



The Use of the Supernatural in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: A Comparative Study

Sushma Meti

Faculty

Department of English

MMDRS Hiresindogi, Koppal

Abstract

This comparative study investigates the role of supernatural elements in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, focusing on how each dramatist employs the supernatural to probe themes of fate, free will, moral responsibility, and human ambition. While both plays are rooted in Renaissance anxieties about overreaching knowledge and power, their protagonists' differing engagements with the supernatural reflect distinct philosophical concerns. Faustus actively invokes the supernatural by forging a pact with Lucifer, representing a conscious rebellion against divine order. Macbeth, on the other hand, passively receives supernatural predictions from witches, yet allows them to dictate his path. The paper argues that the supernatural functions not merely as a plot device but as a mirror of the characters' internal desires, fears, and failures, ultimately underscoring the tragic consequences of defying natural and divine laws in the pursuit of power.

Keywords

Supernatural, Tragedy, Fate, Free Will, Moral Agency, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Doctor Faustus, Macbeth, Renaissance Drama, Ambition, Predestination, Psychological Conflict.

Objectives

- To compare and contrast the supernatural elements in *Doctor Faustus* and *Macbeth*.
- To examine how the supernatural shapes plot progression and character development.
- To explore how both texts interrogate themes of fate, free will, and ambition through the lens of supernatural encounters.
- To analyze the active vs. passive nature of Faustus's and Macbeth's relationships with supernatural forces.

- To reveal how supernatural motifs act as philosophical critiques of Renaissance ideals and the boundaries of human agency.

Introduction

The supernatural in Renaissance drama often acts as a lens through which playwrights investigate the limits of human aspiration and the dangers of transgressing ordained boundaries. Both Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are steeped in supernatural imagery—devils, witches, magic, apparitions—that operate not only as dramatic elements but also as moral and metaphysical agents. These forces enable the authors to interrogate contemporary debates around humanism, divine providence, sin, and predestination. While Faustus is the archetype of the Renaissance overreacher, whose hubristic pact with demonic powers leads to damnation, Macbeth embodies the tragic hero whose ambition is catalyzed by prophecy and consumed by guilt and paranoia. The plays reflect an era grappling with the collapse of medieval theological certainties and the rise of individualist thought, particularly regarding one's control over destiny. This paper undertakes a detailed comparative analysis of how both plays use the supernatural to explore existential dilemmas and reinforce tragic structure.

The Supernatural in *Doctor Faustus*

In *Doctor Faustus*, the supernatural is intrinsic to the drama's structure. Faustus, dissatisfied with traditional disciplines, turns to necromancy. His pact with Lucifer—signed in his own blood—marks a profound moral and spiritual rupture.

Mephistopheles, as Lucifer's agent, warns Faustus that "Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it" (*Doctor Faustus* I.3.76). This line reveals that hell is not merely a place, but a state of existence—a theological concept tied to Reformation-era fears of damnation (Bevington 34). Even as Mephistopheles cautions him, Faustus presses forward, showcasing the hubris of Renaissance man attempting to exceed human boundaries.

His famous declaration, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven," is not verbatim in Marlowe's play but echoes Faustus's early assertion that "This word 'damnation' terrifies not me" (*Doctor Faustus* I.1.46), indicating his early confidence in mastering the consequences of his actions.

Despite multiple chances to repent—urged by the Good Angel and later scholars—Faustus continues to rely on magical powers. His conjuring of Helen of Troy ("Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships...?" *Doctor Faustus* V.1.95) serves as both aesthetic illusion and spiritual distraction. This moment encapsulates Faustus's prioritization of sensual pleasure over spiritual redemption.

Ultimately, Faustus's internal conflict—between the desire for repentance and despair of forgiveness—culminates in his plea at the play's end: "I'll burn my books—ah, Mephistopheles!" (*Doctor Faustus* V.2.120). This desperate final cry illustrates his realization that the knowledge he once craved has become his curse.

The Supernatural in *Macbeth*

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare weaves the supernatural with psychological tension. The play begins with the witches' cryptic chant: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (*Macbeth* I.1.10). This inversion sets the tone for the entire play, introducing themes of moral ambiguity and deceptive appearances.

The witches' prophecy—"All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! / All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor! / All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (*Macbeth* I.3.48–50)—initiates Macbeth's descent. He later reflects, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (*Macbeth* I.3.143–144), suggesting initial passivity. Yet, the prophecy ignites an ambition that propels him toward regicide.

Banquo, however, warns of trusting these "instruments of darkness": "The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence" (*Macbeth* I.3.123–125). His insight presents the witches as agents of manipulation who exploit human ambition.

Macbeth's hallucinations reflect his psychological unraveling. The iconic line—"Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?" (*Macbeth* II.1.33–34)—marks the moment where imagination and supernatural suggestion collide, guiding him to Duncan's murder.

In Act IV, the witches show Macbeth three apparitions: an armed head, a bloody child, and a crowned child with a tree. These cryptic visions embolden him: "Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?" (*Macbeth* IV.1.82), but also mislead him. His misinterpretation of "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" (*Macbeth* IV.1.80) creates a false sense of invincibility, which ultimately contributes to his downfall.

As Lady Macbeth succumbs to guilt, she hallucinates blood on her hands: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (*Macbeth* V.1.30). Shakespeare uses these supernatural manifestations not just as narrative tools but as expressions of psychological torment and moral disintegration.

Comparing the Protagonists' Relationships with the Supernatural

Faustus and Macbeth both fall due to their entanglement with supernatural forces, yet their relationships with these forces diverge significantly.

Faustus is an active seeker: he conjures spirits, initiates the pact, and uses magic to defy both divine authority and natural law. His downfall stems from prideful autonomy—he exercises free will without moral restraint (Greenblatt 72).

Macbeth, in contrast, is a passive recipient: he neither seeks nor understands the witches' prophecy fully but lets it guide his choices. He is caught in a cycle of fatalistic misinterpretation, confusing supernatural signs with destiny (Kermode 111).

Faustus's tragedy is shaped by his conscious rebellion against heaven, while Macbeth's is shaped by his insecurity and belief in prophecy. Faustus says, "Faustus hath done it: torment, sweet friend, that base and crooked age" (*Doctor Faustus* II.1.21), while Macbeth declares, "Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (*Macbeth* I.4.50–51)—both acknowledge the darkness of their ambition, but from opposite perspectives: one boasts, the other hides.

Thematic Exploration: Fate, Free Will, and Consequences

In *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe explores the limits of free will under the weight of Calvinist doctrine, where predestination looms. Faustus chooses damnation, but the system offers him chances to repent, raising the question: Is he truly free, or merely fulfilling a doomed trajectory?

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents a more ambiguous theology. The prophecy sets events in motion, but Macbeth's choices—killing Duncan, Banquo, Macduff's family—are his own. His belief in fate drives his downfall, making him a tragic figure who acts to ensure his destiny, only to be undone by it.

The nihilism at the play's end is stark. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage..." (*Macbeth* V.5.24–25) reflects Macbeth's loss of faith in meaning, echoing the futility of ambition when disconnected from morality (Garber 582).

Conclusion

Both *Doctor Faustus* and *Macbeth* explore the supernatural not as mere fantasy, but as a philosophical instrument revealing the frailties of human ambition. Faustus actively seeks to transcend divine limitations and

pays the price for his hubris. Macbeth, influenced by prophecy, mistakes supernatural suggestion for destiny and loses himself in paranoia and guilt.

These plays offer enduring lessons on the dangers of overreaching, the delusions of control, and the inevitability of consequence when human beings engage with forces beyond their comprehension. Through their respective treatments of the supernatural, Marlowe and Shakespeare expose the tragic tension between desire and morality, ambition and conscience, and fate and freedom.

Works Cited

- Bevington, David, ed. *Doctor Faustus*. By Christopher Marlowe, Bantam, 1995.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare After All*. Pantheon Books, 2004.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. Penguin Books, 2000.
- Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus*. Edited by David Bevington, Bantam, 1995.
- Muir, Kenneth. *Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Routledge, 1982.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Stephen Orgel, Oxford University Press, 2008.

