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Shakespeare's Development.

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A THESIS PRESENTED AT THE
COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
AS A PARTIAL REQUIREMENT FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

ELSIE LEE MASSEY

INTRODUCTION

My object in writing this thesis is to show that Shakespeare used the supernatural element in his plays for the purpose of making an appeal to the fantastic nature of his audience. I have made an effort to show that Shakespeare lived in a superstitious age, and that his beliefs and interests were the same as those of the average man of his day. In this discourse I have endeavored to lay emphasis on Shakespeare's artistic use of three supernatural elements; namely, fairies, ghosts, and witches.

All references that I have used are cited in footnotes. At the end of this thesis I have listed a bibliography of periodicals and books which deals with the subject.

I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. E. M. Gwathmey, Professor of English, College of William and Mary, for his valuable suggestions in the treatment of this subject.

SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF THE SUPERNATURAL

The use of the supernatural in the drama did not originate with Shakespeare, but with the very earliest writers of legends and fancies. A study of the history of literature indicates that the supernatural element has since time immemorial made an appeal to all people because imagination is a characteristic of the make up of every man in every age. In a discussion of Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, we must bear in mind the fact that he was born in and lived during an age which was highly imaginative, and which might be well characterized by the one word "superstition". As an Elizabethan he wrote plays that appealed to the imaginative qualities of the Elizabethan mind; In other words, he knew what the people wanted and gave it to them; hence, his use of the supernatural is representative of the age in which he lived. A good example of his use of the supernatural is found in A Midsummer Night's Dream. In a criticism of this play Furness says¹ "The play was designed as one of those which were common at midsummer festivities. To the inheritors of the English tongue the potent sway of fairies on midsummer eve is familiar." A common belief of the time is expressed by a fairy in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

"Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Call'd Robin Goodfellow: are not you he

¹ H. H. Furness, Variorum Shakespeare, Vol. X, P. V.

That frights the maidens of the villagery;
Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,
And bootless make the breathless housewife churn;
And sometimes make the drink to bear no barm,
Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?
Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
You do their work, and they shall have good luck:
Are not you he?"

In reply to this Puck says,¹

"Thou speak'st aright;
I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon, and make him smile,
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal;
And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's bowl,
In very likeness of a roasted crab;
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,
And 'tailor' cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh;
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there."

1. A Midsummer Night's Dream — Act II, Sc. I.

This play was most appropriate for the midsummer season of the year--a season during which the Elizabethan imagination ran riot. In reference to the appropriateness of the time of the play Elsie Lathrop says, ¹ "The title must refer to that time of year when such interference of the fairies in the affairs of mortals might seem most probable to the English audience, for at midsummer it was believed by many of the country folks in Shakespeare's time, and later, that fairies might actually be seen by those fortunate enough to chance upon one of their meeting places, and that on this day of the year they might effect much for the benefit or harm of those who had incurred either their good-will by unconscious deeds of kindness, or their ill will by malice or cruelty."

As Shakespeare wrote his plays for the people, naturally he gave them what they wanted and what the time demanded. The people actually believed in fairies, and there is very little doubt that Shakespeare believed in them. Whether or not Shakespeare believed in fairies, he was artist enough to make effective use of them in his plays.

Shakespeare wrote his plays for the stage; therefore, he made them just as attractive as he could. Whenever the supernatural elements appear, they are made to serve a purpose. He used fairies to secure comedy, as in A Midsummer Night's Dream. They play an important part in this play; in fact, they almost make the play. They are not the rough, ugly, repulsive, and harmful fairies of Grimm's Mythology. Shakespeare places them in a land of fancy.

¹. Elise Lathrop - Where Shakespeare Set His Stage - P. 173

They are very delightful fairies who skip about lightly and fantastically. These fairies are not harmful, but they play pranks on mortals just for sport, and then they leave the mortals and go back to their regular work in Fairyland. The fairie's work in Fairyland is expressed by a fairy in A Midsummer Night's Dream. The fairy says, I.

 "Over hill, over dale,
 Thorough bush, thorough brier,
 Over park, over pale,
 Thorough flood, thorough fire,
I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moon's sphere;
And I serve the fairy queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green,
The cowslips tall her pensioners be:
In their gold coats spots you see;
Those be rubies, fairy favours,
In those freckles live their savours:
I must go seek some dewdrops here,
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear."

The work of these fairies is also expressed by Titania. She says, 2.

"Come, now a roundel and a fairy song;
Then, for a third part of a minute, hence;
Some to kill cankers in the mush-rose buds;
Some war with rere-mice for their leathern wings,
To make my small elves coats; and some keep back

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1. A Midsummer Night's Dream Act II. Sc. I.
 2. A Midsummer Night's Dream Act II. Sc. II.

The clamorous owl, that nightly hoots and wanders
At our quaint spirits. Sing me now asleep;
Then to your offices, and let me rest."

The fairies add an element of reality to A Midsummer Night's Dream, for the play did seem real to the people for whom it was written. This play is one which would appeal to the people on a Midsummer Eve--an Eve full of enchantment.

The structure of A Midsummer Night's Dream calls for four days, but we must remember that the play is a dream and that several days may elapse in one night's dream. Shakespeare left it to the spectators to count the days for themselves. Time is nothing to the fairies, for day and night pass unnoticed. As Furness says, ¹
"It is we, after all, not the characters on the stage, about whom Shakespeare weaves his spells. It is our eyes that are latched with magic juice. The lovers on the stage pass but a single night in the enchanted wood, and one dawn awakens them on May day. We, the onlookers, are bound in deeper charms, and must see dawn after dawn arise until the tale is told, and, looking back, be conscious of the lapse of days as well as of a night."

Shakespeare gives us three types of fairies in A Midsummer Night's Dream. First, there is the dainty fairy who is very small and wanders everywhere and says, ²

"I must go seek some dewdrops here,
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear."

1. H. H. Furness, Variorum Shakespeare,

A Midsummer Night's Dream, P. XXIV.

2. A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act II, Sc. I,

This type of a fairy is also represented in Romeo and Juliet.

Mercutio gives us an excellent description of Queen Mab and her work.

Mercutio says, 1.

"O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the fore-finger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep;" etc.

Secondly, there is Puck or the Robin Goodfellow type of fairies. He is rougher than the others. He delights in playing pranks and getting into mischief. He laughs at all and has no pity or sympathy for anyone. We can hear him say: 2.

"Lord, what fools these mortals be!"

Thirdly, there are fairies that resemble the fairies of the classics. Oberon, king of the fairies, and Titania, queen of the fairies, belong to this type. We may take the following passages which illustrate the difference between the fairies: 3.

Puck. My fairy lord, this must be done with haste,
For night's swift dragons cut the clouds full fast,
And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger;
At whose approach, ghosts, wandering here and there,
Troop home to churchyards: dammed spirits all,

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1. Romeo and Juliet - Act I. Sc. IV.
 2. A Midsummer Night's Dream - Act III. Sc. II.
 3. A Midsummer Night's Dream - Act III. Sc. II.

That in crossways and floods have burial,
Already to their wormy beds are gone;
For fear lest day should look their shames upon,
They wilfully themselves exile from light,
And must for eye consort with black-brow'd night.

Oberon. But we are spirits of another sort:

I with the morning's love have oft made sport;
And, like a forester, the groves may tread,
Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red,
Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams,
Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.
But, notwithstanding, haste; make no delay:
We may effect this business yet ere day.

These three different classes of fairies add attractiveness and amusement to A Midsummer Night's Dream. The fairies in this play add an element of reality, for the people believed in them. These fairies are interesting in their relations with human beings. We see that they control the actions of human beings and treat them as mere playthings. These fairies contribute to the action of the play. In Romeo and Juliet Shakespeare also makes use of a fairy, Queen Mab, but she has nothing to do with the action of the play. Mercutio mentions her, and then gives us an excellent description of her and her habits. John Matthews Manly says, 1. "Whole scenes exist for no other reason than that the author's brain is teeming

1. A Memorial Volume to Shakespeare and Harvey

with situations and characters and humor or infinite jest."

The Tempest is regarded as a fairy play, but it is very different from A Midsummer Night's Dream. The atmosphere is different, for there is a thinner and clearer air.

1. "The climate's delicate: the air most sweet.

Fertile the isle."

The elves in this play are generally known as sprites, and not as fairies. They are imaginary creatures of a higher order. These sprites represent the elementary powers of nature, repulsive like Caliban and Sycorax, or beautiful like Ariel and the sprites who obey his orders.

The Tempest was written at a time when the people, in general, believed in magic and enchantment. We may gather from the writers of the time that the people believed in magic and enchantment. A few of the writers who wrote about this^{belief} were Howard, Earl of Northampton, in his Defensative Against the Reason of Supposed Prophecies, 1583; Scot, in his Discoverie of Witchcraft and Discourse of Devils and Spirits, 1584; James, in his Daemonologie, 1603; and Mason, in his Anatomic of Melancholy, 1617. Howard says, "We need not rifle the monuments of former times, so long as the present age wherein we live may furnish us with store of most strange examples." We may see from such writers as those that The Tempest was the type of play which the people demanded because of their superstition. The very titles of these writings show us that

1. Quoted in Fairies From Shakespeare to Mr. Yeats: H. Frierson Living Age. Vol. 269; P. 654. Je. 10, '11.

2. Quoted in Shakespeare and His Times: Nathan Drake. P. 581.

the people were interested in magic, enchantment, witches, and ghosts. Shakespeare made use of this popular belief in magic and in enchantment to make his play, The Tempest, attractive and appeal to the people.

This play is purely for the imagination. Shakespeare places his characters on an enchanted isle, a place well suited for magic works. There are elves and spirits, with Ariel at their head on this isle. But Ariel and Caliban move only on compulsion, and their obedience is the result of the magic power. We can see this from the conduct of Ariel who was always asking for liberty, and from the language of Caliban who said that "they all do hate him, as rootedly as I".

Prospero performs his magic through Ariel and the other sprites who are used to carry out his desires and orders. It is through these sprites that Prospero succeeds in revenging those who wronged him. When Prospero saw that those who injured him had suffered enough punishment, he caused them to be brought to the enchanted isle by Ariel. After they all assemble there, Prospero gives Ariel and all the others their freedom.

The history of The Tempest is not important, but it is the magic and enchantment which Shakespeare used in it that appealed to the people. In A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest Shakespeare gives us two types of fairy plays. In the former the fairies have the upper hand and handle the mortals as they wish, while in the latter the mortal has the upper hand and the sprites act according to what he orders them to do.

Next, we turn to Shakespeare's use of the supernatural to

secure tragedy. He does this by bringing in ghosts and witches. Shakespeare used ghosts and witches in his plays because the people of his day believed in them. Mr. W. S. Brassington gives us several examples of the belief in ghosts and witches in Shakespeare's day. Brassington says, ¹. "Every district has its own dialect, folklore, and ghost stories, differing more or less in detail, but having many points in common.

"Ghosts and witches still hold their own as articles of faith in villages around Stratford, where the country folk, though averring they are not frightened at "ghosts", will not go to the haunted spots alone after dark."

Then Brassington goes on to say, ². "At a place along the Skipston road, between Stratford and Alderminster, a ghostly calf comes through the hedge with great noise of breaking sticks: but when the hedge is examined no trace of anything can be found."

Another illustration may be given concerning the common superstition. ³. "At Soxley there was a witch who could turn herself into a hare; she appears to have troubled the people in the village, and one night some men went out to shoot her, whereupon she immediately turned into a hare. The man fired, but the hare escaped, though apparently wounded. Next day, when some of the villagers called upon the old woman, they found she would not sit down, and they therefore drew the conclusion that their theory of the metamorphosis was correct." Mr. Brassington says that this story was firmly believed in during that age.

1, 2, 3, Shakespeare's Homeland - W. S. Brassington, Pp. 224, 227

Concerning the belief of actual appearance of ghosts and apparitions in Shakespeare's time Addison says, ¹ "Our Forefathers looked upon nature with reverence and horror that they loved to astonish themselves with the apprehensions of witchcraft, prodigies, charms, and enchantments. There was not a village in England that had not a ghost in it--the churchyards were all haunted--every common had a circle of fairies belonging to it--and there was scarcely a shepherd to be met with who had not seen a spirit."

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Reginald Scot says, ² "In our childhood our mother's maides have so terrified us with an oughlie divell having hornes on his head, fier in his mouth, and a taile in his breech, eies like a bason, fanges like a dog, clawes like a beare, a skin like a niger, a voice roaring like a lion, whereby we start and are afraid when we heare one cry Bough; and they have so fraied us with bull beggars, spirits, witches, witchens, elves, hags, fairies, satyrs, pans, faunes, rylens, kit with the cansticks, tritons, centaurs, dwarfes, giants, imps, calcars, conjurors, nymphes, changelings, Incubus, Robin Goodfellowe, the spoorne, the mare, the man in the oke, the hallwaine, the fierdrake, the puckle, Tom Thombe, hob goblin, Tom tumbler, boneless, and such other bugs, that we are afraid of our own shadows: in so much as some never feare the divell, but in a dark night; and then a polled sheepe is a perillous heart, and manie times is taken for our father's soule, speciallie in a churchyard, where a right hardie man heretofore scant durst passe by, but his haire would stand upright."

1. Spectator, No. 419

2. Quoted in Shakespeare's England, Vol. I. p. 528 - Oxford University Press.

Since such was the belief in Shakespeare's time even among the educated, with few exceptions, it was very wise for Shakespeare to write plays in which he could very skillfully use this belief of the time. When the people believed in ghosts and saw a play in which there was a ghost, the play seemed all the more real to them. We find Shakespeare using ghosts in several of his plays, but the ghosts are not always the same, for some are objective and some subjective.

Shakespeare makes use of both the objective and subjective ghosts in Hamlet. There is the objective ghost which appears to four persons; namely, Marcellus, Bernardo, Horatio, and Hamlet. We may see that the ghost appears to these four men from the following:^{1.}

Hor. It beckons you to go away with it,
As if it some impartment did desire
To you alone.

Mar. Look, with what courteous action
It waves you to a more removed ground;
But do not go with it.

Hor. No, by no means.

Ham. It will not speak; then I will follow it.

Hor. Do not, my lord.

Ham. Why, what should be the fear?
I do not set my life at a pin's fee;
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?
It waves me forth again: I'll follow it.

1. Hamlet - Act I, Sc. IV.

The ghost appears to these men, but it speaks to Hamlet only. ^{1.}

Ham. Whither wilt thou lead me? speak; I'll go no further.

Ghost. Mark me.

Ham. I will.

Ghost. My hour is almost come,
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.

Ham. Alas, poor ghost!

Ghost. Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.

Ham. Speak; I am bound to hear.

Ghost. So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

Ham. What?

Ghost. I am thy father's spirit; etc.

The ghost in Hamlet is almost one of the characters, but it does not do anything physically. It merely appears, speaks to Hamlet, and vanishes. The appearances of the ghost spread a shade of terror over the play. It was necessary for the ghost to appear before others than Hamlet to carry out the tragedy, and to make us see the ghost as Hamlet saw it. If Shakespeare had taken the view that only one man could see a ghost at a time, the dramatic effect of the appearance of the ghost would be lost. Nathan Drake says, ^{2.} "Had the ghost in Hamlet been invisible and inaudible we should have lost the noblest scene of grateful terror which genius has ever created." Shakespeare knew that he lived in a

1. Hamlet- Act I, Sc. V.

2. Nathan Drake- Shakespeare and His Times- P.537.

superstitious age, and that in order to make his play popular he had to adopt the popular creed concerning the belief in ghosts.

Shakespeare uses ghosts to add an element of reality, for ghosts were real to the people in that age, but now we know that if we think we see a ghost, it is purely our imagination. Hamlet shows that he is prepared to see the ghost when he says, "My father, methinks I see my father -----In my mind's eye, Horatio." The ghost tells Hamlet to avenge his father's death. Hamlet had been suspicious concerning his father's death before he saw the ghost, but still he was not hasty in avenging his father's death. He wanted to get more evidence before he acted.

Horatio was not in the state of mind to see a ghost, but Shakespeare made him see the ghost as a part of the dramatic machinery. If Horatio and the soldiers had not seen the ghost, the ghost would not have seemed as real to the audience. It is by the ghost being visible to them that we sympathize with Hamlet in his belief of its visible presence.

The ghost is a very important element in Hamlet. It is true that the ghost leaves at the end of the third act, but its presence in the play was necessary in order to get the play under-way. When the ghost appeared the audience knew that a startling revelation was going to be made because its very appearance signified terror. The appearance of the ghost helped to hold the interest of the people. The ghost is a powerful element in this play, for it works on our imaginative and moral forces because from the interview with the ghost Hamlet learns of the murder of his father, and from that time on Hamlet is a different man. His suspicion

of the death of his father has become a reality, his speech has become ghost-like, and his desire of revenge has increased to such an extent that he plans to give a play that will determine the conscience of the king. As Hamlet says, ¹. "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." When the play is given King Claudius exhibits his guilt and Hamlet is convinced of the truth of the ghost's revelation, and determines to seek vengeance which he has sworn to execute; thus the ghost is a powerful element in this play, for it works on our imaginative and moral forces.

Mr. Littledale gives us a very good description of ghosts and their work in his article on Folklore and Superstitions. He says, ². "From Hamlet we can gather many of the current notions regarding these ghostly visitants. Coming after midnight, they must depart ere cockerow, or a fearful summons will hurry them away. The ghost 'walk' usually because of some reparation to be made, or foul play to be disclosed, or to warn those dear to them of peril, private or public; or to watch over hidden treasure. Their shapes are without substance, and weapons cannot harm them. They are recognizable figures, in well-remembered attire, wearing either shadowy armour, or in their habit as they lived; or they may appear in 'cerements' (Hamlet I. IV. 48) the familiar 'winding sheet' of many an eerie tale. They will not speak unless they are questioned, and then only to those for whom they have a message. Until this is delivered they repeat their visits, if necessary appearing to

1. Hamlet - Act II, Sc. II.

2. Shakespeare's England - Vol. I - Oxford University Press - P.534

others besides the person whom they specially seek. Their voices squeak and gibber; but on the stage their airy tongues are distinct, and they move with warlike stalk."

We see that the ghost in Hamlet revisits the earth and walks until he is avenged and can have rest. This same thing applies to the ghost of Julius Caesar, and, also to that of Banquo.

The ghost of Caesar is more important to the play than the bodily presence of Caesar. The spirit of Caesar is the most powerful element of the drama, for it is against this spirit of Caesar that Brutus fought. It was Caesar's weak body that Brutus struck down, but he could not strike the spirit of Caesar. Caesar's spirit was strong and terrible, and came to avenge itself upon the conspirators. Caesar's ghost reveals to us the great power of the dictator.

The appearance of the ghost in Richard III is merely a dream. There is no waking existence. The ghost adds terror to this drama, but not as much as the ghost in Hamlet does. The ghosts in Julius Caesar and Richard III are mere sketches in comparison with the ghost in Hamlet.

Concerning the entrance of the ghost in Richard III Hazlitt says, ¹ "The introduction of the ghosts through the trapdoors of the stage should be altogether omitted. The speeches which they address to Richard might be delivered just as well from behind the scenes. These sort of exhibitions might have been very proper for a superstitious age, but in an age not superstitious they excite ridicule instead of terror."

1. Hazlitt - Shakespeare's Characters - P.154

It is true that people in that superstitious age would become terrified at the entrance of the ghost through the trap-door, for they really believed in ghosts while we do not.

It was a common belief in Shakespeare's time that lights grew dim, or burned blue, at the approach of a ghost. In Richard III we have the following line: ¹ "The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight."

In Macbeth the ghost of Banquo is visible to Macbeth only and to no one else on the stage, and therefore, it must be invisible to the audience. The ghost in Macbeth is not the powerful and gloomy ghost which we meet in Hamlet. The ghost of Banquo terrified only Macbeth, and no one knew about the ghost but Macbeth. In Hamlet the ghost appeared to more than one; therefore, it has more to do with the action of the tragedy.

The ghost in Macbeth is a subjective ghost, for it exists only in the imagination of Macbeth, and is not seen by any of the other people present. Hudson says, ² "In Shakespeare's time, the generality of people could not possibly take the conception of a subjective ghost; but it is not so now. To be sure, it was part of the old superstition in this behalf, that a ghost could make itself visible, if it chose, only to such as it had some special concern with; but this is just what we mean by a subjective ghost."

The subjective ghost, such as we find in Macbeth, is not as popular on the stage as is the objective ghost, such as we see in Hamlet. The popularity of the one and the unpopularity of the

1. Richard III - Act V, Sc. III.

2. Shakespeare - Hudson - Vol. 2, P. 348

other is due to the fact that the objective ghost makes the greater appeal to the audience because ^{the mind} we can experience what is taking place. For example, when an apparition resembling Hamlet's dead father appears on the stage, we experience feelings similar to those that almost over-come Hamlet. Of all the tragedies which contain ghosts, Hamlet seems to be the most popular one. The ghost in this drama is the mainspring of the action. Shakespeare uses it to hasten the action of the play. The subjective ghost that we find in Macbeth makes very little appeal to our imagination because that ghost can be experienced by Macbeth only, since its imaginary appearance is the result of Macbeth's own wicked, ^{and} nagging conscience.

Mrs. Montague says, ¹. "The first propriety in dealing with preternatural beings seems to be that the ghost be intimately connected with the fable; that he increase the interest, add to the solemnity of it, and that his efficiency in bringing on the catastrophe be in some measure adequate to the violence done to the ordinary course of things in his visible interposition. To this end it is necessary that this being should be acknowledged and revered by the national superstition, and every operation that develops the attributor, which the vulgar opinion or nurse's legend taught us to ascribe to him, will augment our pleasure."

If we take this attitude towards Shakespeare's plays, we shall appreciate them more, and get more out of them. We see by this that Shakespeare had a motive in using ghosts.

Shakespeare used witches in his plays for the same purpose

1. Quoted in Furnes's Variorum Shakespeare - Hamlet P. 146

as he did ghosts. When witches appear, we know that there is going to be a tragedy, and our interest is heightened as we wait for the expected terror.

In Macbeth the supernatural machinery, which is one of its most striking features, is founded on the superstitions that prevailed in England and Scotland in Shakespeare's day. During the reign of Henry VIII, there was enacted a statute which declared "all witchcraft and sorcery to be felony without benefit of clergy"; but at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, witchcraft seems to have increased, for Bishop Jewel, preaching before the Queen, in 1558, tells her, ¹ "It may please Your Grace to understand that Witches and Sorcerers within these few last years are marvelously increased within your Grace's realm. Your Grace's subjects pine away, even unto death, their colour fadeth, their flesh rotteth, their speech is benumbed, their senses are bereft. I pray God they never practise further than upon the subject."

Since such was the popular belief among all people, even among the educated, with few exceptions, Shakespeare was forced to use these superstitions in his plays.

John Jewel in a sermon, which he preached in 1572, declared:² "Witches and sorcerers, within these last few yeeres, are marvellously increased within this your Grace's realme. There eyes have seene most evident and manifest marks of their wickedness----- Wherefore, your poore subjects most humble petition unto your High-

1. Struppe's Annals of Reformation, Vol. I. P.8

2. Quoted in Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, Introduction P. XXXII

ness, in that the laws touching such malefactors, may be put in due execution."

Hundreds of old women were tortured and burned alive because of this belief in witches. The belief in witchcraft was universal, and men looked on it as one of the unexplained powers of nature rather than as something of wickedness. Wizards and witches were punished for designing or inflicting criminal injuries on man or beast as they were for any other crime. There is no reason to doubt that Shakespeare, like other people in his own day, held the ordinary beliefs on this subject as on that of ghosts.

There has been some dispute whether Shakespeare ennobled Middleton's witches, or whether Middleton made vulgar the witches of Shakespeare, but that does not concern us. All we know is that Shakespeare found the outline sketches of these beings and gave them a poetic life.

Shakespeare's witches are true to nature, considering the time in which he wrote his plays. In the play of Macbeth, Shakespeare takes us back into the legendary time of Scottish history. In this play there is a conflict for the mastery between man's free will and his circumstances, his fate or destiny. This conflict in Macbeth is declared at the beginning, for we see that the witches appear in the opening scene. "The true reason for the first appearance of the Witches", Coleridge has said, "is to strike the keynote of the whole drama." They appear in a place where evil reigns, a desert place, with thunder and lightning. It is here that we find the terrible, mysterious, weird sisters. These weird sisters are the masters of man and make man their slave. Here these weird

sisters came through the thunder, wind, rain, and lightning to meet Macbeth.

The weird sisters cast a weird influence on the action of the play. They do not create evil in Macbeth, but only bring evil out; they stimulate what has originated within himself.

The weird sisters who first approach Macbeth and Banquo are grotesque creatures. The longer Macbeth and Banquo look at these uncanny creatures the more horrible they appear, until finally Banquo exclaims, ¹. "What are these, so wither'd, and so wild in their attire."

Shakespeare's witches are creatures to whom one, who is plotting some mischief, would go to for help. When Macbeth meets these witches, he is spellbound. This meeting has such a profound effect on Macbeth that he does not rest until he has discovered a plan whereby the prophecies may come true and his ambition satisfied, for they had predicted that Macbeth would be "king hereafter".

The weird sisters have no names; this heightens their mysteriousness, for they are known only as "The Three Witches", and "The Weird Sisters". In a symbolical way, no doubt, they illustrate something that was, and is, and will forever more be, for they represent the action that takes place between a man's evil mind and his external nature. These weird sisters are serious things; they are always ready to do mischief. Their presence in Macbeth casts a gloomy and weird shade over the whole play. They

1. Macbeth - Act I. Sc. III

are the fates of destiny, answering to the three divisions of time: the past, the present, and the future. This is shown when the Three hail Macbeth. ¹

Macbeth. Speak, if you can: What are you?

First Witch. All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee,
thane of Glamis!

Second Witch. All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee,
thane of Cawdor!

Third Witch. All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be
king hereafter!

After Macbeth heard this he sought the weird sisters in their dark cavern to learn more of what they had told him. He says, ², "More shall they speak, for I am bent to know by the worst means, the worst."

In his criticism of The Works of Shakespeare, Hudson brings out the contrast in the appearance of the witches before and after the entrance of Macbeth and Banquo. Hudson says, ³. "The difference is not merely one of degree, but of kind; a difference as broad and as pronounced as that between a tadpole and an eagle. In the former case, they are neither more nor less than the coarse, foul old-woman witches of ancient superstition; creatures actuated by the worst and lowest human motives and passions, envy, malice, and spite; killing swine, sailing in sieves, assuming the forms of rats without tails, dealing in the thumbs of

1. Macbeth - Act I, Sc. III

2. Macbeth - Act III, Sc. IV.

3. Hudson - Shakespeare - Vol. II, P.321

wrecked pilots, and riding through the air on broomsticks. Their aspect and behaviour are in the last degree commonplace and vulgar; there is nothing even respectable about them; all is of the earth earthy. In the latter case, they are mysterious and supernatural beings, unearthly and terrible, such as we may well conceive "the Goddesses of Destiny" to be: their very aspect and awe; they do not come and go, they appear and vanish, bubbling up, as it were, through the ground from the lower world, in something of a human shape, to breathe the contagion of Hell upon a soul which they know to be secretly in sympathy with them, and inwardly attempted to their purpose".

Thus we see in this drama that Shakespeare wrote it according to the superstitions of the age. There have been many stories told of the witches in that age. Many human beings were accused of being witches. Shakespeare made use of those being accused as witches in two of his plays; namely, I. Henry VI, and II. Henry VI. In I. Henry VI, Joan of Arc was accused of being a witch. Talbot says: 1.

"Where is my strength, my valour, and my force?

Our English troops retire, I cannot stay them:

A woman clad in armour chaseth them

Re-enter La Pucelle.

Here, here she comes. I'll have a bout with thee;

Devil or devil's dam, I'll conjure thee:

Blood will I draw on thee, thou art a witch,

And straightway give thy soul to him thou servest."

1. I. Henry VI - Act I, Sc. V.

Mr. Schelling states, ¹ "the extraordinary reversal of the military successes of Henry V and of Talbot by the French, a foe habitually despised and beaten, could be accounted for in no other wise than by the acceptance of the English tradition that Joan of Arc had been justly tried and burned for a witch."

In II. Henry VI, the Duchess of Gloucester was accused of being a witch and dealing with witches. Buckingham says: ²

"Such as my heart doth tremble to unfold,
A sort of naughty persons, lewdly bent,
Under the countenance and confederacy
Of Lady Eleanor, the protector's wife,
The ringleader and head of all this rout,
Have practised dangerously against your state,
Dealing with witches and with conjurers:
Whom we have apprehended in the fact;
Raising up wicked spirits from under ground,
Demanding of King Henry's life and death,
And other of your highness' privy-council;
As more at large your grace shall understand."

These accusations prove that the people in Shakespeare's time really believed in the actual existence of witches.

No English dramatist has surpassed Shakespeare in the skillful and artistic method of presenting the supernatural on the stage. His knowledge of the superstitions of his own day and his

1. Shakespeare and Demi-Science -- Schelling, P. 174

2. II. Henry VI -- Act II. Sc. I.

ability to use them effectively in his plays have made him master of the supernatural in the drama. He used fairies for his light and airy plays, and witches and ghosts for his more serious plays. When he used fairies, comedies were the result; when he used witches and ghosts, tragedies were the result.

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