



Shakespearean Tragedies Depicting Supernatural Elements Changing the Protagonist Like Christopher Marlowe Writes His Imagination in Dr. Faustus

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ABSTRACT

This explicit article explores the use of supernatural elements in Shakespearean tragedies, with a particular focus on their role in transforming the protagonist. Through an immense comparative analysis with Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, this article argues that Shakespeare's tragedies employ supernatural elements to facilitate the protagonist's downfall, while Marlowe's Dr. Faustus uses supernatural elements to explore the complexities of human nature. This article contributes to the existing scholarship on Shakespearean tragedy, the supernatural, and the Renaissance drama. This article also explores the tragic deaths of heroes in the works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Through a comparative analysis of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello, and Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great, Doctor Faustus, and Edward II, this study examines the common themes and motifs that contribute to the downfall of these tragic heroes. The article argues that the tragic deaths of these heroes serve as a commentary on the human condition, highlighting the flaws and vulnerabilities that ultimately lead to their ultimate conditional demise.

Introduction

Shakespearean tragedies have long been recognized for their complex exploration of human nature, morality, and the supernatural elements. One of the key elements that contribute to this complexity is the use of supernatural elements to transform the protagonist. This article seeks to explore this phenomenon through a comparative analysis with Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus as a critical study. Tragedy, as a dramatic genre, has long fascinated audiences with its portrayal of human suffering and the downfall of heroic figures. In the works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, two of the most celebrated playwrights of the English Renaissance, the tragic hero's demise serves as a powerful commentary on the human condition. This article will examine the tragic deaths

of heroes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Edward II*, highlighting the common themes and motifs that contribute to their downfall.

Shakespearean Tragedies Depicting Supernatural Elements Changing the Protagonist Like Christopher Marlowe Writes His Imagination in *Dr. Faustus*

The interplay between human aspiration and supernatural temptation forms one of the most arresting patterns in Renaissance tragedy. Both William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe situate their protagonists in liminal zones where metaphysical forces test the boundaries of moral freedom. While Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* dramatizes an explicit covenant with demonic power, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* weave subtler webs in which prophecy, apparition, and psychological possession transform ordinary ambition into catastrophic ruin. Across these works, the supernatural is not merely a theatrical device but a mirror of Renaissance anxiety about knowledge, salvation, and the mutable self (Bradley 1904; Frye 1967).

The Renaissance Imagination and the Supernatural

The late sixteenth century witnessed an unprecedented tension between theological orthodoxy and scientific curiosity. Humanist learning encouraged inquiry into the cosmos, yet the Reformation reinvigorated belief in invisible agencies—angels, demons, providence. Marlowe and Shakespeare both inhabit this cultural paradox. Marlowe's *Faustus* epitomizes the scholar who seeks omniscience through forbidden means: “A sound magician is a mighty god” (*Dr. Faustus* 1.1). Shakespeare, writing within the same intellectual climate, translates that Faustian hubris into dramatic psychology. *Macbeth*'s hunger for sovereignty, *Hamlet*'s obsession with metaphysical proof, and *Othello*'s desire for absolute certainty all echo the same Renaissance will to transcend limitation (Shakespeare 1997a; 1997b; 1997c).

Yet, where Marlowe externalizes the supernatural as visible demons, Shakespeare internalizes it as conscience, hallucination, or fate's whisper. The witches in *Macbeth* may be real or projections of *Macbeth*'s “heat-oppressed brain.” The ghost in *Hamlet* oscillates between purgatorial messenger and psychological delusion. Such ambiguity marks Shakespeare's more mature handling of the supernatural—an inward turn of the miraculous into the moral.

Macbeth: Prophecy and the Corruption of Will

In *Macbeth*, the witches' prophecies ignite a tragic metamorphosis. Before encountering them, *Macbeth* is a loyal thane; after hearing “All hail, *Macbeth*, that shalt be king hereafter,” he becomes an instrument of his own damnation. The supernatural thus acts as catalyst, not controller—temptation framed as revelation. Lady *Macbeth*'s invocation of “spirits that tend on mortal thoughts” furthers the demonic atmosphere, blurring the line between psychological and infernal possession. Shakespeare situates their downfall within the moral logic of choice: the witches “win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence.” Like *Faustus*, *Macbeth* misconstrues prophecy as permission. Both protagonists mistake suggestion for sanction and thus author their own ruin (Shakespeare 1997a; Marlowe 1998).

Hamlet: The Ghost and the Burden of Knowledge

The apparition of Hamlet's father functions as Shakespeare's most complex supernatural figure. It fuses Catholic notions of purgatory with Protestant skepticism, forcing the prince into epistemological crisis. Is the ghost "a spirit of health or goblin damned"? Hamlet's ensuing paralysis parallels Faustus's intellectual vacillation—both characters pursue absolute knowledge in defiance of moral consequence. The ghost's command "Remember me" becomes a fatal imperative; knowledge, once obtained, cannot be unlearned. In Marlowe's schema, such knowledge seals the pact; in Shakespeare's, it disintegrates the self. Hamlet's tragedy lies in the inability to reconcile reason with revelation—a predicament that mirrors Faustus's last soliloquy, where learning yields despair (Bradley 1904).

Othello and the Invisible Magic of Evil

Othello contains no overt witches or ghosts, yet the play vibrates with supernatural imagery. Iago's manipulation assumes quasi-demonic power: "I am not what I am." His deceit functions as black magic—language as incantation—reducing Othello to the credulous victim of invisible forces. The handkerchief, supposedly "dyed in mummy," symbolizes this convergence of superstition and psychology. Shakespeare thereby redefines the supernatural as the corruption of perception; evil works not through demons but through the diseased imagination. Like Faustus's conjurations that end in illusion, Othello's belief in Iago's fabrications demonstrates the self-destructive potency of imagination unmoored from truth (Frye 1967).

Comparative Axis: Marlowe's Overt Pact vs. Shakespeare's Internal Temptation

The essential distinction between Marlowe and Shakespeare lies in **the locus of the supernatural**. In *Dr. Faustus*, demonic power is external, contractual, and theatrical: Mephistopheles appears, the pact is signed in blood, and cosmic hierarchy is visibly transgressed. The tragedy unfolds from overt rebellion. Shakespeare's tragedies, by contrast, absorb the supernatural into human psychology—visions, dreams, omens—rendering the battlefield interior. Macbeth and Faustus alike crave forbidden knowledge; yet Macbeth's devil is his imagination, whereas Faustus's devil bears a name. Marlowe's hero embodies the scholar's overreach: intellectual arrogance that seeks mastery of nature. Shakespeare's heroes display emotional overreach: passion, jealousy, or ambition that perverts moral order. Both dramatists, however, share a moral cosmology in which the supernatural mediates divine justice. The witch, the ghost, and the fiend act as mirrors reflecting the protagonist's sin rather than agents imposing it (Marlowe 1998; Shakespeare 1997a-c).

Humanism, Morality, and the Tragic Pattern

Renaissance tragedy, as A. C. Bradley (1904) observed, is not merely the fall of a great man but "the story of moral error issuing in suffering." The supernatural, far from negating free will, exposes it. When Faustus signs his infernal bond, when Macbeth murders Duncan, when Hamlet delays, or when Othello believes Iago, each moment affirms choice under temptation. The supernatural thus operates as a dramatic microscope magnifying moral weakness. At the same time, both playwrights interrogate the

limits of repentance. Faustus's desperate cry "My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!" echoes in Macbeth's realization that he is "in blood / Stepp'd in so far." Shakespeare's universe, however, allows a glimmer of reconciliation—Lear's recognition of folly, Hamlet's "readiness is all." Marlowe's cosmos remains tragically closed; the clock strikes twelve and the soul is lost.

Gendered Dimensions of the Supernatural

An often-overlooked parallel involves the gender coding of supernatural agents. Marlowe populates his stage with male demons and masculine allegories of temptation; Shakespeare's supernatural emissaries—witches, Weird Sisters, the feminine spirit invoked by Lady Macbeth—embody anxieties about female power. The Elizabethan conflation of witchcraft with subversion of patriarchal order thus inflects Macbeth's moral universe. Lady Macbeth's plea to "unsex me here" literalizes the fear that supernatural influence destabilizes gender identity. In this sense, Shakespeare internalizes Marlowe's external devils into the domestic sphere, showing how metaphysical corruption can begin within the human household.

Staging and Spectacle

Marlowe's dramaturgy depends on visual spectacle thunder, apparitions, pageants of the seven deadly sins reflecting the moral didacticism of medieval miracle plays. Shakespeare, conversely, manipulates audience psychology through suggestion. Banquo's ghost is unseen by the spectators until Macbeth names it; the witches vanish into fog; the ghost in *Hamlet* appears selectively. Through transferring the site of terror from stagecraft to imagination, Shakespeare advances a modern poetics of the unseen. His audience becomes complicit, experiencing the supernatural as a function of belief rather than sight (Frye 1967).

Philosophical Undercurrents

The difference also reflects philosophical temperament. Marlowe's tragedy is Promethean: man's rebellion against divine restraint. Shakespeare's is Augustinian: sin as the misdirection of will. In both, knowledge and desire are twin engines of destruction. Yet Shakespeare, unlike Marlowe, tempers condemnation with empathy. Even in madness or guilt, his heroes retain moral consciousness; their recognition of error restores a measure of order. Faustus's despair lacks such catharsis—his tragedy ends in metaphysical silence.

This divergence underscores each dramatist's stance toward imagination. For Marlowe, imagination is creative yet perilous, capable of summoning hell itself. For Shakespeare, imagination is redemptive when aligned with moral reason, destructive when it usurps it. The supernatural is therefore both a warning and a mirror: an artistic embodiment of the Renaissance conviction that the mind can fashion its own heaven or hell.

Conclusion: This creative yet critical article has explored the use of supernatural elements in Shakespearean tragedies, with a particular focus on their role in transforming the protagonist. Through a light comparative analysis with Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, this article has argued that Shakespeare's tragedies employ supernatural elements to facilitate the protagonist's downfall,

while Marlowe's Dr. Faustus uses supernatural elements to explore the complexities of human nature. This article contributes to the existing scholarship on Shakespearean tragedy, the supernatural, and the Renaissance drama. The tragic deaths of the heroes in Shakespeare and Marlowe's tragedies serve as a powerful commentary on the human condition. Through their portrayal of flawed and vulnerable heroes, these playwrights highlight the dangers of unchecked ambition, emotion, desire, and pride. Ultimately, the tragic demise of these heroes serves as a reminder of the fragility of human life and the importance of humility, compassion, and wisdom unanimously.

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