play, *Macbeth* opens with the Witches’ scene.

#### **4.2. The Weird Sisters as Imperfect Speakers**

*Macbeth* starts with the stage direction: “*Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches*”, who are planning their meeting with Macbeth. Thus the first thing presented in the play is the

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<sup>9</sup> Stoll relates Macbeth’s experience to Freud’s uncanny: “Macbeth finds himself unable to distinguish between a supernatural vision and a real dagger, and this doubt immediately leads him to the possibility of an unhealthy mind. To use Freud’s terms, which in some important respects replace the early modern vocabulary of melancholy, Macbeth wonders whether he is experiencing the projections of his unconscious mind” (143).

supernatural on its own – the Witches going about their business in their own world. Whereas the uncanny puts the description of the characters' reactions into focus, as Todorov argues, the marvellous “may be characterized by the mere presence of supernatural events, without implicating the reaction they provoke in the characters” (47). Thus at the onset the reader is thrust in a world where “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.1 12); from the start “new laws of nature” must be employed – resulting in the marvellous interpretation. In the following scene Macbeth's name crops up again, he is mentioned as a war hero, and the entire opening of the play lays the ground for the reader's anticipation of the protagonist. Whereas *Hamlet* opens with suspense and anticipation of the supernatural – the Ghost, in *Macbeth* the audience and the reader are first presented with the supernatural and wait for Macbeth to appear. In other words, *Hamlet* opens as a fantastic play, and *Macbeth* as a marvellous one. Macbeth does not appear until another Witches' scene, in which they are portrayed as mischievous creatures, passing time by taking vengeance on a sailor whose wife has refused to give them chestnuts. From the beginning of the play they are established as having supernatural powers which they use to meddle with the human world, and one of their schemes is to toy with Macbeth. As they finish their dance, Macbeth and Banquo enter upon the heath, and Macbeth echoes their words: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I.3 38). Katz notes that it is “by means of verbal echo, not dramatic confrontation, that Shakespeare first connects Macbeth to the Weird Sisters” (346), which suggests Macbeth's mysterious (i.e. unexplainable) connection to the Witches, and furthermore, a certain helplessness on his part. Banquo notices them first: “What are these, / So withered and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth / And yet are on't? Live you, or are you aught / That man may question? [...] You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so.” (I.3 39-46). Although Banquo questions their existence, he is more sceptical than frightened, signalling rather a marvellous than uncanny response to the fantastic event. Macbeth charges them to speak: “What are you?” (I.3 47), he asks, but never gets an answer. Instead, he receives the threefold prophecy: “All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! / All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor! / All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (I.3 48-50) The Witches defy identification and force their words on the characters, which is another hint at the marvellous reading. But upon their words Macbeth “starts and seems to fear / Things that sound so fair” (I.3 51-52), offering an uncanny response. Why is Macbeth frightened and “rapt withal” (I.3 57), i.e. utterly spellbound, and Banquo composed and unmoved? It could be argued that this is because Macbeth experiences an uncanny event, where his unconscious or deeply buried aspirations are brought to daylight; his ambition preceding the Sisters'

prophecies. In the early modern context, where the king is ordained and anointed by God, the usurper of the throne, who breaches the divine degree (order), is guilty of the “Luciferian sin”,<sup>10</sup> that is, of ambition leading to rebellion. This is why on the night of Duncan’s murder Macbeth’s castle is portrayed by the Porter as Hell (II.3). Moreover, as Tillyard informs (23-4), breaching the divine degree by committing regicide produces chaos, manifested in upheaval of natural laws, which is in the play represented by the unnatural occurrences reported on the night of the murder/regicide.

“Are ye fantastical”, Banquo insists on questioning the Witches, “or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?” (I.3 53-4) But he does not wait for an answer, eager to hear what “the seeds of time” hold for him: “Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none”, the Sisters grant him (I.3 67). “Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more” (I.3 70), Macbeth urges; “Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence, or why / Upon this blasted heath you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting. Speak, I charge you” (I.3 75-8). However, the Sisters vanish without a response. Unlike the Ghost in *Hamlet*, the Witches are not charged by *Heaven* to speak, so that the audience and the reader are not invited to base their interpretation of the Witches on religious principles. Although *Macbeth* draws on the early modern witch-lore, the text itself does not relate it to religious disputes as in *Hamlet*.

What are Macbeth and Banquo to make of the Weird Sisters? As Banquo proposes, “The earth hath bubbles as the water has, / And these are of them” (I.3 79-80); and Macbeth adds: “What seemed corporal melted / As breath into the wind” (I.3 81-2). They both assign the Witches’ origin to nature, not the Christian after-world in which the Ghost of *Hamlet* is placed. The Witches belong to the world of thunder, wind, and rain: they belong to the Scottish landscape – a special world, which again confirms the marvellous reading. In addition, the air and wind belong to the special domain of witches’ powers, as was believed in the Early Modern Period. As Floyd-Wilson claims, “the witches of *Macbeth* govern Scotland's water and air”, they are of “elemental nature” (150), and are represented in the play as inherently Scottish, and thus alien to England. Even for the early modern witch-believing audience, they represent an “other world”, a marvellous world. Therefore even if Shakespeare’s original audience believed in witches, the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* are characterised in such a way that it must have produced a marvellous reading in the English early modern theatre.

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<sup>10</sup> On the notion of the “Luciferian sin” in Shakespeare, see Matthews, especially Ch. 1 and 2.

Banquo and Macbeth still question the Witches' existence: "Were such things here as we do speak about?" (I.3 83), prolonging the false fantastic dilemma – false because they are both quick to accept their prophecies: "Your children shall be kings" (I.3 86), Macbeth answers. "You shall be king" (I.3 87), Banquo concludes. Although the text questions the Sisters' existence, the focus shifts constantly from their nature to their words and their consequences – they are accepted as marvellous occurrences. Yet this interpretation is soon put to test, as by the end of the scene Macbeth learns that he has indeed been named Thane of Cawdor. As Banquo wonders: "What, can the devil speak true?" (I.3 108), and warns Macbeth: "Oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray'[u]s / In deepest consequence" (I.3 123-6), summarizing the plot of the play and echoing Hamlet's concern that "the devil hath power / t' assume a pleasing shape" (II.2 538-9) to bring a person to damnation. Now the Witches are surrounded in a sinister aura, invoking not so much a religious context as that of undefined black magic; they are also brought nearer to the uncanny. Macbeth is fear-stricken, but ignores Banquo's warning: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill, / Why hath it given me earnest of success / Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor" (I.3 130-3); but Banquo has just explained why. As Macbeth continues, "If good, why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature?" (I.3 134-7) Who said anything about "against the use of nature"? It is Macbeth who comes up with the word "murder" (I.3 139), hence revealing himself as guilty of ambition despite invoking "chance" that will "have him king" (I.3 143). Banquo notices: "Look how our partner's rapt" (I.3 142), and the rest of the play revolves around the execution of the spell which made Macbeth so spellbound. This course of action is heartily supported and pushed by Lady Macbeth, whom Macbeth has informed in a letter: "I have learned by the perfect'st report they / have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made / themselves air, into which they vanished" (I.5 2-4). The report confirms that Macbeth believes the Sisters; the supernatural is not doubted, but accepted, thus the Witches become marvellous for Macbeth and the reader. In addition, whereas the sceptical Lady Macbeth always eschews the fantastic-/uncanny instances in the play (the Ghost, the daggers and the voices), she never doubts the existence of the Witches, or at least their prophecies, which further confirms the Weird Sisters as marvellous. To sum up after Act 1, it can be said that the Witches are first presented to the readers as marvellous, then with Macbeth's and Banquo's responses and doubts the interpretation shifts towards the fantastic-uncanny, but at the end of the act they are again

confirmed as marvellous. Until the end of the play they appear one more time, but it does not mean they are not crucial to the play; it is Shakespeare's strategic use of the supernatural, as McLuskie claims:

Achieving this theatrical end requires only three strategically placed scenes: at the beginning to start the action and alert the audience to the importance of Macbeth, who will not appear for another two scenes; towards the end of act 1 to deliver the all-important message to Macbeth and Banquo – a message which carries the action through the murders of Duncan and Banquo; and again in act 4 to provide a new momentum which will carry the action through to its climax. It was a structured use of the supernatural which Shakespeare had used in *Hamlet*; an instrumental, albeit brilliantly effective, device for securing particular theatrical and narrative effects. (396)

Before Act 4, Scene 1, the Witches also appear in Act 3, Scene 5, but consensus has it that it is a non-Shakespearean interpolation,<sup>11</sup> and will not be considered here in detail: the Witches meet with Hecate, and since the audience and the reader see them in their own world, they are further confirmed as marvellous. The last Witches' scene in the play takes place after the Ghost of Banquo's visitation. Macbeth is reminded of the prophecy that Banquo will father a line of kings; therefore he decides to meet with the Witches again and ascertain he has not murdered Duncan in vain. However, the audience and the reader do not see how Macbeth finds the Witches' cave; instead they are once more presented with the Witches' perspective: the scene opens with thunder, and the audience and the reader testify to the Witches' preparation of a nasty potion. In other words, it is Macbeth who enters their act and cave – their marvellous world, not the other way round; in contrast, in *Hamlet* the Ghost intrudes on the human world. As Todorov claims, "The fantastic is characterized by brutal intrusion of mystery into the context of real life" (26), and this happens in *Hamlet*, but not in *Macbeth*.

As they "cook", the Witches dance and chant, performing a demonic ritual: "Round about the cauldron go; / In the poisoned entrails throw" (IV.1 4-5): fillet of snake, eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, tongue of dog; to name a few ingredients, including "liver of blaspheming Jew", "nose of Turk" and "Tartar's lips". This is the scene which Macbeth enters, demanding explanation: "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags, / What is't you do?" (IV.1 69-70). The change of his tone and attitude is apparent, but his question once more remains unanswered: it is "A deed without a name" (IV.1 71). The play insists on the mystification of the Witches and their world, deflecting all questions. On Macbeth's demand, the Witches call their "masters" to answer him. The three apparitions (as called in stage

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<sup>11</sup> For more detail see Quinn 217.



directions, as opposed to the *Ghost of Banquo*) enter and deliver him prophecies: “an Armed Head” warns him to “beware the Thane of Fife” (IV.1 94), “a Bloody Child” assures him that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (IV.1 101-2), and “a Child Crowned, with a tree in his hand” asserts: “Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him.” (IV.1 114-6). But as Macbeth recklessly concludes, that “will never be” (116). The apparitions (again unidentified: “Whate’er thou art” (IV.1 95), “unknown power” (IV.1 91)) cannot be commanded by him; he can only listen, as the Sisters warn him. Finally, he insists on knowing: “Shall Banquo’s issue ever / Reign in this kingdom?” (IV.1 124-5), whereupon the sisters conjure up “*a show of eight Kings and Banquo*” (stage direction), a “horrible sight” (IV.1 144), which is however, “true”, as Macbeth believes. These spirits are neither of the same “reality” as the Ghost of Banquo, as Macbeth’s is disturbed to notice: “Thou are too *like* the spirit of Banquo” (IV.1 134, emphasis mine). The First Witch is worried: “But why / Stands Macbeth thus amazedly?” (IV.1 147-8), “Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprites / And show the best of our delights” (IV.1 149-50). Macbeth’s unease stems from the materialisation of his fears about his future presented in a vision, not from his fear of the supernatural itself (which would point to uncanny); and neither are the Witches frightening, as their attempt to entertain Macbeth shows. All of this again points to the reading of the scene as marvellous. Finally, the Witches “*dance, and vanish*” (stage direction), but the scene ends up on the verge of the uncanny, suggesting it has all been a hallucination of Macbeth’s: he is suddenly in his chambers, and questions Lennox:

MACBETH Saw you the weird sisters?

LENNOX No, my lord.

MACBETH Came they not by you?

LENNOX No indeed, my lord.

MACBETH

Infected be the air whereon they ride,

And damned all those that trust them! (VI.1 158-161)

This is reminiscent of the last scene of *Hamlet* in which the Ghost appears for the last time, when Hamlet is the only one who can see it, pointing to the uncanny. However, the scene in *Macbeth* is different in that the audience and the reader do not know how Macbeth ended up in his chamber, as if he had “magically” been teleported there from the Witches’ cave. The framing of the last Witches’ scene in *Macbeth* is another pointer to the marvellous

interpretation – it opens in their world, which Macbeth enters, and ends in Macbeth (magically) exiting it, not the other way round.

Finally, although he has been warned of his failure by the vision of Banquo's line of kings, Macbeth takes the three prophecies at face value, in his fatal mistake: he has forgotten that "fair is foul, and foul is fair"; for "now a wood / Comes toward Dunsinane" (V.5 45-6), "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" (V.8 15-6), and Macbeth dies fighting Macduff, but also his "destiny", cursing the Witches: "And be these juggling fiends no more believed, / That palter with us in a double sense" (V.8 19-20).

### **4.3. Kingship, Witchcraft and Jacobean Royal Ideology**

If in *Hamlet* Shakespeare drew on the early modern ghost-lore, in *Macbeth* he drew on the equally popular witch-lore. But whereas in *Hamlet* the reader is invited, together with the play's characters, to judge the Ghost on religious principles, in *Macbeth* the religious doctrines are not at the forefront: the Witches rather belong to nature and the Scottish landscape, as has been argued above. Although in the rituals they perform and in their propensity to meddle with the human world the Witches exhibit some features of a demonic cult, they do not invoke a particular religious doctrine. The focus is not on their nature, but rather on why they are present in the play.

The reason why *Macbeth* is immersed in witchcraft is said to be political: the play was written early in the reign of James I, the Scottish king who succeeded Queen Elizabeth on the English throne in 1603. Moreover, the new king became a patron to Shakespeare's *Lord Chamberlain's Men*, renamed into *King's Men*, and James' ancestry traced back to Banquo, which is one of the reasons why the historically rightful king Macbeth was portrayed by Shakespeare as usurper. As Orgel claims: "The real Macbeth was, like Richard III, the victim of a gigantic and very effective publicity campaign. Historically, Duncan was the usurper", and Macbeth had a claim on the throne (1618). Orgel also believes that the play depicts "the enforced Anglicisation of Scotland, which Macbeth is resisting" (1617), represented in the play in the figure of the last spirit the Witches conjure in front of Macbeth, which carries "twofold balls and treble scepters" (IV.1 143); i.e. the British royal insignia, signifying Scotland's union with England. In addition, as Floyd-Wilson claims, "in bringing English titles to Scotland, Malcolm places his country in its properly submissive role in relation to

England” (159). Furthermore, Shakespeare’s exploration of witch-lore in *Macbeth* is explained by the fact that King James I was, as Orgel states, “intensely interested in witchcraft”, and had actually written a dialogue on the subject, *Daemonology*, so that “witchcraft and kingship have an intimate relationship in the Jacobean royal ideology” (1617).

However, Shakespeare’s handling of the subject is equivocal: the play ends with Macbeth condemning and eschewing the Witches, as well as defying his (villainous) fate, remaining a dramatic hero: “I will not yield, [...] Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane, / And thou opposed, being of no woman born, / Yet I will try the last. Before my body / I throw my warlike shield” (V.8 27-33). Moreover, the victory of the new king Malcolm comes across as “flat” – at the end of the play, the audience and the reader rather mourn Macbeth’s death than celebrate the new king. As Floyd-Wilson notes, “Macbeth ends uneasily” (159), bearing in mind that Malcolm in a disturbing exchange with Macduff (IV.3) claims he is even less fit to be king than Macbeth, in the scene which “plants doubts as much as it reassures” that the new king Malcolm will be able to stop the vicious circle of violence (Floyd-Wilson 159). And Macduff, Macbeth’s killer, remains morally dubious, having abandoned his wife and children instead of preventing their murder. The final impression is that Malcolm does not do the protagonist justice by calling him “this dead butcher” alongside his “fiendlike queen” (V.8 69). Thus at the end of the play, as Orgel points out, “the issue of legitimacy remains crucially ambiguous” (1618). As McLuskie argues, this is why “few critics now insist on a direct relationship between Shakespeare’s play and the explicit preoccupations of James’s policy and practice” (401). As Moschovakis claims, witchcraft in *Macbeth* is rather challenged by Shakespeare, “especially in light of some post-Reformation writers’ growing scepticism about the reality of witchcraft – a movement connected with the Protestant rejection of exorcism among other Catholic rites. James I himself may have leaned in this direction by 1606” (50). Furthermore, Kranz points out that,

In Renaissance England and the Jacobean court, the reality of witches was not a foregone conclusion. [...]. Even the monarch's position in this matter is not perfectly clear. While his earlier personal involvement in the North Berwick case (held to be a plot by witches against his life while king of Scotland) may have strengthened his belief in witches, his later investigations as king of England exhibit growing scepticism on the question. Thus, ambiguity about the nature of the witches pervades both historical and dramatic contexts. (368)

And just as was the case with *Hamlet*, Shakespeare “mixed the evidence” on the origin of the Weird Sisters, as West claims: “the Sisters are not creatures to be positively labelled either witches or devils under the pneumatological schemes of the time. They bear what seems a

deliberately-forged contradiction” (1112). Moreover, as West goes on, “The weird sisters, like the ghost [of *Hamlet*], appeal for understanding to contemporary [early modern] doctrine; like the ghost, too, they remain at least unclassifiable” (1111). As has been pointed out, the text of *Macbeth* insists on *not* providing any answers about the Sisters’ origin or nature. Orgel argues that “The reality of the witches in *Macbeth* is not in question; the question is why they are present and how far to believe them” (1617), which is why the Witches provide the marvellous setting of the play. They set the plot in motion by presenting Macbeth with the (self-fulfilling) prophecy, which is turned by him into a moral challenge around which the tragedy revolves. The Witches are able to command nature and possess knowledge of “all mortal consequences” (V.3 4-5), but they cannot change the future. It is Macbeth who carries out their prophecies because he is, unlike Banquo, susceptible to their “supernatural soliciting”; they only bring to surface his “black and deep desires” (I.4 51). The tension between predestination and free will is a marked feature of *Macbeth* (Matthews 38). However, as Floyd-Wilson points out, Macbeth exhibits diminished free will, a certain helplessness: “The dramatic thrust of *Macbeth* is its representation of a hero whose tragedy may be inseparable from overwhelming environmental forces, made tentatively Scottish by their supernatural element” (161). This is in line with Tillyard’s claim that “for the Elizabethans the moving forces of history were Providence, fortune, and human character” (60), all at work in *Macbeth*.

To sum up, the supernatural in *Macbeth* forks into two directions: the Weird Sisters represent the marvellous domain of the play – they are accepted at face value, and their function is to trigger the plot in presenting Macbeth with the moral challenge, and later to reinforce it. The Ghost of Banquo can be interpreted as both uncanny and marvellous, and represents a turning point of the play, of Macbeth’s way to damnation. Together with the fantastic or fantastic-uncanny instances of the “air-drawn daggers” and voices, the Ghost is a device used for Macbeth’s characterisation. Finally, *Macbeth* as a whole explores the supernatural in a complex manner, with the question of Macbeth’s unstable position between free will and predestination at its centre.

## 5. Shakespeare's Dramatic Use of the Supernatural

The analysis of the scenes featuring supernatural occurrences in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and their classification in Todorov's terms has revealed that supernatural in two Shakespeare's plays is represented in a very complex way: almost every scene in which the supernatural appears can be interpreted in two radically different ways, and the ambiguity is corroborated by the texts themselves. Moreover, the plays were shown to comply with the three functions of the fantastic posited by Todorov: (1) the pragmatic function, in which "the supernatural disturbs, alarms, or simply keeps reader in suspense" (162); (2) the semantic function, in which "the supernatural constitutes its own manifestation, it is an auto-designation", and (3) the syntactic function, in which "the supernatural enters [...] into the development of the narrative", and is linked to the whole of the literary work (162).

Through close reading, we have tried to describe what happens *during* the reading of the plays, and have shown that the reader often struggles for meaning and a coherent interpretation because the texts repeatedly revise their conclusions. Nevertheless, the general conclusion can be drawn that all the supernatural figures appearing in the two plays are represented as real within the play – including the Ghost of *Hamlet*, the Ghost of Banquo and the Witches in *Macbeth*. But whereas the Witches can be clearly defined as marvellous since their existence is hardly ever truly questioned, the case of ghosts is more complex. Since they embody "the return of the repressed", and the textual focus is on the representation of fear and madness, it can be argued that they belong to the fantastic/uncanny. As Jackson argues, the fantastic happens in our world, whereas marvellous encompasses a secondary world (42): the ghosts intrude on human world, whereas the Witches are represented in a different world, where "fair is foul and foul is fair", where new laws of nature have to be employed. Or, for the early modern audience, the Ghost comes from the Christian (under)world, whereas the Weird Sisters come from an alien Scottish world. The ghosts provoke fear, the Witches provoke wonder. Yet the representations of Old Hamlet's and Banquo's ghosts defy unanimous classification, either uncanny or marvellous, and remain ambiguous, exhibiting features of both.

Since the complexity of the plays' representation of the supernatural elements prevents any definite conclusions, the critics have offered a variety of competing interpretations. One of the results of the analysis in this paper is that in employing Todorov's theory, it has provided a common framework which accounts for all the existing responses to the

supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In other words, not only the characters' and the reader's responses can be classified according to Todorov's model, but the interpretations put forth by the critics as well.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals structural parallelisms in Shakespeare's use of supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Namely, it shows that Shakespeare devised the Ghost of *Hamlet* and the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* as dramatic devices to set the tone and atmosphere of the plays, and trigger the plot in posing the moral challenge to the protagonists, defining the plays' action. However, the difference between those supernatural figures according to Todorov's model produces different repercussions on the interpretation of the protagonists and the plays as a whole: the ambiguous fantastic/uncanny/marvellous representation of the Old Hamlet's ghost is one of the reasons why Hamlet notoriously procrastinates in the execution of its commandment. On the other hand, the Witches' marvellous character makes Macbeth to trust them and act at once, but then the consequences of his crime haunt him throughout the play, assuming various fantastic/uncanny forms (the Ghost of Banquo, the air-drawn daggers, and the voices). Whereas Macbeth believes the Witches at once, Hamlet has to come to terms with the Ghost's (religious) origin and nature, alongside with his melancholy and madness, which perpetuates the fantastic hesitation slipping into the uncanny. Furthermore, both plays deal with usurpation or what happens when the divine degree, the natural order, is breached, and that breach is represented as having uncanny consequences: in *Hamlet* the breach precedes the play, and the Ghost appears at the onset; in *Macbeth* the breach is twofold: the "air-drawn daggers" and voices surround Duncan's murder, and the Ghost of Banquo appears after Banquo's murder. Hamlet has to set the order right, yet he fears his action will bring about another breach: Macbeth breaches the degree at the beginning and has to deal with the (uncanny) consequences until the end of the play.

But maybe the most important dramatic role played by the supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* is that it provides the platform for the audience's and the reader's identification with the protagonist. Since the initial moral challenge is presented by ambiguous supernatural figures, the audience/reader and the protagonist are on the same page in trying to grasp it, which ensures that attention is paid until the end of the play. Finally, although the Ghost and the Witches deliver crucial information which triggers the plot, in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* the dilemma has been present with the protagonists *before* supernatural intervention – on hearing the Ghost's words, Hamlet exclaims "O my prophetic soul!", whereas Macbeth's first reaction to the Witches' prophecies indicates he already harbours the same thoughts and

desires. Although the challenge is posed by supernatural intervention, its execution relies on the characters, thus both plays thematise the struggle between free will and predestination. Or, as Hume summarises,

Fantasy serves many other functions, but perhaps five are most important. It provides the novelty that circumvents automatic responses and cracks the crust of *habitude*. Fantasy also encourages intensity of engagement, whether through novelty or through psychological manipulation. In addition, fantasy provides meaning-systems to which we can try relating ourselves, our feelings, and our data. In other words, it asserts relationship. Fantasy also encourages the condensation of images which allows it to affect its readers at many levels and in so many different ways. And it helps us envision possibilities that transcend the purely material world which we accept as quotidian reality. (196)

The analysis of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in this paper illustrates all these functions of employing the supernatural. In addition, in applying Todorov's classification on Shakespeare's two plays, here proposed analysis articulates and illuminates some of the most enigmatic aspects of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. It also shows that that the ghosts and the witches are not something to be "excused" from otherwise less fantastic Shakespeare, but constitute indispensable dramatic devices. Finally, one of the paper's aims was to show there *was* hesitation pertaining to supernatural before the Enlightenment: Shakespeare's texts produce hesitation in both the original audience and the contemporary reader, and any interpretation that undercuts it with allegorical reading, as Todorov argues, depraves the texts of their inherent ambiguity. However, there is a reason why the modern readers and critics tend to read these supernatural occurrences allegorically or symbolically, bearing in mind their function is to speak about the unspeakable. As Todorov notes, "the fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it" (158). The supernatural in the analyzed plays embodies taboos – regicide, fratricide, incest, and murderous ambition, and the uncanny literary mode is a fitting form of representation for such issues.

The principle is manifested throughout literary history, only the modes of representation change. As Hume notes, "the numinous can be considered either a projection of one's own unconscious or as an independent force" (172), but the contemporary readers and critics, especially after the emergence of psychoanalysis, tend to read embodied taboos represented on stage in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* as allegories of the unconscious. As Todorov ventures, "psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby has made useless) the literature of the fantastic" (160). The claim is rather short-sighted, but it points to the right direction: the contemporary sceptic rejects the physical reality of supernatural occurrences, but does not eschew it completely – the supernatural rather gets *translated* into the psychological realm:

the ghost is not a physical entity, but a mental one. The shift from external to internal “ghosts” is indeed a historic one, but it also means that the contemporary conceptualisation of the supernatural as an internal phenomenon cannot be imposed on texts written before the shift occurred. For Hume it is precisely the Renaissance that saw the emergence of realism and scepticism (29), and Jackson claims the progressive internalisation of the fantastic narrative definitely took place in the post-Romantic period (54). Jackson posits that “Through secularisation, a religious sense of the numinous is transformed and reappears as the sense of the uncanny, but the psychological origins are both identical” (66). Thus to say that *Hamlet* “does not really need the ghost at all” (Orgel 1619) is not only historically inaccurate (granted that Shakespeare’s religious audience believed in ghosts), but it also obscures the insight that the same themes and motifs receive different textual representations within literary history. Whereas Hume accurately notes that “The ghost of Hamlet’s father, the witch-fed vision of Macbeth, are a kind of shorthand, an externalisation of processes and convictions that could be entirely internal” (158), she is anachronistic in concluding that they are merely “useful gimmicks” and that “They can be used to heighten human feelings, but the same story could be told without them” (158). In other words, to deny *Hamlet* the Ghost is to deny Shakespeare’s place in literary history. Finally, in their ambiguous and equivocal portrayal of the supernatural, bordering between the religious and psychological, the external and internal, the embodied and mental, the uncanny and marvellous, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* stand on the historic intersection of pre-modern and modern literary representations.



## 6. Conclusion

This paper proposes the analysis of supernatural occurrences in two Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic, reconceptualised for the purpose of this paper as an ahistorical mode. Each scene in which ghosts or witches appear in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* was subjected to close reading and analyzed in terms of Todorov's classification of fantastic literature into uncanny, fantastic and marvellous, with transitory modes. Close reading was a prerequisite to the approach since the fantastic is manifested not merely in supernatural occurrences, but also in how they are represented within the text. Thus the analysis focused on the characters', as well as on the early modern audience's and the contemporary reader's responses to the supernatural, and was further expanded to include the critics' responses as well. Therefore Todorov's theory provided a common framework which accounts for all the competing responses and interpretations of the two plays.

The results of the analysis revealed highly ambiguous textual representation of the ghosts, especially the Ghost of *Hamlet*, whereas the Witches of *Macbeth* were found to represent a rather clear case of the marvellous. In addition, the analysis revealed structural parallelisms in Shakespeare's use of the supernatural in the two plays, but it has also revealed that the difference pertaining to their uncanny/marvellous character bears repercussions for the interpretation of the protagonists and the plays as a whole. The resulting classification of the supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* was further used to outline the way in which Shakespeare used the supernatural as a dramatic device and to what ends, illuminating both the early modern and contemporary reception of the plays. Finally, Shakespeare's use of the supernatural was placed in a historical perspective, underlining its unstable position between the pre-modern and modern literary representations. In other words, the application of Todorov's model on *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in this paper provided an explanation for the texts' appeal to both early modern and contemporary readers.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to present a close reading of two plays by William Shakespeare from the perspective of Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic, reconceptualised for the purpose of this paper as a literary mode. The plays selected for analysis in this context, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, are analyzed for the occurrences of supernatural, and these instances are tested for how they comply with Todorov's categories of the fantastic, uncanny and marvellous. Each supernatural feature found in the plays is considered in terms of the characters', readers' (both early modern and contemporary), and scholars' responses to it, which are then classified according to Todorov's theory as a common analytical framework. This classification is then in turn employed to further illuminate how and why the supernatural is used in the two plays; in other words, what consequences the uncanny, fantastic or marvellous quality of the supernatural occurrence bears for the interpretation of the plays as a whole.

*Keywords:* fantastic, Shakespeare, Tzvetan Todorov, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*