



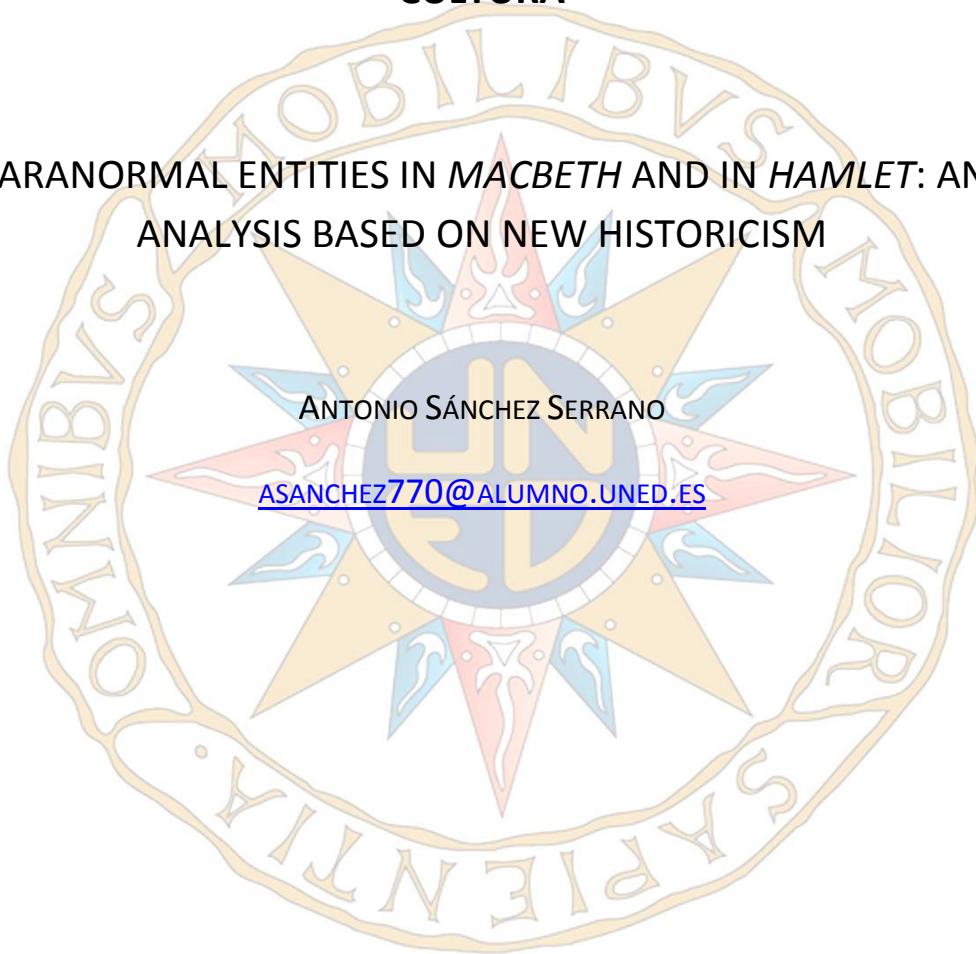
TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

**GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA, LITERATURA Y
CULTURA**

PARANORMAL ENTITIES IN *MACBETH* AND IN *HAMLET*: AN
ANALYSIS BASED ON NEW HISTORICISM

ANTONIO SÁNCHEZ SERRANO

ASANCHEZ770@ALUMNO.UNED.ES



TUTOR ACADÉMICO: Marta Cerezo Moreno

LÍNEA DE TFG: Literatura Inglesa hasta el siglo XVII

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ABSTRACT

Paranormal entities play a more important role in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* than in other Shakespearean tragedies. A comparison between them reveals differences related to the relation of paranormal entities with the main characters and their contribution to the overall atmosphere. There are also points in common between the ghosts of Banquo and Hamlet's father. Following new historicism, it is possible to identify some tensions present at Elizabethan society: ghosts show a conflict between Catholic and Protestant beliefs, while witches, although initially portrayed according to stereotypes of the time, cannot be ultimately responsible for Macbeth's actions.

KEYWORDS: Macbeth; Hamlet; witches; ghosts; new historicism

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1. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1. MOTIVATION AND OUTLINE

William Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer in English language of all times. His sonnets, plays and tragedies are true masterpieces that have maintained their value and impact through time. In particular, Shakespeare's tragedies are unique in their reflection of the human psyche, regardless of their temporal and geographical context, as they cover feelings, values and principles regarded as universal (such as loyalty, love, ambition or revenge).

Much has been written about the main characteristics of Shakespeare's tragedies, from chaos and evil being the natural consequence of the loss of authority, to the solitude and uncertainty experienced by the main characters. An aspect that catches the attention of the reader is the important role of the paranormal in these tragedies.¹ More specifically, ghosts and witches are of decisive importance in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*² as they open both plays, trigger the subsequent action by the main characters and unfold the tragic chain of events in them.³ Without the three witches of *Macbeth* and the ghost of *Hamlet*, life would, in principle, have continued its normal course in Scotland and Denmark, respectively.

This essay aims to contribute to the extensive academic literature covering Shakespeare's tragedies. Making a comparison between paranormal entities in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, two of the most appreciated tragedies by Shakespeare, can also allow the reader to reflect on their differences in the approach to paranormal phenomena and on whether these differences may be the consequence of the evolution of Elizabethan society. Although there is indeed significant uncertainty about the accurate dates where both tragedies were written, academic scholars tend to agree that *Hamlet* was most likely

¹ Paranormal is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the adjective used to express what "[...] cannot be explained by science or reason and that seems to involve mysterious forces." Paranormal can be seen as a synonym of supernatural, a word also used by scholars.

² Throughout the essay, I will use the 2008 edition of the text of *Hamlet* edited by George Richard Hibbard (William Shakespeare, 2008), and the text of *Macbeth* edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason in 2015 (William Shakespeare, 2015).

³ The three witches in *Macbeth* have been also named the three weird sisters. For clarity purposes, I will only make reference to witches.

written between 1599 and 1602 while *Macbeth* is considered not to have been written before 1603 and is closely related to the coronation of James I.

This essay will be organised as follows. This initial section, of an introductory nature, sets the topic under consideration and presents the main research question to be answered as well as the motivation. It also contains a brief discussion of the academic relevance of the issue and a description of the methodology used to provide an answer to the research question. A literature review, focused on those scholarly works that are particularly connected to the research question and the proposed methodology, closes the first section.

The second section starts with a description of the role of witches and ghosts in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, and then compares them. Being this an essay following new historicism, a short introduction to this critical movement, including an introduction to the historical texts to be used, follows. Once the background for the essay has been presented, the second section elaborates on the main research question: namely, the extent to which ghosts and witches in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* reflect the beliefs by the Elizabethan society. In doing so, it pays particular attention to the differences between ghosts and witches in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, and the existence of any other underlying implicit message on gender.

On the basis of the issues discussed in the second section, the third section concludes with a reference to the research questions and a summary of the main findings. In particular, applying the methodology of new historicism suggests that paranormal entities in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* could have been used by Shakespeare to signal existing tensions and conflicts in Elizabethan society.

1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This essay looks at commonalities and differences between the witches and ghosts in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. In *Macbeth*, there is certainly abundance of paranormal entities (three witches, Banquo's ghost, three other witches, Hecate and the three apparitions), but only the three witches and Banquo's ghost play an important role in the tragedy.⁴ On this basis, we will focus on them. Contrary

⁴ The flying dagger (*Macbeth*, 2.1) is excluded from our analysis as, although being a paranormal phenomenon, it does not reflect an underlying being, like ghosts or witches.

to similar paranormal entities in other tragedies by Shakespeare (among others, Julius Caesar's ghost or the murdered princes Edward and Richard in *Richard III*), they are of decisive importance in both plays: they open them, trigger the subsequent action by the main characters and unfold a tragic chain of events in each case.

With that ultimate objective in mind, the main research question to answer refers to the way the representation of ghosts and witches may be a reflection of the beliefs by the Elizabethan society of the time. Seeking for the answer to that question, the essay will also discuss whether differences can be identified between the traits attributed to ghosts and witches in the two tragedies and whether any implicit message, related, in particular, to gender issues, may be identified.

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify that views considering that the ghosts and witches are just the product of the imagination of the main characters (an issue that has been followed by several scholars) are not taken into account. In this sense, the introduction of paranormal entities in his tragedies is considered to be purposely made by Shakespeare. After all, Shakespeare's works are characterised, among others, by continuous references to societal developments (for example, several elements of *The Tempest* relate to the exploration of America). The interest in paranormal entities does not seem to be an exception in this regard. Indeed, as expressed by Ralph Boas and Barbara Hahna, "it was a time of superstition and credulity. Witches, demons, and magicians were regarded as having real power" (116). Furthermore, the fact that King James I wrote himself about paranormal entities offers compelling evidence of the importance that Elizabethan society attributed to them.⁵

1.3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology to answer the research questions described above will consider initially a targeted comparison between the two tragedies, with the aim

⁵ The interest of King James I on witchcraft seems to have started in 1590, where more than 70 persons were accused of creating a storm to sink the boat where he was bringing his wife from Denmark to Scotland. His interest in witchcraft did not decrease in the following years, leading to the publication of *Daemonologie* in 1597 (James I, King of England).

of identifying common points and differences in how paranormal entities are characterised. In addition to the findings derived from it, such a descriptive comparison is also important as it should allow to identify key issues to be subsequently considered in further detail.

Actually, in a second stage, I follow the approach of new historicism, defined as “a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary text, usually of the same period” (Barry 166). I will use historical texts of ghosts and witches in Elizabethan times, and their representation in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. There are two important characteristics of new historicism that are also relevant for the essay: (i) new historicism implies that the historical texts and the literary texts are part of the same historical moment and should be interpreted together (Barry 167); and (ii) “discursive practices,” as labelled by Foucault, are important to maintain social structures of power (Barry 167-173). While not directly related to power, I would like to test whether the attitude of the society towards ghost and witches is somehow incorporated into the written discourse, being Shakespeare’s tragedies just an example of them.

In this second stage, it is of utmost importance to find resources discussing the role of the paranormal in the Elizabethan society, particularly if they include text extracts from that time. In this regard, Wallace Notestein and Keith Thomas are used as main sources of historical texts on witches and ghosts.

For example, Notestein refers to a meeting of witches in the Pendle forest in the so-called Lancashire story.⁶ Confessions and reports of witnesses state that “All the witches went out of the said House in their owne shapes and likeliness. And they all, by that they were forth of the dores, gotten on Horsebacke, [...] they all presently vanished out of... sight” (123). This text echoes the episode of *Macbeth* where the three witches vanish in front of Macbeth and Banquo: “The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / and there are of them. Whither are they vanished? / Into the air; and what seemed corporal, / melted, as breath into the wind” (1.3.79-82). Interestingly, *Macbeth* seems to have been published before the events described in the text above

⁶ For further information on the Pendle witches trials, see the articles by Frances Cronin and Tijana Radeska.

took place, as the Pendle witches trial is documented to have taken place in 1612.

1.4. STATE OF THE ART

Ghosts and witches in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* have been under the attention of scholars for very long time. Leaving aside those who raise doubts about the authorship of the acts in *Macbeth* involving the witches (E.K. Chambers), or those that consider these paranormal entities being just the product of the mind of the main characters (Daniel Diana),⁷ many scholars have looked into detail in the particular role played by ghosts and witches in these two tragedies from a wide range of perspectives.

One of the earliest (and still influential) sources for Shakespeare criticism is Samuel Johnson and he refers in several occasions to the role attributed by Shakespeare to paranormal entities. In principle, being a neoclassical critic, Johnson could not have a positive view of the role of paranormal entities in Shakespeare's tragedies, although he admits that "Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful; the event which he represents will not happen, but if it were possible, its effects would be probably such as he has assigned" (Johnson 471). Furthermore, when discussing the introduction of *Macbeth* and the role witches played in that society, Johnson (1745) states that "in the time of Shakespeare, was the doctrine of witchcraft at once established by law and by the fashion" (Note I, Act I, Scene I) and argues that Shakespeare decided to have this start of the tragedy to reflect these interests.

Later on, scholars like Elmer Edgar Stoll identify a different role of the three witches in *Macbeth* and the ghost in *Hamlet*, and other ghosts in Shakespeare works (*Julius Caesar* and *Richard III*). He perceives the latter to be more passive and less instrumental in the chain of events than the former (202-205). Mary Gleeson (1992) discusses *Macbeth* from a Celtic perspective and finds that the witches "owe more to their Elizabethan stereotype than to the idea of the three supernatural goddesses of destiny" (137), even if some elements could have been taken from Celtic tradition (like the cauldron). This

⁷ Consequently, many of the representations of *Macbeth* since the XIX century omit the witches and on other occasions they are presented as normal women, without supernatural powers, particularly in plays after the XIX century (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 98-103).

view would reinforce the link between the perception of witchcraft in Elizabethan society and the way Shakespeare represented the three witches in *Macbeth*. Katherine Crooks compares the role of the ghosts and witches in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* with those of women in other tragedies: Ophelia and Lady Macbeth. From that comparison, she concludes that madwomen and ghosts serve a similar purpose in Shakespeare tragedies (12-15).

Other scholars have focused on the differences between ghosts and witches in *Hamlet* and in *Macbeth*. Deva Jasheway finds that the ghost in *Hamlet* can be seen as an element of uncertainty and unsettlement, while the witches in *Macbeth* show an ambiguous nature: they inspire fear but, at the same time, reassure Macbeth with their words. On the other hand, there are elements in common between them, as both serve to catch the attention of the audience and to prepare it for a story where the world does not work as expected. She also highlights that towards the end of the two tragedies, the paranormal presences are only seen by the main characters, in opposition to wider witnesses at the beginning. Similar points are also raised by Charles Griffiths, as he states that they are used “[...] as a dramatic device that disrupts the audience’s expectations and forces them into engaging with the plays central themes and issues” (9) and he highlights the ambiguous and uncertain nature of the paranormal characters in *Hamlet* (1-2). On the particular features of the witches in *Macbeth*, he notes that they are not seeking revenge and that, initially, they seem not to be particularly connected to the main action in the tragedy (4-5).

Narrowing down the scope of the literature review into new historicism, it is necessary to note the considerable attention devoted by new historicism to the Elizabethan period, in general, and to the works by Shakespeare, in particular. Even if later criticism has proposed new approaches or reformulations for new historicism,⁸ some of the founding works of new historicism, such as, among many others, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* or Jan Veenstra’s article on Greenblatt, make an extensive use of Shakespeare’s texts. Indeed, according to Jia Gao, “it can be said that one of the most brilliant achievements of New Historicism is the promotion and

⁸ See Neema Parvini for a comprehensive and critical review of critical practice on Shakespeare.

innovation of the study of Renaissance play[s] represented by Shakespeare's" (191).

Focusing on paranormal entities in *Macbeth* and in *Hamlet* and new historicism, there are several works of particular relevance, which are described in the paragraphs below.

In relation to the ghost in *Hamlet*, Stephen Greenblatt (2002) uses it to introduce a detailed discussion of the concept of Purgatory in Elizabethan time. He notes how the abolition of Purgatory by Protestant Church at those times was not able to fully remove this concept from English society, as it had been internalised for centuries since Christianity introduced it. He argues that Shakespeare was just responding to demands from his public when he put the ghost of Hamlet's father at such a central stage in *Hamlet*. He states that "negotiations with the dead are turned from an institutional process governed by the church to a poetic process governed by guilt, projections and imaginations" (252).

Other scholars have continued to work on this topic, even if some of them take a critical attitude to Greenblatt's approach. Among the latter, Sarah Beckwith notes how some subtleties in the analysis by Greenblatt can transform our understanding of religion and theatre at that time, particularly in what regards Eucharist (270). It is particularly interesting the essay by Bridget O'Connor, who considers that the ghost in *Hamlet*, rather than being Catholic or Protestant, is just reflecting the confusion during Elizabethan times between these two types of religious beliefs (44). Indeed, she argues that while the ghost seems to fulfil the three conditions for ghosts according to Catholicism – inability to assume material form, return from Purgatory, and manifestation with a purpose to put the soul at rest–, Hamlet takes a Protestant view regarding the ghost, which he conceives as coming from heaven or from hell ("a spirit of health or goblin damned," 1.4.43).

Similar discussions have taken place among scholars with a focus on paranormal entities in *Macbeth*. Bryan Adams Hampton argues that "[...] through the recurrent images of physical and supernatural purgation, *Macbeth* suggests that witchcraft and demonic presence are not just constructed or

imagined threats, but serious factors that shape personal and national destiny” (343). He considers that the whole tragedy of *Macbeth* is just an exorcism where the broader categories of sacred and profane, and of material and spiritual are blurred. In a similar tone, James Paxton considers that “*Macbeth* resonates from internal and external sorciological [sic] and demonic images and themes” (493-494), putting that into the context of the transformations through which Elizabethan society was going at that time, including the decline of Catholicism.

Last but not least, Gleeson (1993) focuses on the three acts of *Macbeth* where the witches appear on stage. She claims that the witches are of evil nature, as shown by their unwomanly appearance, their differentiated speech and the ceremonies that they carry out. She concludes her comprehensive analysis by stating that the evil nature attributed to the witches was a message for the audience, as they were warned that “trying to peer into the future was always dangerous, nor should he have truck with the purveyors of charms and spells – they were all in league with the devil [...]” (120). She also perceives an anti-feminist view in the witches.

To sum up, paranormal entities in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* have caught the attention of scholars through the centuries and have been approached from different angles. This scholarly effort has also resulted sometimes in diverging and conflicting views; some scholars even question the paranormal nature of ghosts and witches, as they consider them as psychological representations of the main characters. Another group of scholars have interpreted paranormal entities in relation to important issues in Elizabethan society such as women empowerment and religion. Ultimately, it seems undisputable that the introduction of paranormal entities in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* responds to an idea of Shakespeare to convey a particular message through them, even if, so far, there are different interpretations of the nature of that message.

2. AN ANALYSIS OF GHOSTS AND WITCHES IN *MACBETH* AND *HAMLET*

Before entering into the comparative analysis of the paranormal entities in *Macbeth* and in *Hamlet* in the third subsection, the next two subsections will describe the role of the witches and ghosts in these two tragedies. The fourth

subsection, which briefly describes the main characteristics of new historicism, will serve as an introduction to the core of this essay, which is presented afterwards.

2.1. THREE WITCHES, A GODDESS AND A GHOST IN *MACBETH*

In terms of paranormal entities, *Macbeth* is probably one of the richest works by Shakespeare, as it features a ghost, three witches, the mysterious character of Hecate, three other witches and three apparitions. It is interesting to note the key role of the number three (three witches, three other witches and three apparitions), which is typically associated to completeness and is much linked to religion. But not only paranormal entities feature prominently in *Macbeth* in terms of quantity, their influence on the events described in this tragedy appears in comparable terms only to *Hamlet*.

Indeed, *Macbeth* starts with a first act where the three witches present their evil intentions towards Macbeth, in an environment of confusion, turmoil, riddles and rituals, which will be mirrored subsequently in the tragedy. After a short break to introduce the main characters, the three witches return to the scene and this time in a longer interaction with Macbeth and Banquo. Before that, they go through some of their most recent evil deeds, leaving no doubt about their intentions. When Banquo and Macbeth meet them, it is Banquo the one who wonders about their human nature, but the first exchange of words takes place between Macbeth and the three witches. However, they do not speak much with Macbeth, but are able to make accurate predictions to Banquo, before vanishing in the air. In these first interventions, the witches have left clear their evil nature. The witches will not return to the stage until the third act, when Macbeth is starting to regret some of his deeds.

Before that, Banquo's ghost appears on stage, just immediately after he has been murdered. Only Macbeth can see Banquo's ghost and there is a perverse atmosphere in this scene, as Macbeth has requested Banquo not to miss dinner in the evening. When Macbeth is going to sit down in this place for dinner, Banquo's ghost has taken his chair. Banquo's ghost does not talk and, in comparison with the three witches, it is rather passive: it just appears,

disappears and re-appears again. However, it makes Macbeth deliver some of the most perturbing lines in *Macbeth*, showing all the turmoil in it:

The time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns
And push us from our stools.
(3.4.76-80)

Troubled by this experience, Macbeth decides to speak with the three witches, who appear in the next scene. But before the encounter between Macbeth and the three witches, the later appear on stage with Hecate.⁹ Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, is angry and wants to know why she has been excluded from previous meetings with Macbeth and announce to the three witches the important visit of Macbeth.

In the fourth act, the three witches are preparing a spell on Macbeth with their cauldron. This scene is characterised by its dark language and by its strong visual force, connecting directly to the activities typically attributed to witches. Hecate makes a short apparition, accompanied by other three witches, to approve the spell of the three witches. Then, Macbeth meets the three witches and the three apparitions (the head, the child and the king) come one after the other, anticipating the future of Macbeth. The encounter with the three apparitions and the three witches alters Macbeth significantly and marks the start of its fall.

2.2. THE GHOST OF A KING IN *HAMLET*

The only paranormal entity in *Hamlet* is the ghost of King Hamlet, which appears only three times in the tragedy and always during the night. As in *Macbeth*, the tragedy opens with the apparition of a paranormal entity, although in this occasion, the ghost does not actively intervene: it is just seen by two

⁹ In mythology, Hecate was the daughter of Perses and Asteria and was venerated by witches and magicians. In moonless nights, she wandered through the forests and terrorised humans. Medea and Circe are her children.

soldiers and by Horatio. The three of them identify the ghost as the dead king Hamlet and they comment that the ghost has been seen previously.

The first apparition of the ghost is setting clearly its nature, but not its purpose, as it disappears when morning comes. Horatio then speaks to Hamlet about it and persuades him to come with them to the night watch, in the hope to encounter again the ghost. They do so and the ghost asks Hamlet to follow. Once the two of them alone, the ghost tells Hamlet about his suffering in purgatory and, more importantly, that he was killed by his brother, Claudius, who has married his widow, Gertrude. The ghost asks Hamlet to avenge his death, but not to do so with Gertrude.

Hamlet is now left with the doubt whether he has really seen (and talked with) the ghost of his dead father or a demonic entity trying to trick him. As Shakespeare vividly expresses when Hamlet meets the ghost for the first time:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee.

(1.4.18-23)

To check whether the story of the ghost is true (basically, that Claudius killed King Hamlet), he prepares a play that mirrors the story told by the ghost. Watching the reaction of Claudius leads Hamlet to believe the story told by the ghost, which he recognises as his father.

The ghost will appear only one more time, in the “closet scene” (3.4). In this occasion, Hamlet is with his mother, Gertrude, when the ghost appears, but she is not able to see or to hear him. The ghost criticises Hamlet for not having taken revenge yet and for being talking with his mother instead. It is interesting to note that in this scene, and contrary to the other two apparitions of the ghost, only Hamlet can see him and the ghost is not dressed like a warrior, but in a

nightgown. The “closet scene” marks the last apparition of the ghost and he is no more referred in the tragedy.

2.3. A DESCRIPTIVE COMPARISON OF PARANORMAL ENTITIES IN *HAMLET* AND *MACBETH*

Before getting further into new historicism and paranormal entities in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, it is useful to present at this stage a descriptive comparison of the two tragedies and how they depict paranormal entities.

The first (and obvious) difference between the paranormal entities in *Macbeth* and in *Hamlet* refers to the number of them: while the ghost is the only paranormal entity in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* introduces several of them: six witches, Hecate, three apparitions and a ghost. The abundance of paranormal entities in *Macbeth* also contrast with other Shakespeare’s tragedies which, in line with *Hamlet*, typically have one ghost and with a limited role in the plot. From that perspective, the paranormal entities in *Macbeth* may reflect a particular intention of Shakespeare when writing this tragedy as it portrays a world where paranormal entities (even a goddess) seem to interact frequently and at their own initiative with humans. As Gleeson (1992) argues, the witches in *Macbeth* seem to be an image of the beliefs of Elizabethan society rather than a reflection of Celtic tradition—which could be closer to the overall action of *Macbeth* taking place in Scotland—, or, even more, “it maybe [sic] that Shakespeare wished to flatter the royal author of the *Daemonologie* by depicting spirits that conformed to his prejudices” (136). Gleeson (1992) also refers to the interest of James I in the paranormal world. Given that the publication of *Macbeth* has often been connected with the coronation of James I, Shakespeare could indeed have had this in mind when inserting so many paranormal entities in the tragedy. On the contrary, *Hamlet* is set in a scenario where paranormal entities do not regularly interact with humans unless there is the need to correct an important act of injustice. In this regard, the ghost of Hamlet’s father has a stronger indirect presence in the tragedy as a whole, as it unveils the truth to Hamlet and changes his behaviour after their first encounter.

Focusing on the role played by the three witches and by the ghost of Hamlet’s father in the overall plot of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, one can observe a

substantial difference. Typically, Shakespearean tragedies present a situation where the natural order of things is broken, due to some inner, albeit impure, feeling of one of the main characters, leading to a tragic chain of events, often involving the death of the main characters, until the natural order is established again. As Charles Griffiths states, “the witches do not have any wrong doing for Macbeth to put right” (4). On the contrary, the three witches serve as trigger for Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth, to break the natural order of things—represented by King Duncan and his consideration of Macbeth as a loyal noble thanks to his acts—, but they do not have any specific interest in these events. They even play this role twice: when first meeting Macbeth and Banquo, and later on when Macbeth goes to look for them. Therefore, it can be said that the appearance on stage of the three witches is a bad omen throughout the tragedy. On the other hand, the ghost of Hamlet’s father comes into action as a result of a previous alteration of the natural order of things—the murder of a king by his brother— and requires Hamlet to take revenge on him, so that the natural order of things can be restored. In this case, the intervention of the ghost is necessary to correct a previous action against the natural order of things, given that Hamlet seems to lack the courage to do it by himself.

This points to one of the main differences between the two tragedies in general: while the atmosphere in *Hamlet* is full of uncertainty, expressed by the famous line “to be or not to be” (3.1.57), *Macbeth* is dominated by fear, violence and chaos, as fearful images abound—for example, just referring to other parts of the tragedy, horses eating each other or the assassination of Macduff’s wife and her children—. The appearance of the ghost of Hamlet’s father is surrounded by uncertainty from the first line of the tragedy (“Who’s there,” 1.1.1) and is continuously repeated until Hamlet establishes his true nature. In *Macbeth*, the nature of the three witches is also left unresolved and Macbeth questions about it: “what are these, / So withered and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th’inhabitants o’th’ earth / And yet are on’t” (1.3.39-42). However, in this case, the uncertainty about the nature of the three witches vanishes as the tragedy moves forward and, more importantly, is not a central element of the behavioural response of Macbeth upon their encounter. In other

words, Macbeth does not question itself about the nature of the three witches when putting into action his plan to kill the king Duncan.

Nonetheless, when considering just the ghost of Hamlet's father and Banquo's ghost, there are remarkable points in common. Banquo's ghost has a very perturbing presence, albeit minor in the whole tragedy of *Macbeth*, and creates feelings of uncertainty and unsettlement on him, similarly to the reaction of Hamlet after encountering the ghost of his father. Through this ghost, Banquo is able to keep his promise of meeting Macbeth for dinner, despite having been murdered by the will of Macbeth. The nature of Banquo's ghost appears similar to the one observed in the "closet scene" involving the ghost of Hamlet's father: the ghost is only seen by the main characters (Macbeth and Hamlet, respectively) and, although they remain silent, they are able to significantly affect them emotionally. Indeed, in these scenes Macbeth and Hamlet seem to be more connected to the world of paranormal entities than to the real world. In contrast, the three witches are portrayed as active in looking for opportunities to alter the natural order of things in *Macbeth*, as they seem to be doing with other men. Ultimately, "it is the witches that seek Macbeth at the beginning of the play" (Griffiths 5).

There is also an interesting interpretation in terms of gender issues regarding the role of the three witches in *Macbeth*. In fact, they are portrayed as ugly creatures who seem to enjoy doing harm to others. On the contrary, the ghost of Hamlet's father and of Banquo are portrayed as warriors who, even in the afterlife, fight against injustice. Furthermore, considering also Lady Macbeth and, to a lesser extent, Gertrude, the role of female characters in these two tragedies seems to be limited to alter the mind of men to make them go against the natural order of things. Katherine Crooks matches the role of women in these tragedies with that of paranormal entities. As noted by Notestein, a similar view is observed in Elizabethan society when it started its fight against witchcraft and mostly women were accused of witchcraft.

Last but not least, an important difference between the three witches and the ghost of Hamlet's father refers to what happens when the tragedy ends. In *Macbeth*, it is assumed that the three witches continue their evil deeds under

the watch of Hecate, regardless of the tragic fate of Macbeth. They just dance in joy after showing Macbeth his future and vanish in front of him. In *Hamlet*, on the contrary, the ghost of Hamlet's father suggests that the only purpose to visit our world is to inform Hamlet about the circumstances of his murder and to ask Hamlet to revenge him. Once this is achieved, somehow, at the end of the tragedy, there is no reason to think that he would still be visiting his castle in the nights and there is a general feeling of achievement, which is not found in *Macbeth*.

2.4. A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO NEW HISTORICISM

In 1980s, new historicism introduced a new type of post-structuralist literary approach that particularly affected the interpretation of literary texts from Renaissance. New historicism opposes the historical view, exemplified by E. M. W. Tillyard, according to which history is a mere reflection of reality and literary works mirror historical facts and values of the time (Cerezo Moreno 80). On the contrary, new historicism considers that the literary text must be analysed and interpreted together with non-literary texts, giving them equal weight—not with a dominant role played by the literary text – and using them to inform and interrogate each other (Barry 166). As a result, there is no unique interpretation of literary texts, as they are no longer a reflection of historical facts. On the contrary, literary texts are decentralised and disrupted as a stable and unified structure (Cerezo Moreno 81). In this sense, Stephen Greenblatt (1988) argues that the Renaissance play is “the site of institutional and ideological contestation” (3).

One of the analytical methods used by new historicism is “thick description,” as developed by Clifford Geertz. It implies the observation of any particular human behaviour through the description of that behaviour and of its context. Applied to the analysis of literary text by new historicism, it means that anecdotes or details found in religious, historical, or any text serve to show the social mechanisms present at that time, which are also present in literary texts (Cerezo Moreno 83).

New historicism is particularly interested in the Renaissance period, being Shakespeare one of the most frequent subjects of analysis, as it was

found to be an historical period fully matching with the methodological approach of new historicism. In her insightful essay, Jean Howard analyses the impact of new historicism on Renaissance studies through two of its main figures. First, Howard refers to the view of Louis Montrose, according to which Shakespearean drama filled a void in Elizabethan society caused by the removal of catholic traditions and symbols (34); and then Howard considers how Greenblatt focuses on theatrical representations in those days that were intended to be celebrations of the royal power and its victory upon enemies, but quite often hide messages of subversion, and argues that power maintains itself through the existence of a demonic other (39-40).

From the perspective of new historicism, Shakespeare's work, in general, provides ample material to elaborate on their main hypothesis and methodologies. While the main subject of study in relation to Shakespeare's tragedies has typically been the relation with power, it is possible to use new historicism to analyse other aspects and characteristics of these tragedies, such as the role of paranormal entities.

2.5. PARANORMAL ENTITIES IN *MACBETH* AND *HAMLET* UNDER THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEW HISTORICISM

When situating the paranormal entities in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* in their historical context, it is important to consider first the political situation in England in those days, particularly in what concerns the death of Elizabeth I and the succession by James I. In those years, the unrest following the break with Catholicism and the related wars with Spain were still recent in the memory of society. From the perspective of new historicism, any literary text of this time should reflect, even indirectly, this tumultuous reality.

2.5.1. A CATHOLIC GHOST AMID PROTESTANT WITNESSES

An immediate point that comes in relation to the religious shift refers to the nature of the ghosts in *Hamlet* and in *Macbeth*. The ghost of Hamlet's father, and Banquo's ghost, seems to comply with the characteristics of ghosts as accepted by Catholicism and present in England since the Middle Age: they were restless souls in Purgatory that returned to us to solve what impeded them to rest in peace. But Protestantism denied the existence of Purgatory and saw

ghosts only as manifestations of good or evil spirits, the latter being the most likely. Here, as signalled by Greenblatt (2002) and Bridget O'Connor, a conflict arises as a ghost of Catholic nature is interpreted in protestant terms by Hamlet. That could signal how one generation of English had to change their deeper beliefs as a consequence of the religious conflict. Other scholars have gone further and have attributed a demonic nature to the ghost of Hamlet's father, as its apparition triggers a chain of tragic events including Ophelia's suicide and Hamlet's death (Thomas 704-705).

On this basis, one could argue that Shakespeare tried to ensure that the audience of *Hamlet*, regardless of their religious background, would be pleased by the ghost: it could have Catholic nature, being, thus, a restless soul looking for its rest, or it could follow Protestant beliefs, being a demon troubling Hamlet's mind. While the latter interpretation would align the ghost of Hamlet's father with the three witches in *Macbeth*, the former would bring it closer to Banquo's ghost. Considering that both the ghosts of Hamlet's father and of Banquo appear after having been murdered, it seems that the ghost of Hamlet's father is not a demonic entity, despite Hamlet's initial scepticism.

Indeed, Banquo's ghost, although having a less important role in the tragedy, also highlights the tension between the beliefs of the population and the new doctrine dictated by Protestantism. As reported by Thomas, protestants at those times found that "[...] the conviction that many dead men could walk was 'still in the mouth and faith of credulous superstition at this day'" (706). This attitude seems to mirror the reaction of Macbeth when he encounters Banquo's ghost sitting at his place for dinner (3.4.35-69). Again, we find here a conflict between a ghost of Catholic nature and a Protestant attitude of the person confronting the ghost, Macbeth, who wants to deny its existence.

2.5.2. WITCHCRAFT HYSTERIA AND *MACBETH*

Turning to witchcraft, it was an important topic for the Elizabethan society, from the richest to the poorest and across all regions. The prosecution of witchcraft as a crime came to the fore in the first years of the Elizabethan reign, with the passing of the first Act of Parliament against witchcraft, setting death penalty for some crimes related to witchcraft. It has been argued that this Act of Parliament

could have been motivated by religion, since some of the main bishops in the English church had spent some time in Switzerland during the short reign of Mary (Notestein 14-15). Thomas reflects the influence of the Protestant faith in the increase on witchcraft awareness among English people, as it decreased the importance of guardian angels and saints and put an increased weight on the dangers posed by the Devil (589). In this sense, “[...] society was forced to take legal action against a peril which for the first time threatened to get dangerously out of hand.” (594).

Therefore, the interest in witchcraft witnessed in the Elizabethan period in England could stem both from below, from the society requiring actions to be taken to protect them in a new religious environment where previous protective measures were no longer available, and from above, as it was inspired by bishops returning from Continental Europe and from recent religious conflicts. Indeed, Notestein notes the existing fear that the Queen could fall prey of conjuration against her life (19), demanding that potential conjurers were identified and monitored. So, when Shakespeare introduced the three witches in *Macbeth*, he was fully aware of the impact that they could have on the audience. The link to James I is here obvious, given the interest of the new king in the topic. James I even claimed to have been attacked by witches while swimming at the sea with the intention to kill him.

At first sight, it would seem that Shakespeare reflected all the conventions around witches in *Macbeth*. Notestein provides a description of a witch by a boy, dated in 1586: “He had met, he said, a ‘little old woman’ in a ‘gray gown with a black fringe about the cape, a broad thrimmed hat, and three warts on her face’” (76). The image portrayed by this description is very similar to the description of the three witches by Banquo (1.3.39-47). In line with the view of Gleeson (1992), all other images of witches in Elizabethan times are represented in *Macbeth*: they kill animals in their rituals (“Where hash thou been, sister? / Killing swine,” 1.3.1-2), they are able to control weather phenomena (“I’ll give thee a wind,” 1.3.11), they use cauldrons and similar utensils (“Round about the cauldron go; / in the poisoned entrails throw,” 4.1.4-5), they can bring extreme harm to those confronting them even for minor issues (“I’ll drain him dry as hay: / sleep shall neither night nor day / hang upon

his penthouse lid," 1.3.18-20) and they vanish in thin air ("Whither are they vanished? / Into the air; and what seemed corporal, / melted, as breath into the wind," 1.3.80-82).

Interestingly, some of these stereotypes seem to be reverted in *Macbeth*. Banquo refers to the three witches as having beard ("You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so," 1.3.45-47), while Thomas refers how in that time physical abnormalities were interpreted as a sign of witchcraft, and explicitly mentions the lack of beard in men (677). So, if the lack of beard in men could be a sign of witchcraft, would the presence of beard in woman be interpreted similarly? Shakespeare should have been well aware of these beliefs and could have decided to present them in *Macbeth* in a way that they are implicitly challenged.

But more importantly, thinking deeper into the real role of the three witches in the tragic events in *Macbeth*, one can ask whether it is not the ambition of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, instead of the actions of the three witches, what unfolds the subsequent tragic chain of events. After all, Banquo is also present in the first encounter with the witches and his loyalty does not change throughout the tragedy. Moreover, in the final appearance of the three witches with the three apparitions, it is Macbeth who takes the initiative to meet them, and not the other way around. If there would be a need to find a character driving the change in Macbeth, probably Lady Macbeth should be pointed out and not the three witches. The question arises here as to whether Shakespeare could be using the three witches and their role in the whole tragedy to subvert the traditional system of beliefs of that time.

In this regard, Notestein notes that in the second half of the Elizabethan reign, the attitude of the government and judges against witchcraft seems to become more lenient, as signalled by the increasing number of pardons and reprieves to condemned women, even if the attitude of the society against witches is still showing strong intensity (52). As previously mentioned, scholars are of the view that *Macbeth* was written in relation to the coronation of James I, who was a good exponent of the system of beliefs of that time (Notestein 97). The Act of Parliament of 1604 on witchcraft made it a capital offense and, in

order to make an accusation of witchcraft it was enough to have an invocation of the Devil, while previous acts required an act of hostility to the community (Thomas 525).

In such context, Shakespeare could have given a role to the three witches, which, in principle, looks like decisive in driving Macbeth into his tragic destiny. However, upon more careful consideration of these and other characters –among others, Lady Macbeth–, it can be interpreted that the behaviour of Macbeth is not decisively determined by the three witches, as the ultimate responsibility is to be put on himself. There could be an implicit message here not to attribute to witchcraft behaviours that are probably having a human explanation, opposing the view of James I, for whom *Macbeth* was supposed to be written.

Finally, there is an additional related consideration to make. It refers to the invocation of the Devil and the crime of witchcraft. Hecate makes it clear in her appearance (3.5) that the three witches have started iterations with Macbeth without informing her. From there, if the Act of Parliament of 1604 were to be applied to the three witches, it could be discussed whether their words to Macbeth and Banquo would have been enough to condemn them for the crime of witchcraft. Again, one could interpret this as a critique of that Act of Parliament, which seemed to grant ample discretion in the prosecution of witchcraft in England.

2.5.3. THE PURPOSE OF PARANORMAL ENTITIES AND GENDER ISSUES

Another interesting feature of the ghosts and witches in *Hamlet* and in *Macbeth* refers to the purpose of their interaction with the main characters. Here, there is an interesting, and direct, differentiation to be made between ghosts and witches, which can be also drawn by gender.

Indeed, as noted earlier, the main purpose of the ghosts of Banquo and of Hamlet's father is to identify the offender behind their assassination. This was indeed an accepted view in Elizabethan times, because as Thomas states: “[the ghost] reserved his intervention for those cases where an offence would have been undiscoverable by normal means.” (714). Written evidence from that time shows cases of ghosts who came back to our world to, among others, haunt the

lover of the wife who ordered the murder of the husband or the murderer of a soldier. On the contrary, witches in *Macbeth* are portrayed with the only purpose of bringing unhappiness and despair to those that cross their path. That would be the case not only of Macbeth, but also the sailor whose wife refuses to share nuts with one of the witches.

There is, thus, a clear opposition between the benevolent role of ghosts, in the search of justice even after death, and the malevolent nature of witches. This opposition can be also be presented in gender terms, as the two ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are male and the witches are female. As in many other features of his work, Shakespeare reflects here Elizabethan society, where women did not enjoy any independency and had a subordinated and limited role. In those days, the majority of those trialled for witchcraft were women and Thomas explains this fact as a consequence of women being the most dependent members of the society, making them more vulnerable to accusation (678).

But such consideration of weakness would, in principle, contrast with the strength and power initially attributed by the three witches in *Macbeth*. Indeed, it would not be easy to explain that the most vulnerable in society (poor deprived women) would have the power to cast spells over anybody who dared to opposed their wishes. However, as stated above, Shakespeare seems to be introducing here a subtle opposition in the influence of the three witches in future actions of Macbeth, particularly regarding the ambition showed by Lady Macbeth. From that perspective, if Lady Macbeth, again a woman with a negative role, is taken as the main driver of Macbeth's actions to gain power, then the three witches could be seen as vulnerable members of the community, being blamed of inducing behaviours beyond their control and serving, thus, as scapegoat for others with higher societal status, in line with the view of Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon. In general, witches could have been women that did not accept the conventions of the society at that time and they paid the price of being excluded from society and accused of witchcraft. Actually, taking some distance to analyse their behaviour, the three witches do not seem to be perfect wives and daughters, but they are certainly not as evil as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Paranormal entities play a significantly more important role in *Macbeth* and in *Hamlet* than in any other work by Shakespeare. In this essay we have analysed in detail their role in the two tragedies and compared how ghosts and witches are introduced into the respective plots. That comparison has revealed the existence of important differences, referring to the relation of paranormal entities with the main characters, their contribution to the overall atmosphere of the tragedy and, in general, the way they are portrayed by Shakespeare. There are, on the other hand, important points in common between the ghost of Hamlet's father and Banquo's ghost.

Following the approach of new historicism, the essay investigates then how ghosts and witches are reflected in these two tragedies as mirroring the beliefs in Elizabethan society. From that analysis, although they seem to be, in principle, aligned with the "standard" belief at that time, it is possible also to identify societal conflicts raised by Shakespeare.

Starting with ghosts, Shakespeare could have used them to bring to the front the religious conflict of England at that time, where the adoption of a new religion brought important changes to the overall beliefs of the population. By placing Catholic ghosts meeting Protestant men, Shakespeare could have tried to bring to the fore this conflict, which had an intergenerational component.

Regarding the three witches in *Macbeth*, they seem to faithfully align with the societal representation of them, also in view of the interest of James I on the topic. However, looking deeper into their motivations and actions may pose questions relative to their capacity to influence Macbeth's behaviour and whom should be responsible of the ensuing tragic chain of events. In other words, Shakespeare may have inserted them in the tragedy to make us think about their decisive role in the rise and fall of Macbeth, based on existing prejudices, and, at the same time, to make us reflect on whether their material actions are really so decisive, particularly when compared to those of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

From here and taking a gender perspective, it is possible to see how ghosts are typically male and positively portrayed and witches are female, weak and easy “suspects” to bear the responsibility of the acts of other. Indeed, playing with our prejudices, Shakespeare attributes to them a larger influence than they in reality have in the behaviour of Macbeth, in particular when compared with Lady Macbeth. In this case, Shakespeare would just be reflecting a broader societal trend, whereby weak and poor women were often accused of witchcraft and attributed actions over which they had no control, fuelling the “witchcraft hysteria” of those years.

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