



# A Comparative Study of Ghost Images in Dramas of Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare

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## Abstract

Ghosts appear in some representative dramas of both Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare, two greatest playwrights in the world. There are similarities and comparability between the supernatural descriptions in dramas of Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing. The depiction of supernatural phenomena such as ghosts in drama can have multiple levels of impact. The appearance of ghost in these dramas plays an important role in promoting plot development, deepening themes, shaping character, enriching the connotation and expressive power, and enhancing dramatic effect. Through the creation of thrilling ghost images, these dramas can produce extraordinary artistic effects and have a purifying effect on the human heart.

**Key words:** Comparative study; Ghost images; Guan Hanqing; Shakespeare; Dramas

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Guan Hanqing (1225-1302), the greatest playwright in China’s Yuan Dynasty, created 66 dramas in his entire life, among which there are currently 18 surviving ones. Their quantity and quality are both top-notch among Yuan Dynasty dramas. He was 300 years ahead of the British playwright Shakespeare and had almost twice as many dramas. Climbing to the pinnacle of drama and leading Yuan Dynasty drama, Guan Hanqing sang the voice of the suffering masses with the cry of his soul. He believed in Confucianism. During his youth, he devoted himself solely to reading the books of sages. Guan Hanqing is the founder of Yuan Dynasty drama, whose dramas have now been translated into various languages such as English, French, German, Japanese, etc., and widely circulated around the world. Guan Hanqing is highly acclaimed in the history of world literature and art, and is known as the “Shakespeare of the East”.

As one of the most influential writers in human history, Shakespeare (1564-1616) left behind 37 plays. His works expose and criticize the darkness in society, full of humanistic spirit and permeated with Christian thought. In his schooldays, “he read and translated various authors such as Aesop (the author of Fables), Caesar, Virgil, and Ovid (Shakespeare’s favorite). William also read Horace, Livy, and several Roman playwrights, such as Seneca and Plautus, the most admired writer of Latin comedy...The school day ended with a religious reading, the singing of hymns, and a prayer...Shakespeare’s other source of education came from the Church of England. Homilies, or sermons, were a major part of religious education. It was mandatory that townspeople attend church on Sunday. Here preachers read passages from the Geneva Bible or the Bishop’s Bible, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and

*Acts and Monuments.*" (Dommermuth-Costa, 2006, p.28). In an ode written by Shakespeare's friend Ben Jonson, there is famous line: He was not for an age, but for all time!

## 2. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GHOST IMAGES IN DRAMAS OF GUAN HANQING AND SHAKESPEARE

### 2.1 Ghost Image in Shakespeare's Dramas

In general, the revenge tragedy has the following characteristics: Firstly, revenge is the most basic motive in the play. Secondly, the ghost of the dead victim appears on the stage to supervise the whole process of revenge. (Cao, 2002, pp.65-69)

Ghosts appear in Shakespeare's plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III* and *Cymbeline*.

While Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, was taking a nap in the garden, Hamlet's uncle Claudius dripped deadly venom into his ears, causing the venom to flow into his blood vessels and ultimately leading to his tragic death. Hamlet's father turned into a ghost after his death. Subsequently, Hamlet's uncle Claudius usurped the throne, while Hamlet's mother remarried Claudius. Firstly, Shakespeare used Bernardo's words to describe the appearance ghost of Hamlet's father, King Hamlet: "In the same figure, like the king that's dead." (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 1) Then, he further describes the appearance of the ghost through Horatio's discussion about it with several other soldiers:

As thou art to thyself:  
Such was the very armour he had on  
When he the ambitious Norway combated;  
So frowned he once, when, in an angry parle,  
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.96)

Through the above description, the ghost image of King Hamlet in Shakespeare's works is vividly presented. It remains as dignified as King Hamlet was when he was alive, with King Hamlet's previous image and personality.

Then, Horatio describes the ghost to Hamlet, who has returned from abroad to mourn:

In the dead vast and middle of the night,  
Been thus encountered. A figure like your father,  
Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe,  
Appears before them, and with solemn march  
Goes slow and stately by them: thrice he walked  
By their oppressed and fear-surprised eyes,  
Within his truncheon's length; whilst they, distilled  
Almost to jelly with the act of fear,  
Stand dumb and speak not to him. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.104)

In Act I Scene IV and Scene V, Hamlet sees his father's ghost. His father's ghost tells him the misfortune of his being murdered and demands revenge from his son.

The Ghost not only keeps his previous character but also keeps his affection: Though he is quite angry, he forgives his wife's betrayal and doesn't want her to be hurt. He worries that Hamlet might hurt his mother, so he warns him in Act I Scene V:

But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,  
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven  
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,  
To prick and sting her. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.115)

He just wants Hamlet to kill Claudius, the usurper. All this shows that Hamlet's father's ghost still possesses his father's appearance and temperament when he was alive.

*Richard III* is Shakespeare's longest historical play, documenting Richard's various inhumane and immoral crimes committed to seize and consolidate the throne, as well as his failure and downfall. Richard III embodies all kinds of evil in Shakespeare's works. He is a man "of the world, a plotting, hardened knave, wholly regardless of everything but his own ends, and the means to secure them" (William, 1990, p.136). Of course, he knew that what he did was heinous, but he insisted on doing it, and as a result, he was avenged and became a ghost under the sword. On the night before the decisive battle between Richard and Richmond, as Richard III falls asleep in his tent, the ghosts of the killed people, such as Prince Edward, Henry VI, Duke of Clarence, two little princes, Rivers, Gray, Fugen and Buckingham, come to Richard one by one, curse him and declare that he would inevitably fail and die in the decisive battle the next day. Toward Richard III, they repeat the cursing words "Despair and die!" Then the ghosts walk into Richmond's tent, grant him blessings and declare his triumph.

Not only will this kind of plot arrangement not compromise the expression of the theme, but it will also deepen the theme, enrich the connotation and expressive power of the drama, and greatly enhance the artistic appeal of the work. By cursing Richard III through ghosts and predicting his failure, combined with the ultimate outcome of Richard's failure, it strengthens people's understanding of the Christian worldview that good and evil will eventually be rewarded, and has a stunning artistic effect.

In *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, a group of Roman nobles led by Brutus, who is a Roman general, and Cassius assassinate Caesar in the Roman Senate. Brutus regards Caesar as his best friend, yet he organizes and participates in murdering Caesar. In Brutus's view, Caesar is a flawless and righteous person who has nothing to blame. Yet eventually Brutus is determined to murder Caesar just out of the suspicion that Caesar has overstepped his bounds and becomes a danger to Rome's interests. He assumes that if Caesar accepts the crown, he might abuse his authority and become a tyrant. Cassius is the plotter who persuades Brutus to kill Caesar for the

good of the country. Brutus organizes and participates in murdering Caesar out of something that Caesar had never actually done. He just suspects that Caesar might be a dictator, thus Caesar has to die. Brutus's doing is cruel. He has no right to deprive Caesar of his life. In Shakespeare's writings, Caesar himself does not behave like a typical tyrant. His being murdered is due to the suspicion of Brutus and the jealousy of a group of Roman nobles. In Scene III of Act IV of *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, the ghost of Caesar appears before Brutus when he is reading in his tent late at night and forecasts Brutus's fate in the battle of Philippi:

Brutus: How will this paper burn! Ha! Who comes here  
I think it is the weakness of my eyes  
That shapes this monstrous apparition.  
It comes upon me. Art thou anything?  
Art thou some god, some angle, or some devil,  
That mak'st my blood cold, and my hair to stare?  
Speak to me what thou art.  
Ghost: Thy evil spirit, Brutus.  
Brutus: Why com'st thou?  
Ghost: To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.  
Brutus: Well; then I shall see thee again?  
Ghost: Ay, at Philippi.  
Brutus: Why, I will see thee at Philippi then. (*Julius Caesar*; Act IV, Scene III, 60)

When Brutus fails in the battle of Philippi, he says to Volumnius:

The ghost of Caesar hath appeared to me  
Two several times by night; at Sardis once,  
and this last night, here in Philippi fields.  
I know my hour is come. (*Julius Caesar*, Act V, Scene V, 68)

In the end, both Brutus and his wife commit suicide.

Ghosts also appear in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. The plot structure of *Macbeth* is very simple: He is tempted and corrupted, and ultimately destroyed. On their way back home, Macbeth and his friend Banquo meet three witches on a moor in Scotland. The witches begin to predict his future by addressing Macbeth various titles:

1 WITCH: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!  
2 WITCH: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!  
3 WITCH: All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!  
(Shakespeare, 2009, p.312)

Rather than being tempted by a witch, it is more accurate to say that Macbeth's evil desire for the throne leads him to take the wrong step of murdering King Duncan. According to the witches' prophecy, Banquo's descendants would become future kings, which leads Macbeth to see Banquo as a significant stumbling block after his murdering King Duncan and usurping the throne. He believes that as long as Banquo and his descendants are eliminated, he would be able to sit firmly on the throne and have peace of mind. Banquo, Macbeth's former battle companion, is assassinated by assassins sent by Macbeth. Fortunately, Banquo's son escapes the

hands of the assassins. As soon as Banquo is assassinated, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost in his seat in the hall filled with courtiers. Macbeth's heart is full of fear and panic. In front of everyone's eyes, he says to Banquo's ghost uncontrollably:

Thou canst not say I did it; never shake  
Thy gory locks at me. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.343)

His wife has to tell the courtiers that Macbeth's old illness has recurred, asking them to keep seat and not to note him. After the ghost disappears, Macbeth regains his sanity and says to the courtiers, "To our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss. Would he be here!" At this moment, Banquo's ghost reappears in Macbeth's seat, causing Macbeth to lose his sanity again and fall into a state of madness. He roars at 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. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.344)

Macbeth's performance makes the courtiers attending the banquet feel that his spirit is abnormal. He makes a fool of himself in front of everyone. To cover up Macbeth's embarrassment, his wife has to tell the courtiers that Macbeth's old illness has recurred, and that his illness is getting worse and worse. The banquet has to end hastily.

After murdering Duncan, Banquo and Macduff's family, Macbeth loses inner peace and is constantly condemned by his conscience. He is exhausted from despair, unable to rule the country he has usurped, and ultimately understands that the powers of evil cannot be relied upon. His wife, who encourages him to usurp the throne and becomes superstitious about evil forces, ultimately dies raving. All Macbeth can do after failure is curse the witches who seduce him:

Infected be the 'air whereon they ride,  
And damned all those that trust them! (Shakespeare, 2009, p.353)

*Cymbeline* is a play written at the end of Shakespeare's literary career, taking reconciliation as its theme. In *Cymbeline*, the male protagonist Posthumus and female protagonist Imogen marry each other out of true love. Later, under Iachimo's instigation, Posthumus suspects his beloved wife, the English princess Imogen, of being unfaithful to him. Posthumus, who is far away in Rome, writes a letter to his friend Bisanio, asking him to kill Imogen. Bisanio replies saying that Imogen is dead, but in reality, he protects her. Although Posthumus still hasn't changed his perception of Imogen's infidelity, he is deeply saddened by the fact that he has had Imogen killed, and therefore seeks death to redeem himself. Posthumus sees ghosts of his father, mother, and two brothers appear one after another in his sleep. The ghosts beg Jupiter to descend to earth and save Posthumus. Jupiter agrees to

the requests of the ghosts. He promises a happy ending for Posthumus and the affluence of Britain. Soon after, Posthumus clears up the misunderstanding with Imogen and the couple reunite. Imogen, the chaste and virtuous princess, also regains the king Cymbeline's love. Imogen's stepmother, the wicked Queen, suffers retribution for her persecution of Imogen and dies of a sudden illness. The peace is reached between Britain and Rome through negotiations.

In *Cymbeline*, evil forces constantly threaten people, but ultimately fail. Jupiter's help is the reason for the people's triumphing over the evil forces. Misunderstandings are clarified, reconciliation is achieved, bad people are punished, and the drama ends with a satisfying ending. Though this drama achieves a final harmony, yet "this reconciliatory phase comes only after prolonged evil and suffering" (De Grazia, 2003, p.95).

In *Hamlet* Act III Scene II, Shakespeare expresses his views on what drama should be like through Hamlet's words:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.145)

Shakespeare's dramas can achieve objectivity and naturalness, which is precisely the charm of his dramas. Wittgenstein's enlightening comments on Shakespeare's dramas are like this: "Shakespeare displays the dance of human passions, one might say. Hence, he has to be objective; otherwise, he would not so much display the dance of human passions, as talk about it. But he displays it to us in a dance, not naturalistically."

Shakespeare's plays are full of the Christian concept that good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil, portraying vivid ghost images seeking revenge against evil forces. This not only caters to the psychology of audiences from all walks of life, but also represents a concrete manifestation of the Christian idea of retribution for good and evil on stage. This plot arrangement will educate and enlighten the audience through visual impact and spiritual shock, thus purifying their souls. The portrayal of ghost images in drama can reveal the true nature of the objective world.

"Shakespeare realized that nature is the embodiment of God's will and leads to God. In fact, the entire nature is harmonious and consistent, and God's will naturally operate within the supernatural order commonly referred to as heaven. Whether it is the creation of the earth, the endless cycle of life, or the severe natural disasters as a means of divine judgment, they all obey God's commands in normal or abnormal states, and human

political forms and related events also have corresponding communication with the natural world." (Liang, 2006, pp.960-961) As Thornton said, the entire natural world is a mirror for seeing and knowing God. And the occurrence of strange supernatural phenomena is also the will of heaven, foreshadowing the arrival of major changes.

The appearance of ghost in dramas plays an important role in promoting plot development, deepening themes, shaping character, and enhancing dramatic effect.

The literary expression of ghosts can increase the mystery of a work, strengthen the tragic atmosphere, intensify the tragic meaning of the work, and help achieve a heart-shaking tragic effect. Thus, we can say the literary expression of ghosts can help construct tragedy and make it more in line with Aristotle's purification theory. By arousing pity and fear, one's emotions can be purified and his morality can be achieved. The literary expression of ghosts can help achieve the effect of purification on the human heart.

## 2.2 Ghost Image in Guan Hanqing's Dramas

In fact, in excellent traditional Chinese literary works, this kind of ghost plot arrangement is also made to highlight extraordinary artistic effects. Let's take *Mu Dan Ting*, the representative drama of Tang Xianzu, the most influential dramatist of sixteenth-century China, for example. What the heroine of *Mu Dan Ting* goes through after death has striking similarity with the nightmarish experience of hell recounted by the ghost in *Hamlet*. In such representative dramas as *The Injustice to Dou E* and *Xi Shu Dream* written by Guan Hanqing, the image of ghost also appears and plays an important role.

*The Injustice to Dou E* is one of the representative dramas of Guan Hanqing. The female protagonist Dou Duanyun is sent to Mistress Cai as her future daughter-in-law (i.e. child bride) and changes her name to Dou E because of her father Dou Tianzhang's being in debt to Mistress Cai. Less than two years after marriage, Dou E's husband dies; Dou E and her mother-in-law Mistress Cai relies on each other for survival. Mistress Cai goes to collect a debt from Doctor Lu, yet she doesn't get any money back, and she is almost strangled to death by him. Donkey Zhang and his father Old Zhang happen to pass by. Doctor Lu runs away and Mistress Cai survives. Donkey Zhang is a hooligan, who tries to force Mistress Cai to marry his father and tries to force Dou E to marry himself. Dou E firmly refuses him. Donkey Zhang wants to poison Mistress Cai to death and occupy Dou E. Donkey obtains the poison from Doctor Lu by threatening to report his attempt of killing Mistress Cai. That bowl of poisonous soup prepared by Donkey Zhang is accidentally eaten his own father, who is poisoned to death. Donkey Zhang then falsely accuses Dou E of murder. The incompetent prefect severely tortures Dou E and Mistress Cai to extract a confession. Dou E can't bear to see

Mistress Cai suffer. She falsely confesses to poisoning Donkey Zhang's father and is sentenced to execution by beheading.

Three years after the heroine Dou E's being wronged to death, her father Dou Tianzhang succeeds in being appointed as a government inspector. When Dou Tianzhang is reading documents of various cases under the lamp, the first case that comes into sight is the one about Dou E's poisoning her father-in-law to death. At this moment, the ghost of Dou E comes up to him and he sees her. This makes him quite frightened:

Ah, there is the ghost! I warn you; I am the emperor's inspector of justice. If you come near, I'll cut you in two. Hey, boy! How can you sleep so soundly? Get up at once! Ghosts! Ghosts! This is terrifying! (Yang, 1979, p.32)

The ghost of Dou E utters and tells her father the wrongs and injustice that she suffers in detail. Her opening remarks are touching:

Fear is making him lose his head;  
The sound of my weeping has frightened him more than ever.  
Here, Dou Tianzhang, my old father,  
Will you let your daughter Dou E bow to you? (Yang, 1979, p.32)

Dou E's tearful complaints below particularly touch people's souls and are tear jerking:

I complained not to any official but to Heaven,  
For I could not express the injustice that was done me;  
And to save my mother from torture  
I confessed to a crime of which I was innocent,  
And remained true to my dead husband  
Three feet of snow fell on my corpse;  
My hot blood gushed to the white silk streamer;  
Zou Yan called down frost,  
And snow showed the injustice done me.  
Your child committed no crime,  
But suffered a great wrong:  
For resisting seduction, I was executed!  
I would not disgrace my clan, so I lost my life!  
Day after day in the shades  
My spirit mourns alone.  
You are sent by the emperor with authority;  
Consider this case and this man's wickedness;  
Cut him in pieces and avenge my wrong! (Yang, 1979, p.35)

Hearing Dou E's tearful complaints, her father Dou Tianzhang can't help weeping:

Ah, my wrongly slain daughter, how this wrings my heart! (Yang, 1979, p.35)

The following plots go like this: Dou Tianzhang ascends to the court, and after interrogation, he avenges Dou E: Donkey Zhang and Doctor Lu are beheaded. Tao Qian, the prefect, is dismissed from office. The wrong sentence passed on Dou E will be rescinded. Finally, the ghost of Dou E's hopes that his father Dou Tianzhang can bring her mother-in-law Mistress Cai to his residence to fulfill Dou E's filial piety. Dou's father agreed to her request.

Just like the ghost image of King Hamlet in Shakespeare's drama *Hamlet*, the ghost image of Dou E is vividly presented. It remains as lively as Dou E was when she was alive, with the same image, personality and temperament. Through Guan Hanqing's description of the ghost image of Dou E, the image of a strong, kind, and rebellious traditional Chinese woman is vividly portrayed on paper.

By utilizing romantic artistic techniques, *The Injustice to Dou E* vividly and strikingly portrays Dou E's rebellious character of fighting to the end. This drama manifests infinite sympathy for the persecuted people. The appearance of ghost has enhanced dramatic and artistic expression effect. It can also play an important role in deepening the theme of the drama. The descriptive technique of supernatural phenomena can create stunning artistic effects and greatly enlighten people. Dou E's spirit of resisting even in death reflects the people's tremendous courage to struggle and the fighting spirit of Guan Hanqing.

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### 3. CONCLUSION

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There are many similarities between the supernatural descriptions in Shakespeare's dramas and those in Guan Hanqing's drama *The Injustice to Dou E*. These most outstanding tragedies greatly admired by Chinese and foreign scholars have similarities and comparability in terms of the mode of ghost revenge. Supernatural descriptions such as ghost revenge have not weakened their tragic power. On the contrary, these supernatural descriptions give the audience a strong visual and psychological impact, making these dramas have a shocking artistic power. All these dramas are imbued with the concept that good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil, reflecting that people of different nations share a common desire to pray for justice to overcome evil.

The depiction of supernatural phenomena such as ghosts in drama can have multiple levels of impact. The setting of ghost plots plays the role of deepening the theme, enriching the connotation and expressive power of the drama, and greatly enhancing the artistic appeal of the work. The description of ghosts can shock people's hearts, resonate with the audience, make the audience reflect, make the wicked fearful, and strengthen the confidence of the good to continue doing good. In short, to a certain extent, it can purify people's hearts. The affairs of gods and ghosts can provide a deterrent to wrongdoers, comfort to victims, and vigilance to others. Both Guan Hanqing's dramas and Shakespeare's dramas exhibit extraordinary artistic charm, humanistic spirit and show reverence for nature.

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