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Faces of the Supernatural:

Agency and Nature in Shakespeare's

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet, & Macbeth

Catherine Vuilleumier

Sous la direction du professeur Kevin Curran

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Introduction

Shakespeare's plays contain a number supernatural elements that have been the object of much study and debate. Some are instrumental to the plays' plots while others take the shape of passing references without which the storylines could still conceivably function. As John Beifuss explains, "to posit a supernatural dimension to the tragedies requires more than the mere mention of angels, ghosts, or witches in the plays, more even than the appearances of these on the stage. The supernatural element must be so inextricably intertwined with, so blended into the tragedy, that without it there would be either no play or an entirely different play" (24). The presence of the supernatural was not a rare occurrence on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages. But Shakespeare was unique in the number of forms the supernatural takes in his plays and its uncertain, equivocal nature. This thesis shall focus on the latter sort of manifestations of the supernatural, those which blend into the backbone of a play, without which the plot would be greatly diminished or unrecognisable. More precisely, the instances of the supernatural which shall be examined here will consist of the Faeries from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1594 or 1595), of King Hamlet's ghost in *Hamlet* (c. 1601), of the multiple appearances of ghosts and witches in *Macbeth* (c. 1606). Manifestations of the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays almost always possess a number of common elements even when the forms they take outwardly seem to differ greatly. It wears multiple faces drawn from Christian faith, demonology, witchcraft, and popular folklore, and its interventions seem to be provoked by disturbances of the natural order of the world or to appear when it is itself out of balance. It is this complexity and the larger reaches of its influence which will be studied in

this thesis, in order to determine the limitations of human agency when faced with the supernatural, and whether the intervention of supernatural machinery, when pushing man to action, divests him of his responsibility in resulting events. Additionally, by determining the extent and nature of the agency exerted by the English playwright's ghosts, witches, and faerie, this thesis will seek to better understand whether the supernatural in Shakespeare is moved by its own devices or is born from man's hidden desires, whether it springs from interruptions of the natural order or is natural in origin, whether it primarily creates strife or seeks to resolve it.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, studying the consequences of the faeries' behaviour on nature and their human counterparts. The actions of Oberon, Titania, and Puck are closely related to the natural order, and this chapter will seek to expose the manner in which the perception and understanding of the supernatural by other characters has ramifications reaching into the themes of free will and agency. The second chapter, pertaining to *Hamlet*, will concern itself with determining whether the Ghost and its claims to justice is an element that causes strife and a catalyst to the play's unhappy event, or an agent of justice whose actions are directly or indirectly aimed at restoring balance to a diseased state. The extent of the Ghost's responsibility in the events of the play will be if possible measured against that of the human characters in order to determine whether human agency is limited in the face of the supernatural. The subject of the third and last chapter of this thesis will be *Macbeth*, and how in this play the supernatural, in the form of the Weird Sisters, Hecate, and Banquo's ghost, manipulates the events of the play and it's characters. The aim of this discussion will be to determine whether *Macbeth'*s supernatural characters are agents of fate (consciously or unconsciously), and how the intervention of fate and witchcraft would influence the ethical question of Macbeth's (and more broadly, man's) responsibility for his

actions, once again opposing supernatural agency to human agency. The remainder of this introduction will offer a brief overview of demonology, witchcraft, and popular culture in Shakespeare's England in order to contextualise perceptions of the supernatural at the time when *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet,* and *Macbeth* were written.

Early Modern England did not escape the fascination with witchcraft and the subsequent witch hunts that swept across Europe, a period whose beginning is notably marked by the publishing of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the most famous of witch hunt manuals, by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in 1487, and whose paroxysm coincides with the period where Shakespeare was writing and publishing his plays. Yet it would be erroneous to limit ourselves to the contemporary fascination for witchcraft when interpreting Shakespeare's supernatural, and this will necessitate the understanding of the development of sorcery and witchcraft over a broader segment of history. Indeed, even before its infamous witch hunts, the Church was engaged in a another battle, of a similar nature: against the practitioners of nigromancy, who believed they could summon and control demons. Nigromancy used a mixture of ritual ceremonies and recitations in Latin accompanied by the words *conjuro*, *adjuro*, and *exorcizo* (I conjure, I adjure, and I exorcise). These were usually aimed at obtaining the help of demons in matters such as travel, illusions, and spying (a good example of these is contained in the *Munich Handbook*, a 15th century nigromancer's manual edited and translated by Richard Kieckhefer in his book *Forbidden Rites*). The practitioners of the art happened to be mostly members of the clergy itself: an often educated, bored sample of the population with at least some knowledge of Latin and access to books. Their nature also differed from that of witches: contrary to their female counterparts, sorcerers did not consider themselves to be servants of Satan. Additionally, Michael Bailey reveals that the *Practica Inquisitionis*

heretics pravitatis, the first and perhaps the most famous instructional manual for Inquisitors (written around 1321 to 1324 by the Dominican inquisitor Bernard Gui), dedicates a very small amount of space to nigromancy, which leads to the conclusion that unlike witchcraft, nigromancy was not a prioritary concern of the the Inquisition. The *Practica* also distinguishes common sorcery from elite necromancy, and indicates that though Gui believed Inquisitioners were more likely to encounter the former, it was the latter that Church and the elites feared (968). Though nigromancers might be reduced by some to demon-worshipers or bored clerics dabbling in the occult to better pass the time, nigromancy had a very interesting relationship with religion, as nigromancers considered themselves to be pious men exercising control over demons through religion-inspired ceremonies. Books such as the *Key of Solomon*, a 15th century grimoire wrongly attributed to King Solomon, provide examples of the rituals necessary to conjure the demons. The 17th century *Lesser Key of Solomon* or *Lemegeton* ranks and names seventy-two demons which can be submitted to the nigromancer's will. Demonology existed long before the Church's struggles against witchcraft, and therefore the belief in demons existed in Europe before witches such as the Weird Sisters emerged as enemies of faith and servants of evil. But at a time concerned with cartography, scientific advances, a shift of attention from faith to reason and man, both the power of demons as well as that of witches increasingly had to be classified, rationalised, and understood as part of a system. This thesis will not seek to argue whether or not Shakespeare's merry assortment of faeries, spirits, witches and ghosts (all of whom have been suggested to be of demonic origin) are preternatural or supernatural, but it is relevant to note that they were considered to operate within the bounds of nature. Nevertheless, all of these creatures occupied an important enough place in the collective imaginary of Early Modern England to appear in a

number of books, treatises, and plays pertaining to them directly or indirectly. And even though nigromancy and its practitioners were not the focus of the Church anymore by the time Shakespeare wrote his plays, demons and the art of controlling them were a subject that persisted well into the 17th century.

More than a century stands between the appearance of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and 1606, the date commonly accepted as that around which *Macbeth* — Shakespeare's play most concerned with witches — is thought to have been written, despite that it was not published until 1623. In that century, witch hunting had become a widespread obsession, and accounts of witchcraft and possession appeared on all levels of society, leading many "witches" to their death. Bailey reports that "exact figures are understandably difficult to come by, but the best available estimates set the number near sixty thousand, and this just for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the witch craze reached its peak in Western Europe" (960). James VI of Scotland himself wrote his *Daemonologie* in 1599, before his ascension to the English throne as James I in 1603. However, despite the monarch's interest in witchcraft, iron belief regarding tales of witchcraft in Early Modern England may still have been mitigated by some level of scepticism. David Kranz writes that in Renaissance England and the Jacobean court, the existence of witches was not a foregone conclusion, and that Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) exposed the superstitions involved, while King James' *Daemonologie* (1597) somewhat supported the facticity of witchcraft, though even the King's opinion on the matter is not perfectly clear. Indeed, Kranz notes that "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). The supernatural in Shakespeare's plays certainly reflects this ambiguity, as it does not answer to guidebooks or strictly obey any single sort of catechism, especially the complex Weird Sisters, who appear all at once human through their behaviour and appearance, supernatural through their gift of flight, spells, and capacity to disappear into the air, are sometimes uncomfortably similar to demons and faeries through their powers and familiars, and most of all are capable of making what seems to be accurate prophecies. As Kranz additionally remarks, the Weird Sisters' complex and mysterious nature works in accordance with Shakespeare's treatment of supernatural in other tragedies, which rarely contain supernatural certainties (368). For Robert H. West "the almost self-evident truth is that we simply cannot be sure of much about the Weird Sisters, though beyond a reasonable doubt they are representations of some genuinely superhuman evil. Perhaps they are witches, perhaps they are demons — or perhaps they may be called Noms or Trolls or by some other misty term from superstition's uncertain lexicon. Shakespeare just does not leave us the means to decide" (76). For West, the Weird Sisters' evil is certain even if their exact nature is not. Yet even then, this evil can be put into doubt, since even though they inspire Macbeth's actions, the witches never directly suggest a single evil act to him.

Indeed, though the Weird Sisters inspired the representation of witches in many subsequent portrayals, their exact nature in *Macbeth* remains a mystery. In addition, though witches were creatures to be hunted and avoided, they were also figures other members of their community would consult, and thus often occupied a more ambiguous role than the simple facticity of witch hunts would imply. Robert Lima explains that

> The folk belief of the times perceived witches as malefactors, thus their decadent, otherworldly aspect, their eerie and secretive behaviour, their power to affect human lives and the contexts in which they

> are lived. Yet, despite the evil that they are held to represent and promote, people seek them out and listen to their pronouncements or ask for their mediation in affairs of the heart, the hearth, or society. So it is even with high-status people, as Shakespeare's tragedy shows so distinctly, baring the dire results to person and state of a nefarious collaboration with purveyors of evil (198).

Witches were however understood to be of a far darker nature than necromancers, who were perceived by the Church as manipulated by the demons they thought to control, and thus deceived by Satan rather than worshippers of evil. Bailey explains that "the full stereotype of witchcraft involved far more than just demonic pacts and harmful sorcery. Witches were believed to have entered into total apostasy from the faith and to have given themselves over body and soul to Satan. They were therefore not just individuals possessing harmful supernatural powers but members of a vast conspiratorial satanic cult" (979). Shakespeare's Weird Sisters seem all the more threatening in the light of the Early Modern perception of witches, and in parallel the stakes of their undisclosed nature are all the more important.

Like *Macbeth*'s witches, Shakespeare's ghosts maintain a veil of mystery which has led scholars into an ongoing debate as to their nature. Are they spirits risen from Hell, residing in Purgatory, or descended from Heaven? Do their actions correspond to the roles ghosts played in popular folktales, or are they Protestant, Catholic, or classical spirits? Such questions have been repeatedly asked, answered, cross-examined, and put into doubt in a number of works by authors such as Kranz, Robert Lima, Kenneth Muir, and Diane Purkiss. Purkiss points out that for Frederic Moorman in 1906, the pre-Shakespearean ghost was always Catholic in its origin, coming from Purgatory, and reminds us that in 1935 J. Dover Wilson argued that *Hamlet* invites the audience to wonder whether the ghost is actually the dead King or a demon sent to push Hamlet to murder and suicide. Already, it appears that King Hamlet's ghost is both unusual and of an uncertain nature. However, Purkiss writes that Wilson's argument is both over-ingenious and over-literal, and that the characters in the play avoid theological discussions in

favour of folklore and folktales (137). Indeed, Purkiss insists on the importance of taking folklore into account when studying Shakespeare's ghosts, and this because:

> Folklore and folk practices do change and mutate over time, and they do so in response to the pressure of large-scale historical events like the Reformation. But it is an unwarranted assumption that elite changes are automatically reflected in popular beliefs. Most writers on ghosts, for example, take it for granted that the Reformation had an enormous impact on all representations of ghosts, but this ignores the way ghost stories are told and retold as entertainment, or as a negotiation of the fears and desires that have little to do with theological controversies. (141-2)

Folklore allows for a much broader interpretation of the actions of King Hamlet's and Banquo's ghosts, since it places them outside of the field of theology. Purkiss distinguishes between two origins for the ghosts, classical (Senecan) and folkloric, and writes that:

> The Senecan ghost stands for the breakdown of linear time, and hence becomes a metaphor for the (tragic) loss of order, stability and sometimes even reason, and their dissolution into chaos and confusion. At the same time, the Senecan ghost seeks to restore the order whose absence he represents, through reparation, revenge or (more subtly) through the assertion of the stability of patrilineal succession. The ghost of folklore too is tirelessly concerned with inheritance: with buried treasure, wills and legitimate descent of property. The categories of high and low overlap. (138-9)

Meanwhile, in readings such as Greenblatt's, "the complexities and contradictions of Hamlet's ghost all relate to the abolition of Purgatory as an idea, and to a set of stories which made it possible to negotiate with dead", yet for Purkiss, Greenblatt's "neglect of folklore means he probably underestimates the survival of essentially Catholic ideas in the post-Reformation era; angels and even saints had not altogether vanished from imagination by the 1600s, even if they had gone from theology. The stubbornness of folklore makes it a cosy nesting-place for ideas discarded by elites" (138).

Seeking to resolve the debate over whether King Hamlet's ghost is a product of the Reformation, of Catholic origin, or of folklore leads to an answer standing between all three choices. Even though ghosts were not a primary concern of the Church, unlike witchcraft, their nature remained the subject of debate in Christian theology and they were certainly

present in popular culture and ghost stories. Kenneth Muir thus suggests that the Ghost in *Hamlet* combines literary and folklore elements. Indeed, the Ghost's place of residence seems to be a description more fitting of hell than of purgatory, "and it has been pointed out first, that spirits would not (for such a reason) be released from purgatory, that he speaks of his foul crimes, and that he urges Hamlet to avenge his death. It was dramatically necessary to set up these conflicting impressions in the audience's mind (236). For Muir, the fusion between theology, classical lore, and folklore was essential to Shakespeare's purpose of arousing in Hamlet and in the audience's mind the maximum confusion and conflicting ideas as to the correct action to undertake (236). The Ghost's actions do not exactly correspond to to those of a spirit risen from hell, nor to those of an inhabitant of Purgatory, in addition to this, Purkiss writes that

> Characteristically, ghost stories engage the listener in careful forensic interpretation of events. A figure appears, and listeners must actively decide who or what it is, what its purposes are. Often — most often — the narrative fails to disclose a definitive answer, perhaps leaving room for argument. We will see that this is precisely the structure of onstage ghost sightings, a structure which invites the plurality of popular cultures to make themselves visible in the characters' dialogue. (142)

This motif is particularly evident not only in *Hamlet* but also in *Macbeth*, of which Purkiss writes that "Banquo's ghost is inarticulate. His ghost acts as a riddle that has to be interpreted by Macbeth. (...) Yet elements of folklore surface too: his appearance is also a common and particularly Scottish folklore motif. The untimely dead often return in search of food or hospitality denied them in life, and must be satisfied; in general, ghosts often keep appointments made when living, as if still subject to the laws of time" (143-4). Banquo's silent ghost has perhaps been the object of less scrutinity than King Hamlet's, yet it is just as mysterious, and perhaps even more folkloric in origin.

The supernatural in Early Modern England was not limited to demons, witchcraft or elements related to a Christian belief in the afterlife. Creatures such as faeries also appeared in popular culture and folktales, which played as much of a role in shaping Oberon, Titania and their servants in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* did. Muir points out that Shakespeare's treatment of faeries combines folklore and literature, modified by pure invention. Though the playwright usually seems to conform to the common consensus that faeries were beautiful and of a regular size (examples include the bogus fairies from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Anthony's description of Cleopatra as a great fairy, a beautiful enchantress, Pericles asking Marina if she was a fairy, one of Imogen's brothers saying she is like a fairy; and Venus proposing to entertain Adonis by tripping on the green like a fairy), an exception appears in the form of Queen Mab from *Romeo and Juliet*, who (as described by Mercutio) is clearly diminutive. As for *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* it contains three very different sorts of faeries: Oberon and Titania seem to be of human size whereas Titania's servants Moth, Cobweb and Mustardseed are on the same scale as Mab. Puck is "the only character who is entirely traditional. He is the Pouke of folklore, Robin Goodfellow and Lob. There are many place names in Warwickshire which refer to Lob or Hob — Hob's Hole, Great Hobbs' Meadow, Hobbin's Close, Hob Ridge, Hob's Moat, &c." (236). Even in the world of Shakespeare's supernatural, similar creatures can have different shapes and origins. Whereas Puck is a creature of folklore, Muir writes that:

> Oberon and Titania come partly from medieval romance, partly from classical mythology, and partly from the theory that they were pagan deities who had survived into the Christian era. The name Titania comes, of course, from Ovid, who connects her with Diana and Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, which is why Titania is so concerned with the welfare of the child of her votaress. James I in his *Daemonology* describes one kind of spirits (...) "which by the Gentiles was called Diana and her wandering Court and amongst us was called the Phairie." The King of the Fairies was often identified with the god of the underworld, even by those who had no knowledge of classical mythology. This supports

> the theory that fairy-lore was connected with the persistence of pagan rites in medieval times. As Dr. Vlasopolos has recently shown, St. John's Day, the Christian counterpart of the summer solstice celebration, is inseparable from the pagan midsummer night. It is characterised by the exorcism of evil spirits and follows immediately the license and misrule of the previous night. (237)

In the quote above, Muir not only links the faeries to folklore and classical traditions, but also suggests a connection between the pagan midsummer night and a Christian celebration. The former being a time of license and misrule and the second a time where evil spirits are exercised, and thus, conceivably, order is restored, is clearly reminiscent of the sequence of events in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* In addition to the occurrences cited above, there is another occasion where the mention of faeries can be found in one of Shakespeare's plays. For Purkiss, Hamlet's address to a literate and apparently Senecan ghost in the terms: "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned" (1.4.40), should be understood in light of the fact that a goblin is a demon only in case of a fully demonological interpretation of fairies, as a disguise for deceiving devils. Purkiss further explains that though such an interpretation of fairies was common in educated and elite demonological texts and was often adhered to during witchcraft trials (particularly in Scotland), Shakespeare might be suggesting that the apparition is in fact a *goblin.* The use of a term common to popular rather than learned readings of apparitions is in any case worthy of note (146). Indeed, Purkiss reveals that "a goblin is a kind of fairy of a particular kind, a revenant who is damned because he has met with an untimely death. The Greeks called this kind of being an *aoros*. For some strands of early modern folklore, particularly those on Celtic fringes, that was precisely what fairies were — those who had gone to death before their proper time" (147). Even creatures who would to the modern eye be considered fairly innocuous possess hidden recesses, and knowledge that seemed secure — such as *Hamlet*'s Ghost being a ghost — can easily be thrown into doubt.

From nigromancy and demonology to learned and common witchcraft, from classical mythology to popular culture and folklore, Shakespeare's supernatural, wearing the face of faeries, ghosts, and witches, has multiple roots. In light of the information discussed above, the following pages will seek to more accurately interpret the supernatural occurring in Shakespeare's three plays relevant to this work. They will seek to do so from the angle of how the nature, form, and extent of the supernatural's influence in the plays raises questions in regards to whether man possesses free will in the face of events that seem to be supernaturally ordained or characters that are of a supernatural nature, and in turn whether this limits man's responsibility for his own actions.

Chapter 1.
Intervening with the Natural Order
in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The introduction of this thesis described how, in Early Modern England, supernatural beliefs took a variety of forms that tied back to folk culture as much as to learned texts and even classical tradition. The purpose of this chapter shall be to examine the appearance of the supernatural in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* its nature, and its consequences on the play in order to determine what rules it obeys, whether supernatural characters are clearly identified, and how different manifestations of it compare. The aim of this shall be to determine what degree of agency is given to the play's supernatural elements and the effects of their actions on the lives of the human characters. Additionally, while the audience and the faerie court are aware of the supernatural characters behind the irrational actions of the lovers, they themselves have to understand their own actions with no knowledge of the faeries' work. The play therefore has to be interpreted in light of the fact that they believe themselves to possess free will and be in control of their own actions. As a consequence, this section will also seek to analyse the balance between human agency, supernatural agency, and free will in the context of Shakespeare's play.

Though the only prominently supernatural element that appears in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the faeries, the diversity of their roles and aspects makes any single interpre-

tation of their nature impossible and leads to their unique individual influence on the events that unfold. The purpose of the following paragraphs will be to examine the supernatural characters of the play, more specifically Puck, Oberon, and Titania, by focusing on both the direct and more far-reaching consequences of their actions. The supernatural does not intervene until the second act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* when Puck and a fairy enter the stage. Here already a distinction appears between both creatures. Though they seem to be of a similar nature, since Puck addresses the fairy once as "spirit" (2.1, 1) when he questions it as to its destination, and the second as "fairy" (2.1, 58) to warn it of Oberon's impending arrival, and in return is called once "thou lob of spirits" (2.1, 16), and once a "shrewd and knavish sprite" (2.1, 33), the distinction between them appears in the form of their actions. The fairy claims to "serve the Fairy Queen, / To dew her orbs upon the green.", (2.1, 8-9) and that it "must go seek some dew-drops here, / And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear." (2.1, 14-5). Titania's fairy seems to be a creature whose purpose is to decorate the scenery with rubies and pearls in anticipation of the queen's arrival — rather quaint and primarily preoccupied with beauty and nature. As for Puck, his tricks include relatively harmless activities:

> 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 (2.1, 34-8)

But they also include more nefarious ones, as he is said to "Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm" (2.1, 39). Nevertheless, the fairy also informs us that "Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck, / You do their work, and they shall have good luck" (2.1, 32-41). His behaviour and characteristics make Puck into the most folkloric of all the faeries in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and though this thesis will not delve extensively into his origin

and attributes, Katharine Briggs' book *The Anatomy of Puck* provides ample information on the subject. The powers of the faeries at this point are shown to include unhindered travel:

> Over hill, over dale,
> Thorough bush, thorough briar,
> Over park, over pale,
> Thorough flood, thorough fire,
> I do wander everywhere,
> Swifter than the moon's sphere (2.1, 2-7)

As for Puck, the "merry wanderer of the night" (1.2, 42-3) can change shapes, for example in order to "a fat and bean-fed horse beguile, / Neighing in likeness of a filly foal" (2.1, 45-6), or take the "very likeness of a roasted crab" (2.1, 48), or be "for three-foot stool mistake[n]" (2.1, 52). Upon their introduction, the faeries therefore appear to be benign, and their powers are mostly applied to making people "swear / A merrier hour was never wasted there" (1.2, 55-7) (with the exception of some of Puck's more mischievous tricks). Additionally, a close relationship between the faeries and nature is perceptible in the form of the forest they inhabit, their care for its beauty, and their capacity to travel through it at speeds unequaled by natural creatures.

The supernatural as this point does not carry the threatening undertones it possesses in other plays written by Shakespeare, such as the Ghost in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth'*s Weird Sisters. However, the arrival of Oberon and Titania reveals both negative consequences to the powers of the faeries and a stronger influence of the supernatural world over the natural one than Puck and the fairy had led to suspect. In the first dialogue between the King and Queen, Titania admonishes Oberon that due to his brawls

> The winds, piping to us in vain,
> As in revenge have suck'd up from the sea
> Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
> Hath every pelting river made so proud

That they have overborne their continents. (2.1, 88-92).

Not only has the faeries' dispute caused flooding, but also sickness, since "The moon, the governess of floods, / Pale in her anger, washes all the air, / That rheumatic diseases do abound" (1.2, 103-5), and Titania openly admits that "This same progeny of evil comes / From our debate, from our dissension; / We are their parents and original" (1.2, 115-8). The ramifications of the faeries' dispute reach the human world in the form of chaos and a disordering of the seasons, which Anne Paolucci explains as the more general fact that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "natural, physical phenomena are subjected to a new logic that displaces the usual rational explanation of things. Floods and heavy rains have been brought on by the dissension between the rulers of the faery world; mischief is caused by Robin Goodfellow's playful interference in household chores; people fall in and out of love because of Oberon's gracious intervention; the "best bride bed" is blessed by Titania and Oberon" (319). The profound influence of the faeries' power, even unwitting, over natural elements and the course of everyday human life could produce a certain sense of dread among its spectators due to the discomfort of envisioning that one's life is in the hands of powers outside one's control — with the exception perhaps of God's purpose in Christian thought — yet John Mebane writes that "the device which most reassures us is the supernatural machinery. We see that Puck, like Chaucer's Saturn, causes the apparent accidents which befall poor mortals, and we know that the benevolent Oberon is ultimately in charge" (260). There are thus two manners of perceiving the faeries' power over the human world in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One is based on understanding their power and influence over the unwitting characters' lives in the light of the uncertainty of their intentions, the other relies on trust in their ultimately kind nature and the reassurance that the outcome of their actions will restore order to the imbalances of the play. Since Oberon and Titania's power has such an indissociable effect on nature that

their quarrel affects the tides and seasons, and much of their intervening in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is tied to interrupting and re-establishing the natural order, the latter belief that their desire for balance and a correct ordering of the world will eventually lead to the resolution of the lover's affections does seem like a plausible option. Though the first interpretation will also be discussed more extensively in the following pages, Titania's first dialogue with the fairy King reveals a desire for reconciliation and her worry over the effects their dispute has had on the human world. In addition, though Oberon's experiments with the juice of a magic flowers first lead to an unbalancing of the natural order — as Titania finds herself enamoured with the transformed Bottom while Lysander and Demetrius both start pursuing Helena with all the diligence applied before to Hermia — his actions then result in a resolved situation when the fairy King and Queen settle their disagreement and the Athenian lovers separate into two happy couples. Mebane, an advocate of the second interpretation of the play's supernatural, writes that "eventually, all the changes contribute to a pattern involving the transformation of sorrow and disorder into joy and harmony" (263). This is a fortunate pattern but also a double-edged argument as most of the disorder in the play is caused by "benevolent" Oberon's jealousy towards the child of Titania's votress, and by his subsequent dabbling with magic that leads him to cause Titania's "disgrace" and taunt her over the events that follow (4.1, 45-58). Nevertheless, Oberon's desire to aid the Athenian lovers' pursuit of happiness speaks in favour of his ultimate beneficial nature, and a certain trust in his good intentions, when vengeance over Titania isn't involved, seems deserved, though the fairy King's actions also illustrate the fact that free will, such as the choice of Demetrius to love Hermia instead of Helena, is apparently inconsequential when it stands in the way of happy endings.

That the actions of the faeries lead to the ultimate resolution of the play's plot argues in favour of the precedence of supernatural agency over human agency in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* particularly after the idea that the faeries' influence over nature is so powerful it reflects their disputes, and thus they do not only directly but also indirectly affect the human world, has been acknowledged. Paolucci explains that "so long as the faeries are in harmony among themselves, things run smoothly in the world; but the minute they quarrel, both the physical and psychological courses of human life are disturbed. For the faeries are related to the human universe as celestial movers, their sphere of influence being the sphere of the moon (astronomically, flood and tides; astrologically and mythologically, the emotions of the human heart and all disturbances connected with these emotions)" (319). Even when Oberon seeks to aid Helena in her fruitless love for Demetrius — the reassuring "thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love" (2.1, 246) — balance is not restored, but instead, due to Puck's mishap, the situation worsens. For Maurice Hunt, "until Oberon and Titania's brawl is settled, the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta — or of any of the Athenian lovers — would be ill-advised, simply because Nature, disturbed by the faeries' quarrel, remains hostile to happiness" (1). The faeries are so closely tied to the natural world that the impact of their actions escapes even their control, and this is why despite the fact that Oberon tries to aid Helena, the consequences of his dispute with Titania make a happy resolution this early in the plot impossible and he only worsens the situation. This closely woven relationship between the faeries and their environment is perhaps more understandable knowing that in Early Modern England, the relation between man and the environment was a much more fluid one than in the centuries that followed, or, as Kirsten Poole writes, in 16th and 17th century England

> We find an almost ubiquitous understanding that the universe is organised according to a homologous and interconnected relationship between body and world. Time and again, the researcher snuffling

> around in the archive, or even the student thumbing through an anthology of Renaissance literature, reads that the body was a little cosmos that that reflected and participated in the large cosmos that was the universe (12).

Just as the body and the world are interconnected in 16th and 17th century thinking, so does the faeries' environment reflect their disputes, and, conceivably, these imbalances would in turn reflect themselves within the human characters of the play (because of the relationship between man and environment), leading to the conclusion that even by the bias of nature itself, the supernatural characters influence the unwitting human characters. Indeed, further supporting the idea the resolution of the plot depends upon the resolution of Oberon and Titania's dispute is the fact that order is only found once Oberon has obtained the changeling child, which after his dabbling with Titania's affections "straight she gave me, and her fairy sent / To bear him to my bower in fairy land" (4.1, 59-60). The faeries are then reconciled, as is made clear through the following lines:

> Come my queen, take hands with me,
> And rock the ground whereon these sleepers be.
> [*Oberon and Titania dance*]
> Now thou and I are new in amity (4.1, 84-7)

After their reconciliation, the purpose of the two faeries is to

> Dance in Duke Theseus' house triumphantly,
> And bless it to all fair prosperity.
> There shall the pairs of faithful lovers be
> Wedded, with Theseus, all in jollity. (4.1, 85-91)

Willingly or unwillingly, the faeries influence the lives of the human characters both directly — through devices such as magic, shape-shifting, Puck's tricks or Oberon's tampering with magic flowers — and indirectly, through their influence on the moon and the seasons.

By now, the influence of the faeries on the play has been shown to be all-encompassing, inescapable, with no exception for the sceptical Theseus whose marriage is blessed with

happiness and healthy children. The purpose of the second part of this chapter will be to analyse how the knowledge — or lack thereof — of the play's supernatural characters makes it possible to speak of an illusion of free will in Shakespeare's play. It will seek to do so by identifying the reasons behind the apparent incapacity of the human characters to perceive the work of Oberon and Titania and which circumstances make them more or less subject to supernatural manipulation. Finally, it will question the adequacy of an interpretation of the faeries as agents of destiny and whether the supernatural of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has any over-arching purpose or reflects the faeries' whimsical nature.

The four Athenian lovers are subjected to the faeries' manipulations, which could be partly due to the apparent existence of the dual space of a world that is seen and understood, and a hidden world comprised of creatures regular humans seem usually unable to perceive. The only character who actually sees a fairy is Bottom, and he articulates it as a comical misquotation of Saint Paul, "a most rare vision, (...) a dream, past the wit of a man to say what dream it was. (...) The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" (4.1, 203-12). Supernatural agency is revealed by Shakespeare to the eyes of his audience but it remains unseen by the characters of his play who are not of a supernatural nature, or when they do perceive it, it is remembered with confusion and they seem unable to find terms to explain or understand their experiences, as is Bottom's case. Even Demetrius, who has experienced a sudden change in his affections and is ultimately the character most affected by supernatural powers by the end of the forest episode, admits to Theseus that

> I wot not by what power —
> But by some power it is — my love to Hermia,
> Melted as the snow, seems to me now

As the remembrance of an idle gaud

Which in my childhood I did dote upon (4.1, 163-7)

In other words, even when the characters realise that they may have been influenced by powers outside their control, they remain incapable of identifying or explaining their behaviour. More importantly, the supernatural events of the play seem to slip outside the realm of their perception, as the following dialogue shows:

DEMETRIUS These things seem small and indistinguishable,

Like far-off mountains turned into clouds,

HERMIA Methinks I see these things with parted eye,

When everything seems double.

HELENA So methinks;

And I have found Demetrius like a jewel,

Mine own, and not mine own. (4.2, 186-91)

The couples' memories of the night seem affected by a power that makes them incapable of remembering their time spent under the power of the faeries with precision, the implications of this being that even after their escape from the enchanted night, the human characters remain affected by the will of the supernatural characters to remain hidden. Theseus' outright rejection of any supernatural causes behind the sudden turn of Demetrius' affections and of the tales of the lovers illustrates the shortcomings of human rationality in the face of events the audience blatantly knows result from supernatural intervention. Theseus claims that:

I never may believe

These antique fables, not these fairy toys.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend

More than cool reason ever comprehends.

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet

Are of imagination all compact (5.1, 2-8)

Though in other circumstances Theseus would be largely viewed as correct in his assumptions (except perhaps by poets and lovers, who might react unhappily to being placed with madmen

in this classification), in the context of a play where the supernatural is clearly shown to the audience as capable of influencing the most intimate aspects of the characters' lives and of the balance of nature it gains a comical dimension. Theseus' reaction may also be seen to reflect the human desire to believe in our own agency and free will, rather than in an all-powerful force or destiny that carries man through his life and dictates his choices, a premise on which is based the classical tragic hero who rejects the idea of fate while unwittingly playing into its hands.

The displacement of the human characters out of the civilised and ordered world of the city into the magic-filled wood, which makes them fall in the whimsical world of the fairies and subjects them to their will and tampering, is perhaps the most relevant element which subordinates the four lovers to the manipulations of supernatural agency in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For Paolucci "the faeries live in perpetual night; it is their natural province. The lovers who stumble upon their world are out of place, out of *time*, subject to inconsistency (for this is the sphere of the moon)" (324). Indeed, inside the forest the elements themselves are under control of its supernatural inhabitants, as Oberon orders Puck (Robin) to

> overcast the night;
> The starry welkin cover thou anon
> With dropping fog, as black as Acheron,
> And lead these testy rivals so astray
> As one come not within another's way (3.2, 355-9)

For the characters subjected to supernatural manipulation, all these effects of the faeries' actions would however seem to have no apparent cause, and consequently Mebane writes that "events perceived by the spectators as graceful, orderly, or comical are often experienced by the characters as bewildering or terrifying. The play's numerous references to such things as lions, wolves, and damned spirits maintain an undertone of nightmare" (260). Though at first

A Midsummer Night's Dream is perceived in light of its comedic content, and its pages peopled with fairies and lovers do not seem to contain the same threatening strain of supernatural as that found in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, a closer of examination of the lines below (spoken by Puck) may lead to a re-association of Oberon, Titania and their kind with darker facets of the supernatural:

> Now it is the time of night
> That the graves, all gaping wide,
> Every one lets forth his sprite
> In the church-way paths to glide.
> And we fairies, that do run
> By the triple Hecate's team
> From the presence of the sun,
> Following darkness like a dream,
> Now are frolic (5.1, 373-81)

After all, according to Briggs, in Early Modern culture faeries were at times thought to work with witches, and she even further identifies the nature of Early Modern faeries as a mixture of "lost heathen gods (...), half-deified spirits of the dead, and the spirits of woods as well as wells and vegetation" (4). To this, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adds some measure of classical tradition by drawing on Ovid, but the undertones of spirits of the dead and folk beliefs regarding faeries form an undercurrent that follows his faeries throughout the play. Puck's monologue also resembles the following lines spoken by Hamlet:

> 'Tis now the very witching time of night,
> When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
> Contagion to this world. (3.2, 350-6)

Hecate is another element that appears in both *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and is mentioned in passing in *Hamlet.* But whereas in *Macbeth* she is described as the mistress of the three witches and "the close contriver of all harms" (3.5, 6-7), in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* when Puck mentions "the triple Hecate's team", he simply means the moon, a

goddess whose triple nature Hunt summarily explains by the fact that she "was Phoebe — or Cynthia — in the heavens, Hecate — or Proserpina — in Hades, and Diana — or Lucina — on earth" (2). Whether the moon being referred to as Hecate (the facet linked to the underworld) is tied to the folk belief that faeries were the spirits of the dead is open to consideration. In the meantime, the same moon is in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, a book which Shakespeare drew on when writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* a goddess called Titania, which would associate Shakespeare's fairy queen even more closely with the moon and therefore Hecate and the world of the dead. However, it seems unlikely that demonic agency is truly at play in Shakespeare's comedy, despite the fact that Briggs describes how "at the Reformation, when the ordinary man was as much occupied with theology as the specialist, the faeries and Devils drew closer together. This fusion has been helped by the indentification made by the Early Christian Fathers of the pagan gods with devils" (10), and furthermore writes that "in the time of witchcraft trials, when all psychic experiences were deeply suspect, ghosts, faeries, and second sight were thought to be part of diabolic machinery for ensnaring the souls of men" (140). The fairy wood is indeed a place where spirits and ghosts who avoid the light of day can be found, but these are of a different nature than Oberon and Puck, as the following dialogue between the two characters shows:

> PUCK And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger,
> At whose approach, ghosts wandering here and there
> Troop home to churchyards. Damned spirits all,
> That in cross-ways and floods have burial,
> Already to their wormy beds are gone,
> For fear lest day should look their shames upon:
> They wilfully themselves exil'd from light,
> And must for aye consort with black-brow'd night.
> OBERON But we are spirits of another sort:
> I with the Morning's love have oft made sport (3.2, 380-9)

Despite these elements, the ultimate goal of supernatural agency in Shakespeare's play does not appear to be damning the souls of the lovers ensnared by its manipulations, and arguing that the faeries have a nefarious purpose that goes beyond the apparent positive outcome of their actions (the happy resolution of the play) would necessitate wandering too far from the text and into the realm of supposition for comfort.

If the faeries' actions are not oriented towards achieving a particular purpose and are just as whimsical as they appear to be, an interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a dream vision play, based on its roots in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, would give the dreams it contains a prophetic dimension and the supernatural characters a role as agents of destiny. Such an interpretation is proposed by Mebane, for whom the structural and thematic importance of prophetic dreams in many of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Pericles,* and *Cymbeline*, should make a play presented by its title and epilogue as a dream vision unsurprising. Additionally, according to Mebane, Shakespeare's knowledge of the discussions of cosmic order in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* strengthens *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s visionary and philosophical dimension considerably, "for it seems unlikely that [Shakespeare] would have failed to connect the philosophical speeches of Theseus and of the narrator with the implications of the tale's structure, including its supernatural machinery. The fact that Chaucer's Olympians are the agents of destiny supports the hypothesis that the same is true of Shakespeare's faeries" (261). Several elements seem to work in favour of Mebane's argument. Firstly, Hermia's nightmare in act 2.2 is clearly prophetic in nature and anticipates Lysander's change in affections:

> What a dream was here!
> Lysander, look how I do quake with fear.
> Methought a serpent ate my heart away,

> And you sat smiling at his cruel prey. (2.2, 146-9)

Secondly, further supporting the importance of dreams and their perception in the play, after awakening the four lovers have difficulty remembering the events of the woods, which seem to them to have been surreal, and understanding that they are not still asleep, as Demetrius' following words show:

> Are you sure
> That we are awake? It seems to me
> That yet we sleep, we dream. Do you not think
> The Duke was here, and bid us follow him? (4.1, 192-4)

Additionally, the confusion expressed here illustrates the incapacity of the human characters to understand the nights spent in the faerie's woods as having truly taken place, blending them instead with a dream, and shows how deeply entangled they still are in the faeries' power. For Mebane, the fact that "both Chaucer and Shakespeare utilise supernatural agents to resolve the conflicts of the main plot" is "an assertion of Theseus' limitation as an agent of order" (257). Indeed, throughout the play the youths disobey Theseus' wishes, and the turns of events after the arrival of the lovers in the woods as well as the ultimate resolution of the play's imbalances are all imputable to the faeries. After encountering the four sleeping youths, Theseus' reaction does not go much further than asking "How comes this gentle concord of the world, / That hatred is so far from jealousy, / To sleep by hate, and fear no enmity?" (4.1, 142-4), and he readily accepts the evolution of the lover's affections, excusing their presence in the woods by a desire to observe the rites of May.

However, weighing in against Mebane's identification of the fairies as agents of destiny are the facts that firstly, the faerie King and Queen's dispute is at the base of an imbalance of nature and makes a happy resolution to the play impossible until they are reconciled, as if they were agents of destiny it would be unlikely that their actions were at the base of the situ-

ation they were meant to settle. Secondly, Oberon's actions are inspired simply by the desire to secure Demetrius' love for Helena after they chance upon him in the woods and not by any grander motivations. And thirdly, most of the events in the forest are due to Puck's mishap, which he assures Oberon was accidental, but still serves to increase the play's confusion rather than diminish it. Additionally, the reason for the fairies' presence close to Athens is to bless the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, a rather benign purpose that seems to have little to do with any overarching fates. Nevertheless, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does illustrate the incapacity of the human characters to understand and perceive events outside of the realm of their beliefs or rationality, as well as their powerlessness in the face of these forces, and the human characters are clearly subjected to the agency of the play's supernatural elements. Yet, even if a happy resolution of the lovers affection could be a result of destiny of which Oberon, Puck and Titania were the agents, the scope and tone of the play make such interpretation seem to be exaggerated. Indeed, the play being a comedy influences the perception the audience would have of the supernatural it contains, and would paint it in a more light-hearted brush than in one of Shakespeare's tragedies — the restoration of a certain balance therefore seems more likely than destiny or fate as the origin of the actions of the play's supernatural aspects. Supernatural agency does play an instrumental part in solving the entanglement of the lover's affections and Titania and Oberon's dispute, and the close relationship of these characters with nature would explain their actions as a desire to find a balance that was lost because of their enmity. The most ambiguous aspect of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the manner in which the human characters are blind to actions of their supernatural counterparts despite the latter's influence over their lives and affections, a power which as mentioned preciously would be perceived quite differently by the audience if the faeries were creatures of less

whimsical and more nefarious purpose, such as ghosts or witches. In addition to this, the fact that the human characters are unaware of the supernatural leaves them with the belief that they are responsible for their own actions throughout the play, though the audience knows many of these to be dictated by the supernatural characters of the play.

Chapter 2.

Hamlet's Ghost:

Creating Strife or Bringing Justice?

While the faeries in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ultimately solve the play's problems, the Ghost in *Hamlet* is a creature of a different sort. Its claims to revenge do not appear unjustified and would fit in a context where saving the diseased state of Denmark necessitated avenging its murder, but Hamlet's subsequent quest for vengeance also leads to the death of seven characters. In order to understand the impact of the apparition's motivations and nature on the way agency is distributed in the play between the supernatural and other characters, the first part of this chapter will discuss where the Ghost originates from, whether it is a consequence of the diseased state of Denmark and if so how this affects the perception of its actions, as well as whether its motivations are shown in a positive or negative light in the play. The second part of this chapter will seek to analyse in what measure the Ghost's actions inspire Hamlet's decision to seek vengeance, and whether his decision to obey the apparition's demands can be seen as the source of the play's death and strife, in order to ascertain whether these are of human or supernatural origin. Finally, it will study the overall effect of the Ghost on the play and in what measure it controls the events and actions of *Hamlet* in order to determine whether the characters act of their own volition and if the supernatural is an element that causes further strife or seeks to bring balance and justice to the play.

Hamlet's Ghost originates, according to its claims at least, from the murder of the King by his brother, Claudius. Here again, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, nature and the supernatural are very closely linked. However, while the faeries' link to nature was direct and their existence did not depend on any particular events, the Ghost can be seen as originating from a break in the natural order — the untimely interruption of the King's life by his trusted brother. For John Beifuss, who writes that Hamlet "operates as much in the supernatural order as in the natural, and the supernatural order in a very real sense operates the events in the natural order and gives rise to the most perplexing problems of the play" (25), the events of the natural world are, as seen in the previous chapter, ordained by the supernatural to a certain degree. However, in *Hamlet*, some of the characters are aware of the unnatural events at play, and thus the supernatural in *Hamlet* operates on more levels than that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as it is open to questioning by the characters that are warned of its existence and is also of a more dubious nature than Oberon, Titania and their courts. To create his particular Ghost, Shakespeare mixes elements of antiquity, Christian thought, and folklore, as well as fate and omens, whose importance the following lines by Horatio seem to establish early on in the play by referencing the death of Julius Caesar, the subject of Shakespeare's play directly preceding *Hamlet*:

> A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.
> In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets:
> As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
> Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
> Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
> Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse:
> And even the like precurse of fierce events,

> As harbingers preceding still the fates
> And prologue to the omen coming on,
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climatures and countrymen. — (1.1, 115-28)

For Horatio, the appearance of the Ghost is an omen of the events to come, and is accompanied by a slew of inexplicable and strange events. Additionally, once again the dead leaving their graves and wandering the night is presented as a facet of the supernatural, but while in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it seemed to be a regular event unsurprising to the faeries, in *Hamlet* it is an ill omen which announced Caesar's death and thus promises the same manner of "fierce events" in Denmark. But for Diane Purkiss, the apparition is even more closely tied to folklore than to classical antiquity, as she writes that the ghost of *Hamlet* "is the ghost that carries the thickest marks of folklore on his grim person. *Hamlet* is a play that catches up all its characters in discussion of folklore and the retelling of folktales" (146). In this line of thinking, she interprets the following lines spoken by Hamlet as a speech where folklore replaces the play's "elegant, theologically well-informed and well-read Senecan apparition" with "the creature that kept his culture awake and sweating, clutching at the sheets" (146):

> 'Tis now the very witching time of night,
> When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
> Contagion to this world. Now I could drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on. (3.2, 371-5)

This short passage confirms her claim as it combines a mention of witchcraft, a reminder of the importance of nighttime to the supernatural, a line and a half on hell escaping from churchyards to affect this world, and two and a half lines on the kind of blood-drinking monster more traditionally found in ghost stories than theatre. Additionally, when discussing the first appearance Hamlet's ghost, Purkiss draws a link between Marcellus' line of 'thou art a

scholar; speak to it, Horatio' and "the common Renaissance notion that books and book-learning — words — contained the means to handle the supernatural, an idea basic to Protestantism, and basic, too, to the idea of the Renaissance magician" (148). However, as shown by the passage below, Horatio's words and learning are powerless in forcing the apparition to speak, and both this as well as his apparent fear of the apparition show, perhaps, the inadequacy of scholarly knowledge in the face of the inexplicable:

> I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion!
> If thou hast any sound, or use of voice,
> Speak to me:
> If there be any good thing to be done,
> That may to thee do ease and grace to me,
> Speak to me:
>
> *Cock crows*
>
> If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
> Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid, O, speak!
> Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
> Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
> For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death,
> Speak of it: stay, and speak! Stop it, Marcellus. (1.1, 129-42)

Not only does the Ghost disappear despite Horatio's quintuple exhortation for it to speak, but the scholar's words reflect beliefs about ghosts and their reasons for appearing to the living which have roots deep in popular culture and folklore instead of Christian thought: unfinished business in this world, an untimely death, foreknowledge of future events or hidden treasure. The Ghost's departure upon hearing a rooster crow also reflects, once again, popular belief that darkness was the domain of the supernatural and night the only time it held true power, a belief that was also shown in chapter one to affect the faeries of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The subsequent lines, spoken yet again by Horatio, show that in *Hamlet* at least this is due to

the rooster itself and affects spirits, fairies, witches, and even planets alike, a belief which seems to fit more comfortably with folklore than Christian dogma:

> Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
> Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
> This bird of dawning singeth all night long;
> And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad,
> The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
> No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm.
> So hallowed and so gracious is that time. (1.1, 163-9)

The Ghost's multiple possible roots in folklore, Catholic, or Protestant thought make it all the more difficult for its audience to interpret, and emphasise the dubiousness of its purposes as these different origins would influence the understanding and scope of its actions. Similarly, the extent of its influence on the play's characters is open to debate, as the only apparent power it seems to exercise on Hamlet is through its words. Nevertheless, if it is more deeply rooted in folklore than Christian thought, it would seem unlikely that its purpose is solely nefarious or should be interpreted only in a religious context, as will be explored more extensively later in this chapter.

Though the Ghost's nature resists analysis, there are clear ties between its existence and the crime committed by Claudius which has caused a disquiet reflected in the whole state of Denmark. The Ghost therefore seems to appear as a consequence of the diseased state of the country, and its actions could equally be interpreted as a descending spiral of violence and murder or as an attempt to redeem Denmark. The projection on the scale of a whole country of the consequences of Claudius' crime is linked to the idea presented by Kirsten Poole that

> The early modern experience of the body (...) is radically alien to our conception of physicality. In contrast to the modern tendency to distinguish between physical and mental states, the early modern reliance on humoral theory created a direct relationship between state of body and state of mind. In contrast to our tendency to imagine a discrete entity of the body that moves through, but

> is not directly related to, its environment, humoral theory again allowed for, and even necessitated, a fluid relationship of body and world. (51)

According to humoral theory, therefore, mental imbalance is reflected in the body and consequently in the environment. But the opposite relationship is also imaginable: an imbalance in the world could spread to individuals through this fluidity, much as madness seems to spread in *Hamlet* from character to character (Hamlet's feigned madness, Polonius' progression from a wise man of state to a "wretched, rash, intruding fool" (3.4, 32), Ophelia's suicide). When Marcellus tells Horatio that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4, 90), he expresses the fact that the poisoning of Hamlet's father has spread, metaphorically, to the whole state of Denmark, an event which reflects the fluid relationship between body and world that existed in the Early Modern period mentioned in the previous chapter. In the words of Beifuss, "the entire state of Denmark is diseased because of the morally diseased condition of the king — the imagery paralleling the diseased condition of the state with the poisoning of the elder Hamlet. The real event gives rise to the metaphor and strengthens it: the metaphorical body is diseased by a perversion of the proper universal order, and this perversion spreads to the people as it was spread from the real poisoning" (29). Horatio can only answer that "Heaven will direct it" (1.4, 91), revealing firstly a certain powerlessness of the characters in the face of events, and secondly introducing the idea that the resolution of the play will be supernaturally ordained — by Heaven or other means. The intervention of the supernatural is indeed due to the nature of the murder committed, as the following dialogue shows:

> GHOST Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
> HAMLET Murder!
> GHOST Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
> But this most foul, strange and unnatural. (1.5, 25-28)

The Ghost asks for revenge because the murder was "most foul, strange and unnatural". The words "strange and unnatural" are particularly relevant as they reveal the origin of the supernatural events in Hamlet: the nature of the murder, the manner and circumstances in which the previous King was killed. When Hamlet stages the play in hope of bringing Claudius to reveal himself, Lucianus, nephew to the King in the play, recites the following words:

> Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,
> Confederate season, else no creature seeing,
> Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
> With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
> Thy natural magic and dire property
> On wholesome life usurps immediately. (3.2, 257-62)

He thus reveals that the poison was obtained through witchcraft, using a process vaguely reminiscent of that which could be found books of spells or descriptions of witches' powers, which is to say specific herbs collected at certain times and then cursed with a recitation or incantation of words. In addition, Lucianus' insistence on the number three is particularly noteworthy, as David Kranz explains how "the number three has also been related to witchcraft and demonology. Dante's Satan, for example, is given three faces in one head, an obvious parody of the Trinity. Medieval sorcerers and necromancers, moreover, have always shown a predilection for odd numbers, particularly for three, as have, according to superstition, English witches" (370). Hecate, who was already mentioned in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and will appear in *Macbeth*, is presented by Kranz as "a triple goddess in classical mythology, not merely the queen of night, ghosts, magic, and witches; she is a deity "supreme in Heaven, on earth, and in Tartarus," who, though a Titan, joined the Olympians, was exalted by Zeus, became an intercessor for human prayers, and served as a benefactress in politics, war, sport, fishing, and farming" (370). Though in the context of Lucianus' words, it is her

link to witches and magic and not her classical history which appears to be emphasised, she remains a complex character with multiple possible interpretations, and the forces at play in *Hamlet* increasingly seem to be outside of the characters' control.

The Ghost is the catalyst behind much of *Hamlet*'s action and its purpose, whether it is simply part of the supernatural agents at play or wether it possesses hidden motivations (a demon seeking to damn Hamlet, for example), remains as mysterious as its nature. Neverthe-less, it claims a right to vengeance that sparks an unavoidably manichean debate on its inten-tions, as according to whether they are judged in the light of Christian thought or reflect other beliefs and principles, they can be cast in either a positive or negative light. Determining the righteousness of Hamlet's search of vengeance should in turn help determine whether the play's tragic ending was a consequence of his decision to act (supporting the theory of free will) or caused by greater forces at play (once Hamlet learned of his father's murder the out-come of the play was unavoidable). Supporting the argument that Hamlet's "unnatural" refusal to accept his father's passing is instrumental in leading to the tragic outcome, when the Prince of Denmark is first introduced Gertrude admonishes him with the following sentence:

> Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
> Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
> Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
> Passing through nature to eternity. (1.2, 70-3)

Death is natural, and the queen argues that the fact such fate befalls all things means Hamlet should accept his father's passing. Claudius similarly states that

> to persever
> In obstinate condolement is a course
> Of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief;
> It shows a will most incorrect to heaven (1.2, 92-5)

The insistence on the "obstinate", "impious", "unmanly" nature of Hamlet's mourning, which is "common", "incorrect to heaven", and that Claudius repeatedly claims to be "a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature, / To reason most absurd" (1.2, 101-3) would imply that the cause of the tragedy lies within Hamlet's incapacity to accept a fact of nature and of life, rather than the unnatural nature of the murder which was discussed previously. Christian principles would also conceivably advise forgiveness, or at the very least condemn the pursuit of vengeance. Yet, Claudius and Gertrude themselves are sinners, and the following metaphor used by the Ghost casts Claudius in the shape of a serpent that murdered the previous King in an orchard, a scene which to a Christian audience would be reminiscent of the garden of Eden where Satan, in the form of a snake, caused Adam and Eve's downfall. Claudius, in comparison, provokes a chain of events that leads to the downfall of Denmark, which supports the theory that the blame for the play's events should be placed squarely on his shoulders:

> 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
> A serpent stung me — so the whole ear of Denmark
> Is by a forged process of my death
> Rankly abus'd — but know, thou noble youth,
> The serpent that did sting thy father's life
> Now wears his crown. (1.5, 35-40)

Hamlet, as a result, "the son of a dear father murder'd, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell" (2.2, 585-6), is acting out of filial love and obligation, his vengeance almost an obligation, wished by both heaven and hell, unavoidable and therefore in the hands of forces out of his control. Despite the insistence of Purkiss on the Ghost's folkloric nature, Christian thought gives the play an impact that goes beyond the question of vengeance into the realm of good and evil and influences the perception of Hamlet's actions by the audience. For Robert

West "The pneumatological evidence on the nature of the apparition seems, then, to point about equally in three directions: to a Catholic ghost, a paganesque ghost, and a devil. What does this mean? It could mean that the disorder of pneumatology in the world has resulted in a derived disorder in the play" (62). The Early Modern period was a time where religion and many of people's broad views on the world were being redefined, or as Poole writes:

> In the mid sixteenth century, the cosmos was understood very much as it had been in medieval theology and ancient astronomy: humanity existed in a geo-centric universe; hell and purgatory were in the center of the earth, heaven was beyond the outmost celestial sphere; earthly space was not yet widely perceived in terms of cartographic measurement; God and Satan interacted with mortals through the material conditions of their environment. By the mid seventeenth century, this vision of the cosmos had been radically altered: humanity was now spinning on a planet that orbited the sun; the location of hell, even its existence as a physical place, was in question, and purgatory had been largely abandoned; earthly space was deeply geometric and mathematical; the clockwork universe was leading into a conception of a distant clock-maker God, and a Satan who worked through witches and the physical world was becoming outmoded. (p. 8)

The uncertainty about the world and changing beliefs characteristic of Shakespeare's time are reflected in Hamlet's claim that "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5, 174-5). The passages above show that responsibility for the play's outcome seems to lie at Claudius' feet, in accordance with the well-known moral rule that an evil deed breeds evil consequences. They also justify Hamlet's quest for revenge in the light of Christian thought, as casting Claudius in the role of the serpent in turn casts Hamlet on the good side of the fight against evil, and also suggest the unavoidability the course of events that begin once the Ghost reveals to Hamlet the circumstances of its passing. This finally raise the question of his agency in choosing his course of action: in what measure he is bound by the Ghost's claim to revenge, whether the events that follow are dictated by fate to obtain a re-ordering of nature or in the hands of the human characters of the play. A purely folkloric origin to the Ghost would imply that it is not part of any greater plan than its

pursuit of revenge, but the presence of fate and the Christian imagery of evil in the play suggest that it is only a facet of the supernatural at play — which is linked with themes that go beyond the supernatural itself.

The Ghost is, if its discussions with Hamlet are to be believed, justified in claiming the right to vengeance, but causes death and strife, whether because of Hamlet's decision to act upon the Ghost's words or as a natural consequence of the events set into motion by Claudius' murder. The supernatural in *Hamlet* can seem ambivalent in the sense that it can either be perceived to bring out the worst in the play's characters (murder, plotting, deceit), or to inspire the noble sentiment of seeking vengeance for a murdered father. Assuming that the Ghost truly is justified and the death of Claudius serves to heal the diseased state of Denmark, its demands nevertheless bring about the death of Gertrude, the very person he asked Hamlet to spare, as well as his own son, Polonius, Ophelia, and Laertes, instead of just Claudius. I want to take a moment, therefore, to determine more precisely how the Ghost's dubious nature and the extent of its agency influence the play. If the Ghost represents a larger supernatural machinery at play — such as fate or fortune — that necessitated these deaths meant to assuage its vengeance and orchestrated by its actions, the human characters would have had little choice in avoiding such an outcome. However, the possibility that the Ghost's agency is limited and the other characters have control over their own fates would unavoidably change what meaning can be given to the apparition and to the consequences of its demands: the ethical question of whether man can be held responsible for the consequences of his actions if these were dictated by greater forces at play, or whether *Hamlet*'s events result solely from the mistakes and crimes of man. Determining the Ghost's nature and its influence of the play is essential to determining the extent of the supernatural manipulations involved. But the diffi-

culty of the task is augmented by the uncertainty surrounding the apparition's origin and purposes, as Hamlet's lines to the Ghost show:

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou comest in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee (1.4, 40-4)

Though determining the origin of the Ghost seems impossible (spirit or goblin, heaven or hell, wicked or charitable?), it seems to be the apparition's "questionable shape" which pushes Hamlet to talk to it. Another particularity of the Ghost is the fact that Queen Gertrude seems unable to see it and tells her son "Alas, how is't with you, / That you do bend your eye on vacancy, / And with the incorporeal air do hold discourse?" (3.4, 116-8) when it appears before her and pushes Hamlet to keep pursuing his vengeance. Just as Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth* only appears to the usurper himself, King Hamlet's ghost cannot be seen by all. However, whereas Banquo's ghost appears to its murderer (or the instigator of its murder, as Macbeth does not carry out the act in person), *Hamlet'*s Ghost never shows itself to Claudius, and inexplicably only appears to Marcellus, Barnardo, Horatio, and Hamlet. This is one of the many mysteries that surrounds the Ghost, or as West writes, "Shakespeare strongly asserted the reality of the supernatural, and he recalled to his audience some current explanations of it; but in sum he left the apparition almost as mysterious as it was at first entrance" (66), and this is certainly what makes the play so open to interpretation. Though the Ghost says to Hamlet that "My hour is almost come, / When I to sulph'rous and tormenting flames / Must render up myself" (1.5, 2-4), these could be the flames of purgatory or could altogether be a lie, as could the following lines:

> I am thy father's spirit,
> Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,

> And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
>
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
>
> Are burnt and purg'd away. (1.5, 9-13)

The ghost admits here to being one of the spirits mentioned multiple times in both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet* that are free only at night and flee the light of day, which confirms its reaction upon hearing a rooster crow, but this does not bring us any closer to determining its nature or purposes, as much of the supernatural seems confined to nighttime (an element which will also be relevant to the study of *Macbeth*). Hamlet himself acknowledges that

> 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. (2.2, 600-5)

The idea that the Ghost is a devil would however oversimplify the complexity of its nature and actions, but the doubt remains. It seems more likely that it is indeed the ghost of Hamlet's father, and thus the prince of Denmark would be obligated to avenge his father's death, as the following lines would seem to suggest:

> GHOST (...) lend thy serious hearing To what I shall unfold.
>
> HAMLET Speak; I am bound to hear.
>
> GHOST: So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear. (1.5, 5-7)

After hearing of the circumstances of his father's murder, a resolution involving Hamlet's revenge becomes the only possible outcome, a resolution that is foreshadowed to end in blood, as he himself announces "from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (4.4, 65-6). Killing Claudius becomes not only a matter of justice and duty, but letting him live would equal damnation, or at least this is what Hamlet's questioning reveals:

> Is't not perfect conscience

> To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In further evil? (5.2, 67-70)

Hamlet is bound to revenge by the Ghost's revelations, and despite his misgivings and elaborate plans to determine the truth of the apparition's words, the death of Claudius seems sealed at that moment. The Ghost itself, however, does not seem to possess any large scale of control on the action of the play, outside of pushing Hamlet to revenge. Though the outcome of the play would support the argument of its evil intentions or nature, the only vengeance it asks of Hamlet is on Claudius, and would work towards healing a diseased state. Nevertheless, the pivotal moments of the play all rest on decisions to commit murder; and not only the murder of the King by Claudius, but also that of Claudius himself, of Polonius, of Ophelia's self-murder, of Hamlet, and of Laertes.

All the points above lead to the question of whether the characters of the play act of their own volition, or dance to the tune of the apparition and the supernatural elements it represents. The main evidence for the latter interpretation is the question of fate, which seems to demand the death of Claudius at Hamlet's hand, as the Prince's words of "My fate cries out, / And makes each petty artery in this body / As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve" (1.4, 81-3) would seem to indicate. Hamlet's role is to right the imbalance caused by the "strange and unnatural murder" of his father, a role which has affected the time itself and which he resents: "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5, 196-7). Fate and the supernatural are intimately linked since the latter is often a result of the former. For Beifuss, this is due to the fact that "when fate enters so intimately into the drama that it can be commanded by men (to a degree), it must come in the form of the supernatural" (28). The supernatural has been shown to result from a break in the natural order and from the

workings of fate. Both these theories combine when the natural order is understood to be that ordained by the fates (or fate). Unbalancing the natural order would therefore equate breaking the stream of events pre-determined by fate. In turn, this would mean fate is not pre-determined to a level where it cannot be changed by man's actions. Therefore, though disobeying fate does not appear to be a recommendable course of action, it remains possible. Man possesses the capacity to act against his own fate, or as the following monologue by Hamlet states, he can either suffer his fortune or take arms against it:

> Whether 'this nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them. (3.1, 57-60)

For Beifuss, evil is born from the fact that man possesses free will and can choose (through reason) to obey the *lex aeterna*, God's law. Beifuss argues that "God's will proceeds from the *lex aeterna* (which is established by God; which He follows; which is the basis of all law); Nature is controlled by the *lex aeterna*, and God works through Nature. Natural agents obey unwittingly but man (through free will), obeys only through free consent. This consent is (or ought to be) governed by reason. (...) If reason errs, man falls into evil" (30). Claudius' murder of his brother would therefore fall into this category, as his reason erred on the side of evil. Hamlet, however, when considering whether to avenge his father's death, opposes thought to action and casts the former in a negative light:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pitch and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action. (3.1, 83-8)

Conscience transforms man into a coward, and resolution is weakened by thought. Hamlet worries that his enterprise will be compromised and never be concretise itself due to his hesitation. Nevertheless, Hamlet also states that

> Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and godlike reason
> To fust in us unus'd. (4.4, 36-9)

He seems to oscillate from believing reason will stop him from taking the correct course of action, and arguing that God gave us reason and that it should therefore be put to to use. Additionally, thinking too precisely on avenging his father's death leads, according to Hamlet, to thoughts that are "but one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward" (4.4, 42-3). The outcome of the play seems to suggest that Hamlet's decision to take vengeance leads to the negative consequences, though he did not accept the duel as a means to his ends. Indeed, Laertes and Claudius were the ones to conspire and procure the poison which kills all three of them and Gerturde as well. Claudius is the last of the characters to be poisoned, once Hamlet realises what has occurred. Yet, when the Player King states that "Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown: / Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" (3.2, 213-5), it indicates a feeling of powerlessness in the face of the inevitability of one's fate, and Hamlet himself believes that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2, 10). Beifuss seems correct in writing that "unreasonable acts cause turmoil and conflict, not only in the person who has departed from reason, but also in the social structure and even in the very ordering of nature. (...) This perversion must inevitably be righted by the working of fate. Such a development necessarily implies a supernatural dimension in the tragedies, for the operations of fate are, in these plays, moved by forces from outside the merely human universe" (30). Claudius' regicide has been shown to have repercussions that directly lead to

the ending of the play, despite the free will man supposedly has. Horatio tells Fortinbras that he shall hear

> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. (5.2, 387-92)

In conclusion, though man possesses free will, fate and the supernatural may intervene and lead him through an unavoidable sequence of events: once Hamlet encounters the Ghost, despite his misgivings, he is bound to revenge, as promised by the apparition. As for Claudius and Laertes, the decision to poison the Prince of Denmark seems to condemn them to die by it in a sequence reminiscent of the law of talion or some divine justice. The supernatural is a consequence of a perversion of the ordering of state and nature imputable to the actions of a man whose reason has led him to an act contrary to God's will. Once fate, in the guise of the supernatural, intervenes to correct the wrongs committed (in a way somewhat similar to the dramatic function of the chorus in Greek tragedies, where it intervened to reveal what unavoidable events would take place), man loses much of his agency and becomes entangled in a supernatural machinery that works towards a seemingly inevitable outcome. The supernatural possesses its own agency which, while it seems to cause strife — as the Ghost pushes Hamlet to seek the revenge that will lead the tragic ending of the play — is ultimately shown to have the overarching purpose of solving the problems caused by man's actions. The hand of Claudius in the murder of the elder Hamlet and the subsequent events is indisputable, but once the supernatural intervenes human agency and responsibility becomes a much murkier issue, marked by the question of whether the former can be limited in certain circumstances and if the unavoidability of fate relieves man of the latter, to a certain degree.

Chapter 3.

Manipulating Fate in *Macbeth*

Though *Macbeth* contains its own ghost, the supernatural beings that hold the most importance in the play are the Weird Sisters, whose words first suggest to Macbeth the possibility of his accession to kingship. The purpose of this chapter will be to determine the extent of their influence on the play's other characters and whether, if their actions can be interpreted in light of the existence of a greater force at play — be it called God's will, the natural order, fate, or providence — human agency becomes subordinated to the supernatural. In order to do so, this chapter will expose the complexity of understanding the Weird Sisters and the importance of their multiple nature, mainly their folkloric and classical roots. It will then study the power words seem to hold in *Macbeth* with the aim of exposing the manner in which the Weird Sisters exert control over other characters, and whether this applies only to their prophecies. The next part will focus on the question of Christianity and the natural order by seeking to understand how these themes influence the Weird Sisters or other supernatural phenomena and their perception. Finally, the presence of demonic agency in the play will be briefly studied, as well as the importance of fate or providence in dictating the play's outcome in order to determine how much agency the supernatural and man, respectively, have in *Macbeth*. All of these elements will serve to further our understanding of the limitations of human agency and responsibility when supernatural characters of an uncertain, dubious nature come into play.

Shakespeare's Weird Sisters possess many attributes that would have allowed an Early Modern audience to identify them as witches, and the most important of these to Banquo and Macbeth immediately appears to be their foreknowledge. Witches were commonly thought to possess the ability to see into the future, and when Banquo first questions the Weird Sisters, his words reflect that belief as he states that:

> If you can look into the seeds of time,
> And say which grain will grow, and which will not,
> Speak then to me, who neither beg, nor fear,
> Your favours nor your hate. (1.3, 58-61)

But Banquo and Macbeth's quick acceptance of the witches and their direct questioning also reflects a certain familiarity with the idea of consulting this sort of character. Stuart Clark writes that "study after study has shown how, all over Europe, ordinary people regularly appealed to to their own consciences, or to the collective conscience of the Church, but to local practitioners skilled in healing, divination, and astrology for help with their everyday problems. They did this frequently in cases of suspected *maleficum,* but any kind of misfortune, anticipated or experienced, could justify a visit to the 'cunning' man or woman" (457). Therefore, due to widespread belief in witches, common knowledge of why they would be consulted, and their appearance, the Sisters would rapidly have been associated with classical witches by an Early Modern audience. Additionally, the three Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, accompanied by Hecate, are undoubtedly the most famous witches of Early Modern theatre, but Robert Lima has shown that witches inspired by classical Greco-Roman models can be found in a variety of plays such as Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1592), in which Barabas the Jew (an evil character) parodies Medea's incantation from Seneca's tragedy, or in John Marston's *The Tragedie of Sophonisba* (1606) where the Greek witch Erictho has an appearance. Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (ca. 1613), a tragicomedy set in

Ravenna, focuses on a witch named Hecate. As for Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Queenes* (1609) features twelve classicized black witches appear in the first part (205). Witches on a theatre stage were therefore not a rare occurrence, and also served very well for entertainment as their appearance could often be exaggerated, as shown by Banquo's words:

> What are these,
> So wither' and 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 seem to understand me,
> By each at once her choppy finger laying
> Upon her skinny lips; you should be women,
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
> That you are so. (1.3, 39-47)

The Weird Sisters possess many characteristics of traditional witches: withered, wild in their attire, choppy fingers, skinny lips, beards, and are according to Kenneth Muir "the kind of old women who, because of their appearance, get credited by the villagers with possessing supernatural powers — and if a cow dies or a child falls sick they get the blame for it" (238). The Sisters also show additional behaviour representative of witches: they have in their possession a pilot's thumb, the finger of a birth-strangled babe; they are revengeful, can control winds (though their powers are limited: "his bark cannot be lost, Yet it shall be tempest-tossed" [1.3, 24-5]), and prepare vile concoctions in a cauldron using an unsavoury mixture of animal parts and chanting, though David Kranz points out that "English and Scottish witches apparently did not use cauldrons, but Medea and the Weird Sisters do" (371), which would tie them with a more classical model of witches rather than a contemporary one and emphasise their similarities with the fates rather than a simple interpretation as witches. All of these, accompanied by their foreknowledge, would have partly identified them as witches to the eyes of their au-

dience, while maintaining a certain measure of doubt as they are never called witches in the play and answer not to the devil but to Hecate. They also share certain of their powers with the faeries of *A Midsummer Night's Dream:* control over the elements, to a certain degree, as their spell to unleash a tempest on a sailor's ship reveals (1.3, 11-25), and an unnatural swiftness in their travels, as they call themselves "posters of the sea and land" (1.3, 33) and can vanish "into the air; (...) What seem'd corporal, / Melted as breath into the wind" (1.3, 81-2). These latter two characteristics were not common to traditional witches, as for all their deceptiveness, meddling and pact-making with the devil, they remained human and quite corporeal. For Muir, "Shakespeare sets going in our minds conflicting impressions of the Weird Sisters — sometimes witches, at other times devils in the shape of witches, tempting Macbeth in order to bring about his damnation, sometimes relying on popular conceptions of witchcraft, at other times echoing the learned King James, and also influenced by classical stories of witchcraft in Ovid, in Lucan and in Apuleius. In this case, as with ghosts and fairies, Shakespeare under-pinned and counterpointed current superstitions with theological speculation and classical information" (239). The Weird Sisters' equivocal nature is what makes their purpose as well as the extent of their influence over the play difficult to unearth. Nevertheless, their actions identify them as perhaps the most instrumental part of the supernatural machinery at work in *Macbeth*, preceding even their master, Hecate.

Despite all of their traffic with questionable ingredients and chanting around cauldrons, the Weird Sisters' words are what echoes most loudly in Macbeth's actions, and these words have dire consequences. The following section of this chapter will seek to analyse whether the Weird Sisters' prophecies have such an effect on their auditors because of their supernatural origin, whether they are charged with the effect of a charm or other such witch-

craft, or whether the information conveyed simply through language is enough to lead Macbeth on the path to murder. In the passage below, the Sisters chant and dance in order to cast a charm before their first meeting with Macbeth:

> The Weïrd Sisters, hand in hand,
> Posters of the sea and land,
> Thus do go about, about:
> Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
> And thrice again, to make up nine
> Peace! — the charm's wound up (1.3, 32-7)

This would suggest that the witches cast a spell upon Macbeth and therefore need more than simply the prophecy to influence his actions. The Sisters' spell seems to rely on their chanting and dancing, and their words to Macbeth are simple save for the particularity of repetition:

> 1 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
> 2 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
> 3 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! that shall be King hereafter.

Nevertheless, the number three, as has been noted earlier in this thesis, does hold very important connotations not only because of its association with Hecate (of whom the Weird Sisters are agents), but also because of its association with the devil (such as Dante's three-faced Satan). Michael Bailey describes how ecclesiastical reformer and Dominican theologian Johannes Nider wrote in his 1437-38 *Formicarius*, reprinted seven times before 1692, a treatise in five volumes the last of which discusses and is titled "Witches and Their Deceptions", that witches do not possess any power of their own, but are said to cause harm through words, rites, or actions by practising with demons (978). The Weird Sisters accordingly rely on words and potions to influence the characters and elements of the play, though they are never explicitly shown pactising with demons (though, arguably, the apparitions which the witches call "our masters" (4.1, 63) would be likely candidates had Hecate not earlier told the witches that

"artificial sprites" (3.5, 27) raised by "magic sleights" (3.5, 26) would "draw him [Macbeth] on to his confusion" (3.5, 29). Only Hecate, however, is clearly identified as a supernatural entity alongside the three Sisters). Nevertheless, it is the prophecy that precipitates the events of the play, and little attention is drawn on the Sisters' spell. John Beifuss writes that "when Macbeth first admitted the prophecies of the witches to his intellect, he had made the initial step toward his corruption" (31). Though the Weird Sisters' words are what lead Macbeth astray, the moment his reason accepts them as prophecy marks the true beginning of his downfall. His thoughts eventually turn to murder, and from there on the path to concretising his ambition with the death of Duncan seems to become an unavoidable and very direct road to hell. Banquo warns Macbeth:

> Oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
> The instruments of Darkness tell us truths;
> Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
> In deepest consequence. (1.3, 123-6)

This passage seems to reveal that regardless of whether they predict the future or implement it, the veracity of the Weird Sisters' words is secondary to the effect of they have on Macbeth and how they influence his actions. The importance of the Weird Sisters' prophecy is also emphasised by Robert Lima, who writes that when Banquo and Macbeth question them, it is to the latter "that the bizarre, androgynous beings respond, wasting no time in foretelling each man's future. And, on the revelation that Macbeth will be thane of Cawdor and king, he is spellbound. The words have the impact of thunder on his imagination" (199). Macbeth initial reaction upon hearing Sisters' words is to "seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair" (1.3, 51-2), after which he exhorts the Sisters to reveal the source of their knowledge, asking them to "Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence", (1.3 75-6), and their purpose for revealing it by questioning "why upon this blasted heath you stop our way with such prophet-

ic greeting" (1.3, 76-78). Banquo and Macbeth then discuss their experience and repeat what they heard "To the selfsame tune, and words" (1.3, 88), until Macbeth is made thane of Cawdor by the King's decision. The repetition of the Weird Sisters' words, and even more importantly their tune, in other characters' mouths marks their power over the minds of those who hear them. For Kranz "purely dictional echoes of the language of the witches in the mouths of the two main characters and general patterns of linguistic repetition throughout the tragedy have long been noted. (...) The mapping suggests that the influence of the witches extends itself substantially to the inner thoughts of key figures at Inverness and also, but much less so, to the public pronouncements of more overly Orthodox Christian characters" (348). The patterns of speech and musicality serve to connect the Weird Sisters to other characters, and as a consequence their influence can be tracked by the presence of their language in that of other characters. For Kranz, "Shakespeare has clearly established unique auditory patterns at the very beginning of the play, called our attention to them, and brought them back later. The patterns become, I think, a kind of poetic signature for the ambiguous, partly supernatural characters who utter them. But Shakespeare has also suggestively linked some of the patterns to human characters" (357). The most obvious example of this is the antithesis in the witches' language of "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1, 11), echoed in Macbeth's first line in the play of "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3, 38). The following speech by Macbeth, also rife with antithesis and confusion, illustrates the effect of the Weird Sisters' prophecy on his psyche and the presence of their tune in his words:

> 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:
> 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? (1.3, 130-7)

Despite Banquo's warning of how truth can be used by the "instruments of Darkness" in order to cause harm, Macbeth cannot seem to conciliate himself with the thought that the witches would have delivered the truth, especially good, for an ill purpose. His confusion is further emphasised by the realisation that his mind is already yielding to the desire to seize the throne, despite his physical reaction indicating the adverse effect the idea has on him. For Lima, "the twisted words of the Weird Sisters foreshadow the twisted actions that Macbeth's own mind begins to devise and his lady will implement on his and her own behalf" (200). The power of the Weird Sisters' suggestion is revealed by Macbeth's incapacity to resist it. When later in the play he sees "A dagger of the mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain" (2.1, 37-9), the imaginary weapon is also a product of the turmoil in which the Sisters' words have sent his mind. This implies that if Macbeth's actions weren't the planned course of fate (an issue which will be discussed further in this chapter), the words the Weird Sisters utter have the power to change events and influence the future to a degree that turns Macbeth from a loyal retainer to a regicide and an usurper, and have such an effect on his mind that his thoughts are such as to elicit his own fear. The passage below shows both the consequence of the planned murder of Duncan that has already taken form in his mind, and the manner in which in the anticipation of this event, Macbeth finds himself in a situation where the future holds more weight for him than the present:

> Present fears
> Are less than horrible imaginings.
> My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
> Shakes so my single state of man,
> That function is smother'd in surmise,

> And nothing is, but what is not. (1.3, 137-42)

Additionally, this monologue shows the subconscious power the witches' words hold over Macbeth and those they have influenced, as originally the fantasy of an accession to kingship was implanted by them. Yet, Macbeth does show a certain sense of caution in regards to the prophecy, as he declares "be these juggling fiends no more believ'd, / That palter with us in a double sense" (5.8, 19-20). This caution does not however last or suffice to contain his ambitions. The witches' words also are not the only one which hold power, as Lady Macbeth plays an instrumental role in convincing her husband to commit the murder: her influence is probably nowhere clearer than when she speaks the following lines:

> hie thee tither,
> That I may pour my spirits into thine ear,
> And chastise with the valour of my tongue
> All that impedes thee from the golden round (1.5, 24-7)

Taking into account the fact that the previous occasion on which one of Shakespeare's characters was said to have poured something into another's ear consisted of Claudius using poison to murder Hamlet's father, would promise dark consequences it to Lady Macbeth's words in favour of Duncan's murder, though the similarity could be coincidental. Other examples of the power given to language include Macbeth's line of "Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives" (2.1, 61), which opposes language to deed in a manner reminiscent of Hamlet's opposition between thought and action. Here, words are perceived by Macbeth in a negative light, though their influence has been shown to run throughout the play. The Weird Sisters' supernatural abilities appear to be reflected in their words, as the presence of their tune in the speech of other characters and the effect on Macbeth's mind of their prophecy has shown. The extent of this influence opposed to Macbeth's own desires — whether it channels Macbeth's secret ambitions or provokes them — is instrumental in determining if responsibility for the

play's unhappy events rests on human shoulders or is the result of supernatural machinations, and it would appear that the first steps of Macbeth's destruction are imputable to the latter.

Also influencing possible perceptions of the supernatural in *Macbeth* are the implications of the nature of its relationship with Christianity and the natural order. As for the former, Clark notes that the distinction between church and witchcraft — or activities and people related to it — often wasn't a clear divide, as

> The churches and their clergy could be appealed to for solutions that, in scope and content, were very like those expected of the 'cunning' profession; the parish priest who administered to his flock's material needs like an unofficial healer, diviner, or conjuror was by no means an uncommon figure. On the other hand, village healers and their like mixed religious elements into their formulas and rituals and sometimes expected a faith-like confidence in their clients (458).

Though the Weird Sisters, if identified by the audience as witches, would automatically by perceived as servants of the devil and consequently be credited with evil intentions, maintaining doubt as to their nature casts them in a much more questionable light. Yet, for Kranz "from a Christian perspective, the witches may be seen as confusing God's ways by by means of chaotic antithesis and ambiguities, thus motivating human actions destructive of the cosmos, the created order" (369). In other words, in an optic where the natural order results from God's will, confusing God's ways would equate to upsetting the natural order, an issue which was at the heart of the supernatural events in *Hamlet* and strongly linked as well to those of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, though in *Hamlet* supernatural events were only seen to occur after the murder of King Claudius, *Macbeth* has no such catalyst, and from their first appearance the Weird Sisters are planning to meet the eponymous hero of the play: the first witch asks "When shall we three meet again?" (1.1, 1) and the other two answer "Upon the heath. / There to meet with Macbeth" (1.1, 7-8). The intervention of the supernatural does not result from any prior action by the human characters, and the fact that the Weird Sisters are

the first characters of the play to appear on stage further cements this impression. The supernatural, in the form of the Weird Sisters, would thus function independently from God's will and the natural order. Further throwing into doubt the Christian perspective of the play is Hecate, who appears in lieu of the Devil as the Weird Sisters' master. She first appears in the play mentioned by Macbeth:

> Now o'er the one half-world
> Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
> The curtain'd sleep: Witchcraft celebrates
> Pale Hecate's off'rings; and wither'd Murther,
> (...) towards his design
> Moves like a ghost. (2.1, 49-56)

In this speech, she is associated with a mention of the death of nature, wicked dreams, witchcraft and the silent approach of Duncan's murder. Yet, for Kranz, "Macbeth's allusions to Hecate (2.2. 49-56 and 3.2. 40-44) explicitly associate her with witchcraft and murder, but nothing in her relationship to the three sisters and their verbal triplicities precludes her classical identification as well" (370). However, Hecate's own words identify her as a negative character:

> I, the mistress of your charms,
> The close contriver of all harms,
> Was never called to bear my part,
> Or show the glory of our art? (3.5, 6-9)

Her desire to be part of the Weird Sisters' manipulations as well as her role as "the close contriver of all harms" cast her in the light of an enemy of order and good, and in a Christian perspective, in the role that should belong to the Devil and his servants. Apart for the Weird Sisters and Hecate, the last of the supernatural characters which appear in *Macbeth* is the ghost of Banquo. The presence of the ghost at Macbeth's feast is foreshadowed by Macbeth's words to the still living Banquo of "To-night we hold a solemn supper, Sir, / And I'll request your

presence" (3.1, 13-4), as the ghosts of folklore often appear to keep appointments made with the living or seek promised hospitality. Thus, the appearance of Banquo's ghost directly after each of Macbeth's mentions of him, both after the lines of "Here had we now our country's honour roof'd, / Were the grac'd person of our Banquo present" (3.4, 39-40) and "to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss; / Would he were here!" (3.4, 89-90) seems unsurprising. For Diane Purkiss "this tricky ghost first appears not as a ghost but as a host, as a double of Macbeth, using the usurper's seat as if part of the feast (...). This symbolic usurpation foreshadows their rivalry for the royal 'seat', and also foreshadows the unquenchability of Banquo's body (and hence his survival through his heirs) and his identity in occupying it." Banquo returns for reasons very similar to those of *Hamlet*'s ghost: a murder which has perverted the natural order and in all appearances robbed him of his fate, here as the father of future kings. Unlike *Hamlet*'s ghost however, he is seen only by his murderer, which to the other characters of the play makes Macbeth appear to have lost his reason (much like Hamlet appeared to have lost his after his own encounter with a ghost):

> LADY MACBETH My worthy Lord,
> Your noble friends do lack you.
> MACBETH I do forget. —
> Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends,
> I have a strange infirmity, which is nothing
> To those that know me. (3.4, 82-6)

The recurrent loss of reason (or the appearance of it) associated with interventions of the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays is also relevant to Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, as Kranz writes that "all of her words are fixed on past actions, which she relives in the unchronological, repetitive, and circular order suggestive of mental disturbance" (361). A disordering of the natural order equals a disordering of people's thoughts and reason through the

principle of a humoral relationship between man and his environment. Another element closely linked to mental disturbance and nature in Shakespeare's plays is sleep. Macbeth believes he heard a voice say:

> 'Sleep no more!
> Macbeth does murther Sleep,' — the innocent Sleep
> (...) The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great Nature's second course (2.2, 34-8)

Sleep, by evading Macbeth, emphasises the symptoms of the deterioration of his mental health and the imbalance his actions have caused in the natural order. The Weird Sisters, Hecate, and Banquo's ghost, despite their folkloric or classical aspects, all possess direct ties to Christianity and the natural order and appear to either disturb it or result from a disturbance of it. Yet, Kranz argues that "though the Weird Sisters are, by their destructive, revengeful designs and ambiguous sexuality, largely representations of "unnatural" evil, they are also part of Nature's plan, of the cosmic destiny. Like the devils who ultimately work for God, witches are part of a postlapsarian but still providential universe" (371). Whether the witches act against the natural order, flout God's law or ultimately work as part of an overarching fate, will lead directly to the questions of demonic agency and providence discussed in the last part of this chapter. The conclusion of the Doctor that "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1, 73-4) seems to suggest that *Macbeth*'s supernatural machinery is set into motion by actions that go against nature, yet the very actions that would fit this description are inspired by the supernatural itself in the form of the Weird Sisters. Nevertheless, for Beifuss, determining the origin of the disquiet in the play in question is not as complicated as it would seem since "though many other supernatural elements exist in *Macbeth*, it is sufficient to note only the conclusion. As the perversion of the natural order in one man leads to the perversion of the social structure (in a King, the infection of the entire state, as has been seen in *Hamlet* and

Macbeth, and will be seen in *King Lear*), Malcolm devotes the little time remaining in the play after Macbeth's death to the right ordering of the state" (32). Finishing the play with a scene of Malcolm setting his attention to the ordering of the state would thus underline the importance of order as opposed to the chaotic influence of the supernatural not only on people's inner thoughts and emotions but also on the larger scale of a country. The supernatural characters of *Macbeth* are therefore clearly agents of chaos and disorder, but the question remains whether they are working in accordance to God's will or against it, perverting the natural order and interfering with fate or are agents of it.

The Weird Sisters and Hecate are the faces of the supernatural appearing in *Macbeth* which most clearly possess their own agency and with the most mystery surrounding their nature. In Macbeth's own words to his wife, "They have more in them than mortal knowledge" (1.5, 2-3), and the death and chaos resulting from their intervention seems to identify them quite clearly as beings with evil intentions. Robert H. West writes that "more than any of the other plays of Shakespeare *Macbeth* seems pervaded by some kind of superhuman evil, an evil that shakes and pierces the thin veil of nature and twists its way into the vitals of human volition" (69). Evil in *Macbeth* would accordingly be of supernatural origin even when found in the actions of human characters, leading to the question of whether establishing a difference between evil linked to human fears and passions and that caused by the Weird Sisters (nonhuman malice) would influence the perception of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's responsibility for their actions. Despite West's claim that "as more than one commentator has asserted, what seems on the surface a superhuman evil in Macbeth may be really night's lurid reflection of human evil flaming in the protagonist and his wife" (70), both protagonist and wife show awareness of the gravity of the planned act as well as differing mea-

sures of hesitation and regret. Lady Macbeth wants to "Stop up th'access and passage to remorse; / That no compunctious visitings of Nature / Shake my fell purpose" (1.5, 43-5), and later again admonishes:

> Come, thick Night,
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
> Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
> To cry, 'Hold, hold!' (1.5, 49-53)

She is also incapable of murdering Duncan with her own hands, as he reminded her of her father in his sleep (2.2, 12-3). Macbeth, who decides to "proceed no further in this business" (1.7, 31) and then allows himself to be convinced to "bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (1.7, 80-1), also shows regret for the murder through the line of "Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou couldst!" (2.2, 73). Evil seems to bend the will of men to its goals. This, however, would necessitate that the Weird Sisters be understood as intrinsically evil beings, and, as mentioned previously in this thesis, witches in the Early Modern period were not perceived solely in regard to their supposed allegiance with the devil, but were also often sought out by common folk for their powers. Arguing that the Weird Sisters are inherently evil would therefore lead to the implication that they are not witches of the usual sort, despite the similarity of their appearance and powers. For West "the case for demonic agency in Macbeth probably has to stand or fall with the meaning the Weird Sisters can have. All the other phenomena of evil in the play are possibly attributable to human fears and passions. But it is hard to show that the Sisters are not best understood as discrete beings moved by malice at once personal and nonhuman" (70). The origin of evil in *Macbeth* grows murkier: for Beifuss "the witches, in the *Macbeth* universe, do objectively exist and thus state the objective existence of evil. Yet they never even suggest an evil act to Macbeth" (31), but on

the other hand "to give assent of the intellect to their prophecy is, therefore, a perversion of the intellect" (31). Evil in *Macbeth* would at first glance seem imputable to the manipulations of the Weird Sisters, but the protagonist of the play is responsible for the act itself. Hecate's sorcery is responsible in part for his downfall, as she tells the Weird Sisters that:

> Upon the corner of the moon
> There hangs a vap'rous drop profound;
> I'll catch it ere it come to ground:
> And that, distill' by magic sleights,
> Shall raise such artificial sprites,
> As, by the strength of their illusion,
> Shall draw him on to his confusion. (3.6, 23-9)

However, once again, Macbeth seems to seek out the Weird Sisters of his own volition, though the influence of the Weird Sisters' words and possibly spells on him grows ever more difficult to determine as he travels down the path of murder and destruction laid before him. The fact that for Bailey "sorcery had always been linked, at least in the minds of clerical authorities, to demonic agency, and thus resolutely condemned" (961) would suggest that the Weird Sisters can to a certain degree be held responsible for the evil in the play. Additionally, emphasising the difficulty of identifying the origin of *Macbeth*'s evil, West establishes the following four points defining what the play has in common with Christian demonology's views about superhuman evil: "first, this evil, in the play as in demonology, manifests itself in ways that are obscure and marvelous to man. Second, it is personal and acts against man with jealousy and hatred. Third, fearsome as it is, it appears not absolute in power; it moves the human will only indirectly and knows the future only conditionally. Fourth, traffic with it comes from evil in man and is itself evil and leads to evil and inevitably to ruin" (77). Macbeth's decision to proceed with the murder of Macduff's family is representative of the growing evil in the

play and in the usurper himself. In opposition to the measure of hesitation and regret he showed where the death of Duncan occurred, he now states:

> The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
> Unless the deed go with it. From this moment
> The very firstlings of my heart shall be
> The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
> To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
> The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
> Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' th' sword
> His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
> That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool.
> This deed I'll do before this purpose cool. (4.1, 150-61)

The thoughts of murder that frightened Macbeth at the beginning of he play are now what he commits to. This evolution in his attitude conveys the impression that he has let the thoughts of murder inspired by the Weird Sisters overtake the part of human nature that believes murder to be an evil and condemnable act. Macbeth now decides to follow his thoughts with acts without considering their justifiability or nature as he did before the turning point of Duncan's murder. Evil, if the influence of the Weird Sisters that results in the play's murders can be called that, has won over Macbeth. Indeed, Macduff himself seems to believe that Macbeth is evil incarnate, as "Not in the legions / Of horrid Hell can come a devil more damn'd / In evils, to top Macbeth" (4.3, 55-7). Nevertheless, the influence of demonic agency, if the Weird Sisters and Hecate can be perceived as such, is clearly felt by the human characters of the play and influences their actions and decisions, though the range of this influence remains uncertain. However, for Kranz "The witches' tune and words are heard, however slightly, in almost every scene" (349), and such a range and distribution not only suggests that their power in the play is extensive, but also implies "that the poetic patterns represent powers that include but

go beyond the demonic" (349). Whether the Weird Sisters and Hecate go beyond the demonic is nowhere clearer than in their possible interpretation as agents of fate or providence.

Macbeth's accession to kingship is an event caused by his own intervention in the shape of his murder of Duncan. Yet, the inspiration of the act is directly imputable to the Weird Sisters. Defining whether they are simply servants of evil seeking to cause chaos (the argument of the previous paragraph), witting agents of fate, or unwitting ones will determine whether it was witchcraft or fate that lead to the events of Macbeth, as well as the level of responsibility held by the human characters in the face of the supernatural elements at work. Lima, for one, writes that "it would appear that witchcraft, not fate, is responsible for the turn of events since Hecate is not pleased with and berates the Weird Sisters for not having consulted her before they trafficked with Macbeth and altered his life thereby" (200). Indeed, the fact that Hecate is angered that the witches dared "To trade and traffic with Macbeth, / In riddles, and affairs of death" (3.5, 4-5) seems to work in favour of his argument, but this seems to be partly because she was not consulted and thus could not participate, and partly because:

> which is worse, all you have done
> Hath been but for a wayward son,
> Spiteful, and wrathful; who, as others do,
> Loves for his own ends, not for you. (3.5, 10-3)

It would appear that the Weird Sisters expended too much effort and art only "for a wayward son", and Hecate additionally indicates that her anger stems from the fact that Macbeth "Loves for his own ends, not for you". If the Sisters are devils, then their goal would be to corrupt Macbeth and win him over to Hell (a goal they would have succeeded in). If they work against or accordingly to some fated plan, their intentions non-withstanding, as the Weird Sisters could be fulfilling their role as agents of fate despite the desire to disrupt it, their presence in the play would be of a much more ambiguous nature. Macbeth initially

seems to believe that some higher power is at play in the Sisters' prophecy, leading him to state that "If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir." (1.3, 144-5), but this desire to leave his accession to the throne in the hands of the afore-mentioned higher power is short-lived and he quickly decides to proceed with Duncan's murder. Kranz pursues the argument that "almost all Renaissance writings on witchcraft support the view that God's will allows the opportunity for demonic activity; to disagree would be to rejuvenate the Manichean heresy. Thus, however apparently antagonistic to God's order, the verbal patterns of the three sisters ultimately suggest a divine origin or fated plan. By the end of the play, it is apparent that the witches can read the "seeds of time" (1.3.58), the order of things, and possibly the blueprint drawn by that Christian fate or fury called Providence" (371). Lady Macbeth certainly seems to believe in her claim to her husband that "fate and metaphysical aid doth seem / to have thee crowned withal" (1.5, 28-9), and the Weird Sisters' capacity of seeing into the future reflects itself on the desires of the protagonist and his wife, who states that "Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant" (1.5, 55-7). As for Macbeth's monologue at the news of the queen's death, Kranz writes that "elements of the witches tune cluster in a final statement of the despair that results when one develops, by choice or fate, a relationship with the mysterious powers that the witches represent" (362). The Weird Sisters' intervention in the events of *Macbeth* is reflected in Lenox's words describing the night where the protagonist commits his regicide:

> Prophesying with accents terrible
> Of dire combustion, and confus'd events,
> New hatch' to th' woeful time, the obscure bird
> Clamour'd the livelong night: some say, the earth
> Was feverous, and did shake. (2.3, 57-61)

Though the intervention of the Weird Sisters is clearly negative, as it leads among others to Duncan's murder, Macbeth's downfall, Lady Macbeth's suicide, and the death of Macduff's family, it also has more deep-reaching consequences. Kranz identifies in *Macbeth* "the existence of a supernatural order in which possible but indeterminate providential designs work through demonic and human actors to bring changes to the history of Scotland and England" (382). The role of the Weird Sisters would therefore be more closely linked to fate than what their designs originally seem to indicate. Macbeth, when protesting against the knowledge that a supernatural power has pronounced "the seed of Banquo kings" (3.1, 70), calls "Rather than so, come, fate, into the list, / And champion me to th'utterance!" (3.1, 71-2). Hecate tells the Weird Sisters that "He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear / His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear" (3.5, 30-1). Macbeth calls upon fate to help him work against the prophecy, whereas Hecate expects him to work against it and her words suggest this behaviour will lead to his downfall. Yet Macbeth himself seems to predict the consequences of his actions as soon as in the first act of the play when he states that:

> We still have judgement here; that we but teach
> Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
> To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice
> Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd Chalice
> To our own lips. (1.7, 8-12)

These somber words foreshadow the consequence his own actions will have upon his fate and that of the other characters of the play who decide to act upon the Weird Sisters' prophecy.

The Sisters may be devils, agents of fate, or be working against providence and the natural order — their exact nature is kept a mystery and this in itself is part of what makes them such interesting objects of study. What is certain is that they exercise an influence on the play that opposes supernatural agency to that of their human counterparts, and can be seen to

manipulate events to a degree that reflects itself on a scale spanning from the innermost thoughts and emotions of the characters they influence to the state of Scotland itself. Though their nature remains uncertain, their role as part of *Macbeth*'s supernatural machinery is indisputable, and even Hecate's influence on the play seems secondary to that of her agents. Yet, man himself seems to hold a certain responsibility for his actions: Macbeth's murder of Duncan is committed by his own hand, he is seen to reflect upon the possible consequences and nature of his act, and though it is first suggested by the Weird Sisters, it is Lady Macbeth's intervention that ultimately convinces him to proceed with the regicide. The desire and capacity to manipulate fate, whether it resides in supernatural or human hands, indeed seems to lead to the unhappy outcome of *Macbeth*.

Conclusion

This thesis has shown how supernatural phenomena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet,* and *Macbeth,* despite how different they may first appear, possess a certain number of similarities and common themes which progress throughout all three plays. This begins with the first appearance of the supernatural. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the supernatural characters are not introduced until the second act of the play. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost is mentioned by the soldiers before it arrives on stage in the first scene of the play. As for *Macbeth*, the play opens on the Weird Sisters, clearly supernatural characters, planning to meet with a certain Macbeth. At each occurrence, the supernatural is introduced earlier and earlier on, placing a clear emphasis on its influence on scope and tone of the play as it becomes the first aspect of *Macbeth* the audience discovers. Parallel to this, the perception of the supernatural by the human characters and their acceptance of it shows a similar progression, and leads to the question of whether the intervention of the supernatural limits man's responsibility in ensuing events. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the human characters are not aware of the supernatural elements at play and therefore believe themselves to be responsible for their own actions — notably the four lovers' changes of affection — despite the audience knowing otherwise. In *Hamlet*, the supernatural is a consequence of Claudius' foul and unnatural murder of his brother. Though supernatural agents influence the human characters of the play, such as the ghost asking for revenge, Hamlet's decision to believe the Ghost and act is made on his

own terms and of his own free will. His actions are inspired by the knowledge imparted upon him by a supernatural character, but unlike the four lovers his hand is not forced by the likes of magic or spells. Nevertheless, Hamlet's quest for revenge, though successful in that he murders Claudius, also causes the death of a certain number of innocents. The responsibility of these deaths is difficult to establish, as it is the intervention of the supernatural that leads to the quest for vengeance in the first place, but this intervention is justified by a need for revenge, to right the natural order of the world. In *Macbeth* the extent of the supernatural's influence is much less certain, as even by the end of the play it is unclear how much power the Weird Sisters' spells and words hold over Macbeth, and therefore man's responsibility is thrown into doubt by the possible limitation of his agency when events that seem ordained by supernatural powers come into play. Additionally, though the supernatural can influence man, it appears man is still responsible for his actions, as Hamlet's pursuit of vengeance is a decision taken in full knowledge of the dubiety of the apparition, and Macbeth's downfall, though provoked by the Weird Sisters' intervention, still rests on his decision to murder Duncan (an act which takes place because of the intervention of Lady Macbeth, a non-supernatural character, who convinces him to proceed in spite of his misgivings). Both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* insist on the importance and often opposition of thoughts (or reason) and acts (or deeds) in keeping man from evil and from murder, even when the latter is arguably justified by revenge. Man, by losing his reason or letting it err into evil and as a consequence lead him to evil acts, would therefore seem to bear responsibility for his own actions. Nevertheless, this seems limited by the fact that human agency seems subordinated to supernatural agency to an extent which varies throughout the plays. The loss of a certain measure of free will by the plays' hu-

man characters once the supernatural intervenes is indisputable, as they are invariably influenced by the supernatural machinery in motion.

In all three plays natural phenomena is linked to supernatural characters: the faeries' influence on the moon and seasons and the resulting consequences of their quarrel on the country; the diseased state of Denmark that mirrors the imbalance caused by Claudius' murder of his brother; the cause of the Ghost's existence; or the weather in *Macbeth*, from the "foul and fair" day on which the Sisters first appear to the unnatural weather the night of Duncan's murder. All these elements reflect a fluid relationship between characters, events, and environment present in all three plays. Indeed, as exposed by this thesis, supernatural events find their source in the interruption of the natural order, and the natural order can be understood as ordained by fate. Unbalancing the natural order would therefore mean interrupting events predetermined by fate. Similarly, if the natural order is a consequence of God's will, countering it would amount to upsetting the natural order. The natural order, fate, and God's will are therefore all linked. Upsetting one of the three would have consequences on the other two, as has been observed. Yet, even with these common elements, the role of the supernatural changes throughout all three plays. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, despite the effect of their dispute on the natural world (which is solved when Oberon obtains the child of Titania's votress), the faeries work to balance the affections of the four Athenian lovers, and after some mistakes ultimately achieve their goal. Simply put, the supernatural seeks balance and ultimately has a beneficial influence on the play's outcome. *Hamlet's* Ghost is a consequence of the diseased state of Denmark, and whether through its own volition or as an instrument of fate, works to restore the natural order by seeking Claudius' death. Here, the supernatural still seeks to restore balance, but is motivated by the personal desire for revenge and it is the actions of

man, more precisely Claudius, that have caused the imbalance in the first place. The Ghost's intervention also leads to the string of deaths that accompany Hamlet's vengeance and as a consequence cannot easily be interpreted as beneficial. The supernatural in *Macbeth* differs even more markedly from that of the previous two plays, as it appears at the beginning of the play at a moment where the traitor Macdonwald has been defeated and peace is restored. It causes the disease of the country but does not result from it, and seems motivated by the selfish desire of the Weird Sisters to manipulate Macbeth's fate. The hand of the supernatural in influencing events and the actions of man would imply fate is not pre-determined to a level where it cannot be changed, though intervening with it has been shown to have indisputably negative consequences.

Another common theme linked to the supernatural in all three plays is also the apparent loss of reason of certain characters: that of Bottom, who cannot remember or describe his experience in the woods except in the form of a strange dream and a jumbled phrasing when seeking to explain it, Hamlet's feigned madness which is reflected in Ophelia's suicide and Polonius' degradation from a wise counsellor to an old fool, and Macbeth's descent into a spree of murders and paranoia. Fate, providence, and omens also hold a role in all three plays, even, though less so, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* where the supernatural seems to be of a more whimsical nature. It is the importance given to omens and fate that suggest the Ghost cannot be interpreted simply as a folkloric ghost asking to be avenged but as part of the a supernatural intervention linked to the greater purpose of re-ordering fate. The supernatural in *Macbeth* seems motivated by the selfish desire of the Weird Sisters to intervene with the correct path of fate. Their reasons for meddling with the play's protagonist do not seem to result from any greater purpose than causing chaos, as they do so without the blessing of their mis-

tress. Fate, chance, and providence are however mentioned several times throughout the play, and though both the witches' actions and Macbeth's show little concern with maintaining the correct order of the world, the question that remains is if the supernatural characters of *Macbeth* are agents of chaos and disorder and are working in accordance to God's will (unknowingly) or against it; if they are perverting the natural order and interfering with fate or if they are agents of it. The changes to the history of Scotland and England brought about by the supernatural in *Macbeth* support the idea of an intervention of fate. Yet, though evil in the play would at first glance seem imputable to the manipulations of the Weird Sisters, the protagonist of the play is responsible for the act of murder itself and therefore its consequences. The unhappy events of *Macbeth* would therefore stem from the *hubris* of the protagonist and his wife who decide to take fate into their own hands.

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