

Shakespeare and Yeats: The Supernatural in *Macbeth* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer**

Beau La Rhee

Abstract: The supernatural elements abound in both Yeats and Shakespeare; Yeats takes the supernatural for granted in his plays, while Shakespeare makes convenient use of it to illustrate humanity, revealing the hidden in one's heart and mind: what one is and what one feels, thinks and fears. Shakespeare's ghosts look like humans with supernatural power; Yeats's, meanwhile, seem distant and abstract, though they act like humans. To illustrate these aspects, the focus of this paper is on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Yeats's *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, their representative ghost plays.

Key words: Shakespeare, Yeats, the supernatural, ghosts, humans

Author: Beau La Rhee is Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English Language and Literature, Jeju National University. She specializes in Renaissance and Modern/contemporary plays, focusing on Shakespeare and Yeats.

E-mail: beaularhee@gmail.com

제목: 셰익스피어와 예이츠: 『맥베스』와 『에머의 유일한 질투』에서의 초자연주의
우리말 요약: 예이츠와 셰익스피어는 극작품에서 유령이나 요정과 같은 초자연적인 존재를 많이 사용했는데 작품에서의 활용은 목적이 다를 뿐만 아니라 접근 방법이 다르다고 할 수 있다. 셰익스피어는 초자연적인 존재들을 인물들의 인간성을 부각시키는데 사용된다. 특히 마음속에 숨겨진 욕구나 감정 또는 무의식을 드러내는데 사용한다는 것을 주목해 볼 수 있다. 셰익스피어의 유령은 인간들과 닮아 있고 인물들의 반응을 적극적으로 끌어낸다. 예이츠의 유령들은 추상적이고 동떨어진 느낌을 주는데 이런 방식의 표현은 셰익스피어와 다른 목적을 가지고 있기 때문이다. 본 논문은 유령 이야기를 다룬 대표적인 드라마 셰익스피어의 『맥베스』와 예이츠의 『에머의 유일한 질투』를 중심으로 살펴본다.

주제어: 셰익스피어, 예이츠, 초자연주의, 유령, 인간

저자: 이보라는 제주대학교 영어영문학과 조교수이다. 그녀의 전문분야는 르네상스와 현대/당대 희곡이며 셰익스피어와 예이츠의 희곡을 집중 연구하고 있다.

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I

Yeats and Shakespeare as playwrights are deeply interested in the supernatural, but they have different attitudes to it. That is, they use it in their work differently. To illustrate how they use it, I will look at two works: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Yeats's *The Only Jealousy of Emer* as they put ghosts and spirits in the foreground. These two playwrights, though they lived centuries apart, seem to have believed in the supernatural. Shakespeare was living in an era when most people believed in myths, ghosts, and spirits which affected their daily lives greatly. Yeats was living, however, in a time when most no longer believed in such things partly because of scientific discoveries; that is, to most, Yeats may be seen as unusual. Yeats was a sensitive child in his youth, keen on discovering the mysteries of the world as we can see in the memories of his childhood noted in the autobiographies. In the meantime Shakespeare makes use of ghosts to represent the characters' psychological states in the play: in a sense, he is more like moderns.

One might wonder why Yeats was so susceptible to what is immaterial. As some suggest, this may have to do with his childhood spent in Sligo: he heard from his townspeople numerous accounts of fairies and apparitions. The Irish legends and myths concerning the supernatural circulating in Sligo came to be crucial sources for his work. He further adopted an attitude that might be that of indigenous people. As a spiritualist himself, his use of the spirits in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* may be an externalization of his experience.

Yeats's supernatural plays seem to me to be like Shakespeare's ghost stories. There is, however, a difference between them: while Shakespeare makes frequent use of ghosts in revealing characters' conscience, Yeats makes them mysterious by highlighting the rituals and habits of spirits. To compare the playwrights in using the supernatural, I will focus on their representative ghost plays: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Yeats's *The Only Jealousy of Emer*.

II

There are a handful of Shakespeare's memorable plays about ghosts, memorable because major characters experience agony caused by them. The most famous ghost is the ghost of Old Hamlet. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet has to go through an ordeal because of the urging of his father's spirit to take revenge on his brother and murderer, Claudius. The spirit may have been externalized as a result of Hamlet's jealousy to his uncle, now his stepfather, who has taken possession of his mother Gertrude. In the closet scene, Hamlet quarrels with his mother, throwing daggers at her heart: we wonder if the apparition really appeared in front of Hamlet, because Gertrude denies witnessing any traces of the apparition. Of course, *Hamlet* is the only play that puts the ghost in the foreground, and as Belsey points out, "Senecan shades undoubtedly contribute something to the presentation of Old Hamlet" as the English Stage owes a great deal to the Senecan dramaturgy of the treatment of ghosts (6). *Macbeth* is another ghost play besides *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, leaving a strong impression on the audience. Richard III and Brutus see ghosts of the people they killed, and their conscience seems to have taken the form of a ghost, but *Macbeth* dramatizes human conscience most successfully. Concerning the matter of conscience, Armstrong notes that Freud has interpreted it as a manifestation of something through Lady Macbeth, which is repressed by Macbeth. He explains that "Freud introduces the theory that 'Shakespeare often splits a character up into two personages, which, taken separately, are not completely understandable and do not become so until they are brought together once more into a unity'" (Armstrong 31-32). Yet, more importantly, it is Macbeth's hallucination or the appearance of ghost that truly serves to show Macbeth's mind.

To look into how Shakespeare uses psychology, it is worthwhile to take an example of Macbeth's soliloquy; driven by his ambition and his wife's

urging, he is on the verge of killing King Duncan. Committing murder, he imagines a dagger floating in front of him. But immediately after his speech, he says to himself, "I have thee not, and yet I see thee still" (II.i 35). He questions himself about the nature of his vision:

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
 To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
 Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
 As this which now I draw.
 Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
 And such an instrument I was to use. (II.i 36-43)

Macbeth's dagger in his mind's eye is intangible as he reaches to it. Seeing is not believing, and he rationalizes the reasons why his other senses are numb:

Mine eyes are made the fools o'th' other senses,
 Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,
 And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
 Which was not so before. There's no such thing.
 It is the bloody business which informs
 Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
 Pale Hecate's offerings, and withered murder,
 Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
 Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
 Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
 And take the present horror from the time,
 Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives.
 Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives. (II.i 44-61)

Macbeth studies the reason why such a thing floats in the air, why he feels every little sensation. His description of what he sees fails to correspond with the other senses. He, however, cannot dismiss it; he keeps seeing the blotches of red here and there. Nothing cannot be so real than what he sees at the moment; the sight of all the senses is the strongest and most influential; so he naturally believes that while his sense of sight is working, other senses of his are not. But half of his mind knows that the vision is a cause of his conscience.

III

Shakespeare amplifies the fear and state of Macbeth's disturbed conscience through the sense of sound: "Thou sure and firm-set earth,/ Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear/ Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,/ And take the present horror from the time, /Which now suits with it" (II.i. 56-60). The sounds his footsteps make call his attention to where he is heading, thus making him conscientious of the cruel deed he is about to commit. Each foot step rings into his ear like a heartbeat, and Shakespeare's use of and emphasis on the strongest sensories, sight and hearing put the audience in Macbeth's place to feel the thrilling moment leading to the murder.

Shakespeare's use of the sense of sound does not stop there. A consistent interruption of knocking heard by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is followed by a prolonged knocking and the slow porter taking about the knocking. The crime has been committed, and the raucous knocking is heard, making the audience anticipate a supernatural phenomenon to occur. The porter comments that he feels as if he is the gatekeeper of hell to let people in, which keeps the audience removed from feeling complacent about being an audience, breaking

the line between illusion and reality. As Garbar points out, "The boundary between what is inside the play and what is outside it . . . is continually transgressed, and marked by a series of taboo border crossings: sleep/waking, male/female, life/death, fair/foul, heaven/hell, night/morning" (122).

Macbeth's vision tortures him once more in Banquo's ghost scene. The Lords are gathered for a feast waiting on Banquo without knowing he is already murdered at the time. Having heard that Banquo was killed off, Macbeth is relieved but not fully satisfied, because Banquo's son Fleance has escaped. Nevertheless, he tries to ignore his feelings and focuses on his reception of guests. This is in part a result of, in Nuttall's words, "post-hypnotic suggestion": "What the Weird Sisters do to Macbeth is oddly like what a practised hypnotist can do to a subject, using post-hypnotic suggestion. The post hypnotic 'trigger' can be trivial in itself. But its power is astonishing" (289). Yet, what is suggested by the witches is not the murder of Banquo, which Macbeth himself committed. Extreme fear plays out in Act III scene iv. Lords are all seated except Macbeth, and he is asked to take his seat. But Macbeth perceives the table to be full, seeing someone sitting in his place. He becomes outrageously mad, initially taking it to be a prank on him by one of the Lords, but soon gives in to talk to the ghost while everyone is watching him: "(to Ghost) Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake/ Thy gory locks at me" (III.iv. 50-51). The ghost vanishes when Lady Macbeth censures him for being a coward, emphasizing that it is his hallucination. The ghost vanishes, and Macbeth seems to have returned to himself. Then as he raises his glass to make a toast, the ghost reappears, and Macbeth shouts: "(seeing the Ghost) Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth/ hide thee./ Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold./ Thou hast no speculation in those eyes/ Which thou dost glare with!" (III.iv 92-96). Despite Lady Macbeth's remark to appease Macbeth and rationalize his behavior to the lords, Macbeth rambles in agony:

What man dare, I dare.
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The armed rhinoceros, or th' Hyrcan tiger;
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble. Or be alive again,
And dare me to the desert with thy sword.
If trembling I inhabit then, protest me
The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!
Unreal mockery, hence! (III.iv 99-107)

The ghost's assumption of its form unnerves him severely. In fact the nature of the ghost does not seem to trouble him as it would not fear him if it takes any shape different from what it takes now. Macbeth, as well as Lady Macbeth, uses the words, "sight," "vision," and "eyes" to describe the presence of the ghost. Apparitions appearing in front of him, the nature of them, is not the focus of his point but the unpleasing shape it takes whatever it is. Other shades coming back from Hades would not scare him as he has killed many men, and Macbeth's bravery has been recognized by being rewarded for slaying Thane of Cawdor with getting the title himself. Macbeth's self-consciousness represents fear caused by confronting his superego; what he sees with his eyes is a vision putting the audience on the edge for fear that Macbeth's unusual behavior would cause suspicions in the audience in the world of the drama. Macbeth has shared his anxieties with the audience outside of the drama, making us accomplices. These reasons and other misfortunes Macbeth goes through seem to have contributed to a bad rumor about performing the play; "*Macbeth* has always been regarded as unlucky, and many accidents have befallen performers in the play, some of them fairly serious. Actors call it "the Scottish play," refusing to mention its name, especially onstage" (Garber 88).

While Shakespeare uses apparitions to show what major characters think, such as Banquo's ghost, Yeats uses them to show the nature of the

supernatural. In *The Only Jealousy of Emer* Yeats's ghosts are just like human beings, having jealousy, greed, and sometimes love. Apparitions can also be in conflict with each other, and at other times apparitions can team up with each other: they are often not some reflection of the characters' anguish or spirits of the people murdered by them; they remain to be mysterious and detached from the private lives of the characters, and they can be mischievous.

IV

The story of the *Only Jealousy of Emer* is based on the Cuchulain saga. Yeats was particularly interested in the legendary hero as he was looking for a dramatic character that can represent the Irish imagination. His understanding of the legend seems to have been different according to Moore: "Yeats makes over this primitive hero of epic and saga, gradually creating a symbolic figure of loneliness whose greatness comes less from his achievements than from his response to tragic suffering" (151). In particular, along with this play, *On Baile's Strand* focuses on the suffering of the hero. Yeats amplifies and dramatizes the human emotion in each play than narrating about his accomplishments as a hero. This could be one of the views that differ from those of Lady Gregory in the use of mythology as explained by Bodsworth:

In every retelling of a mythic narrative, there is likely to be some authorial departure from the source. Writers such as Lady Gregory or Standish J. O'Grady revised Irish myths to make them more readable for a general audience. Others such as Kuno Meyer focused on providing as accurate a translation as possible. Yeats, however, was prepared to change any aspect to strengthen the evocative power of the narrative. By focusing on poetic function, on the aesthetics of the narrative, Yeats rendered the sequence of events subordinate to the emotive discourse (120).

Yeats not only structurally and aesthetically changed the original narrative, but also included supernatural elements to dramatize the emotional sufferings of characters.¹⁾

Most of the artistic and stylistic details to portray the supernatural in the *Only Jealousy of Emer* are created by Yeats. Yeats's play opens with Cuchulain lying on bed, unconscious after fighting the waves out of rage brought about by his killing his own son without realizing it. To resuscitate Cuchulain, his wife Emer first asked Inguba, Cuchulain's newest love, to make a visit. She hopes that his newest love can help inspire and revive him. The ghost in this drama is Cuchulain. There is also a figure of Cuchulain, who speaks to Emer. The Figure of Cuchulain is not Cuchulain himself, but another spirit who has possessed his body, and the Ghost of Cuchulain is Cuchulain's spirit. When Inguba gives the Figure of Cuchulain a kiss, she says, "It is no man. I felt some evil thing that dried my heart [w]hen my lips touched it" (541). After a few moments of discussion, the Figure of Cuchulain reveals his identity: "I am named Bricriu--not the man--that Bricriu, Maker of discord among gods and men, Called Bricriu of the Sidhe" (543). Bricriu can free his captive but on the condition that she renounces her hope to be loved by Cuchulain in the future. According to Bricriu, who reads Emer's mind, Emer has not been jealous because she has been believing that after loving many new women, Cuchulain will become tired of them and return to her. In Cuchulain's figure, Bricriu points to the possibility that it would be a different case if the woman is the Sidhe. To show her what he means, he puts vision on her eyes:

Emer. [seeing the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain]. My husband is there.
Figure of Cuchulain. I have dissolved the dark
That hid him from your eyes, but not that other
That's hidden you from his. (547)

He is shut out from the real world made to be unaware of where he is unable to hear her voice. Soon she can also see the Woman of Sidhe, who has come to lure him back, “for the Sidhe are dexterous fishers and they fish for men with dreams upon the hook” (549). Yeats’s description of the Sidhe gives a brief sketch of the nature of the Sidhe and the supernatural powers. Yeats creates dramatic tension by making the Woman of Sidhe lure him:

[The Woman of the Sidhe moves round the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain at front of stage in a dance that grows gradually quicker, as he slowly awakes. At moments she may drop her hair upon his head, but she does not kiss him. She is accompanied by string and flute and drum. Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass or silver, so that she seems more an idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements. Her hair, too must keep the metallic suggestion. (551)]

The stylistic dance Yeats employs in the play seems to recall Noh drama elements with its ritualistic mood heightened. According to Poulain, “As in Noh, the climax comes with Fand’s dance, whose role here is analogous to that of the *shite*, the invisible spirit who is revealed to the eyes of the audience (Emer, and the real audience) through the mediation of the *waki* (Cuchulain)--so that yet another level of embedding is involved here” (95). In the Japanese Noh, *shite* would be the main character playing the role of a spirit “conjuring up his past,” and *waki* would be the spectator, “a medium between the supernatural apparition and the audience” (Poulain 91). The play could be regarded more as a story about female characters in Cuchulain’s life than about the hero himself. Yeats employs such typical devices of the Noh drama to create a collapse of a borderline separating the living and the dead.

Bricriu not only describes the nature of her kind but also shows Emer and the audience how she “fish[es] for men with dreams upon the hook” (549). The description of the attire she is dressed in – the mask, the color

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and texture of her clothes being metallic — all suggests the absence of humanity; the spirit does not resemble humans except her figure. The apparition might be walking around with humans but maintains to be distant and abstract, being mystical. The Woman of the Sidhe urges him to kiss her on the mouth, saying that he will be oblivious to the past memories with beauty remaining. Cuchulain gets tempted, but soon remembers Emer and cries out her name. Bricriu persuades Emer that if she cries out that she would renounce his love forever, he will be saved from becoming a captive of the Woman of the Sidhe. He also reveals that he is her enemy and has come to thwart her. Emer sees that she has no choice but to renounce his love to save him.²⁾ Cuchulain wakes with the Figure of Cuchulain sinking in bed, but only to recognize and respond to Inguba.

The interaction between the supernatural and the human in Yeats's drama reflects Yeats's attitude to the supernatural as in his autobiographical essays and his folklore writings. Yeats gathered many folklore stories and included them in *The Celtic Twilight*. Almost all of the events narrated in the stories describe how ghosts appear and vanish, not appearing in front of humans because they have some personal relationship. They would be living with the humans sometimes visibly and at other times invisibly, and they can be mischievous. The Irish people living in Sligo seem to understand how to live in harmony with the spirits. The characters in the folklore Yeats collected represent the Irish people's attitude toward the supernatural. For example, in Yeats's folklore writings, "Belief and Unbelief," belief in the existence of fairies is so widespread in Sligo that when a girl disappeared one day, most believed that she has been abducted by a fairy and the villagers go so far as to do what the constable says they should do: the constable advised the villagers to burn all the ragweed sacred to the fairies in the field where the child vanished. Many other stories in *The Celtic Twilight* adopt the same attitude. Yeats's conclusion of "By the Roadside" recapitulates the nature of

the supernatural elements for his work:

. . . it has always seemed to me that we, who would re-awaken imaginative tradition by making old songs live again, or by gathering old stories into books, take part in the quarrel of Galilee. Those who are Irish and would spread foreign ways, which, for all but a few, are ways of spiritual poverty, take part also. Their part is with those who were of Jewry, and yet cried out, 'If thou let this man go thou art not Caesar's friend' (191-192).

In the quote above, one would take note of the two divides Yeats is pointing to: the Irish ways and the foreign or the British ways. Considering that Ireland was under British rule for a long period of time, we can see that some Irish people preferred the British ways as they were introduced into the country as "modern" ways, but Yeats saw an abundance of imagination of his native culture, which was lacking in Britain.

Yeats's supernatural drama reflects this culture. His ghosts cohabit with the humans. Their ways of life resemble humans', sometimes in conflict with human interests and needs as in the plays of Cuchulain saga. Yeats is sometimes like Shakespeare: Yeats's persons in his plays walk among the living when stuck in purgatory as in *The Dreaming of the Bones*. They can be called upon: a competent medium like Mrs. Henderson in *The Words upon the Window-Pane* calls out dead spirits to have them speak with her clients. Yet, in Shakespeare the apparitions mostly appear in the characters' weakest state of mind. Hamlet, Macbeth, Brutus, and Richard III all encounter spirits while in depression or guilt, thus, making them reflect upon themselves. That is, Shakespeare makes use of them as dramatic device to reveal characters, while Yeats seems to have lived with ghosts as part of normal ways of Irish folklore traditions: it seems to have been more than a normal life for him, possibly a way to reach to something beyond the physical world. So Yeats aims higher than the human level.

Notes

- 1) Yun notes that unlike the heroic actions shown in *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchulain is passive in the play, leaving his life in the hands of others (95). The focus of the play is rather on Emer and her emotional sufferings.
- 2) Her renouncement itself may come across as tragic, but an alternative choice may not have really changed her inevitable destiny. As Yoon puts it, "She wants him to fulfill her desire someday by sitting together with him at the hearth, but her desire cannot come true because he is what he is as a hero only by his adventurous spirit..." (64).

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