

# ON THE SUPERNATURAL IN POETRY

**Anne Radcliffe**

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## On the Supernatural in Poetry

Anne Radcliffe

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The following discussion of supernaturalist practice in literature, which features Radcliffe's famous distinction between "terror" and "horror," was to be part of the prologue to Radcliffe's posthumously published novel *Gaston de Blondville*; it was instead published separately. It is cast in the form of a dialogue between two travelling companions, Mr. S— and Mr. W—.

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ONE of our travellers began a grave dissertation on the illusions of the imagination. "And not only on frivolous occasions," said he, "but in the most important pursuits of life, an object often flatters and charms at a distance, which vanishes into nothing as we approach it; and 'tis well if it leave only disappointment in our hearts. Sometimes a severer monitor is left there."

These truisms, delivered with an air of discovery by Mr. S—, who seldom troubled himself to think upon any subject, except that of a good dinner, were lost upon his companion, who, pursuing the airy conjectures which the present scene, however humbled, had called up, was following Shakespeare into unknown regions. "Where is now the undying spirit," said he, "that could so exquisitely perceive and feel? that could inspire itself with the various characters of this world, and create worlds of its own; to which the grand and the beautiful, the gloomy and the sublime of visible Nature, up-called not only corresponding feelings, but passions; which seemed to perceive a soul in everything: and thus, in the secret workings of its own characters, and in the combinations of its incidents, kept the elements and local scenery always in unison with them, heightening their effect.

So the conspirators at Rome pass under the fiery showers and sheeted lightning of the thunder-storm, to meet, at midnight, in the porch of Pompey's theatre. The streets being then deserted by the affrighted multitude, that place, open as it was, was convenient for their council; and, as to the storm, they felt it not; it was not more terrible to them than their own passions, nor so terrible to others as the dauntless spirit that makes them, almost unconsciously, brave its fury. These appalling circumstances, with others of supernatural import, attended the fall of the conqueror of the world – a man, whose power Cassius represents to be dreadful as this night, when the sheeted dead were seen in the lightning to glide along the streets of Rome. How much does the sublimity of these attendant circumstances heighten our idea of the power of Caesar, of the terrific grandeur of his character, and prepare and interest us for his fate. The whole soul is roused and fixed, in the full energy of attention, upon the progress of the conspiracy against him; and, had not Shakespeare wisely withdrawn him from our view, there would have been no balance of our passions. – "Caesar was a tyrant," said Mr. S—. W— looked at him for a moment, and smiled, and then silently resumed the course of his own thoughts. No master ever knew how to touch the accordant springs of sympathy by small circumstances like our own Shakespeare. In

Cymbeline, for instance, how finely such circumstances are made use of, to awaken, at once, solemn expectation and tenderness, and, by recalling the softened remembrance of a sorrow long past, to prepare the mind to melt at one that was approaching, mingling at the same time, by means of a mysterious occurrence, a slight tremour of awe with our pity. Thus, when Belarius and Arviragus return to the cave where they had left the unhappy and worn-out Imogen to repose, while they are yet standing before it, and Arviragus, speaking of her with tenderest pity, as “the poor sick Fidele,” goes out to enquire for her, - solemn music is heard from the cave, sounded by that harp of which Guiderius says, “*Since the death of my dearest mother, it did not speak before.* All solemn things should answer solemn accidents.’ Immediately Arviragus enters with Fidele senseless in his arms:

“The bird is dead, that we have made so much of.

- How found you him? Stark, as you see, thus smiling.

- I though he slept, and put My clouted brogues from off my feet, whose rudeness Answered my steps too loud.” – “Why he but sleeps!”

“With fairest flowers

While summer lasts, AND I LIVE HERE, FIDELE, I’ll sweeten thy sad grave –.”

Tears alone can speak the touching simplicity of the whole scene. Macbeth shows, by many instances, how much Shakespeare delighted to heighten the effect of his characters and his story by correspondent scenery: there the desolate heath, the troubled elements, assist the mischief of his malignant beings. But who, after hearing Macbeth’s thrilling question –

- What are these,

So withered and so wild in their attire,

That look not like the inhabitants o’ the earth,

And yet are on’t?

Who would have thought of reducing them to mere human beings, by attiring them not only like the inhabitants of the earth, but in the dress of a particular country, and making them downright Scotch-women? thus not only contradicting the very words of Macbeth, but withdrawing from these cruel agents of the passions all that strange and supernatural air which had made them so affecting to the imagination, and which was entirely suitable to the solemn and important events they were foretelling and accomplishing. Another *improvement* on Shakespeare is the introducing a crowd of witches thus arrayed, instead of the three beings ‘so withered and so wild in their attire.’ About the latter part of this sentence, W—, as he was apt to do, thought aloud, and Mr. S— said, “I, now, have sometimes considered, that it was quite sensible to make Scotch witches on the stage, appear like Scotch women. You must recollect that, in the superstition concerning witches, they lived familiarly upon the earth, mortal sorcerers, and were not always known from mere old women; consequently they must have appeared in the dress of the country where they happened to live, or they would have been more than suspected of witchcraft, which we find was not always the case.”

“You are speaking of old women, and not of witches,” said W— laughing, “and I must more than suspect you of crediting that obsolete superstition which destroyed so many wretched, yet guiltless persons, if I allow your argument to have any force. I am speaking of the only real witch - the witch of the poet; and all our notions and feelings connected with terror accord with his. The wild attire, the look *not of this earth*, are essential traits of supernatural agents, working evil in the darkness of mystery. Whenever the poet’s witch condescends, according to the vulgar notion, to mingle mere ordinary mischief with her malignity, and to become familiar, she is ludicrous, and loses her power over the imagination; the illusion vanishes. So vexatious is the effect of the stage-witches upon my mind, that I should probably have left the theatre when they appeared, had not the fascination of Mrs. Siddons’s influence so spread itself over the whole play, as to overcome my disgust, and to make me forget even Shakespeare himself; while all consciousness of fiction was lost, and his thoughts lived and breathed before me in the very form of truth. Mrs. Siddons, like Shakespeare, always disappears in the character she represents, and throws an illusion over the whole scene around her, that conceals many defects in the arrangements of the theatre. I should suppose she would be the finest Hamlet that ever appeared, excelling even her own brother in that character; she would more fully preserve the tender and refined melancholy, the deep sensibility, which are the peculiar charm of Hamlet, and which appear not only in the ardour, but in the occasional irresolution and weakness of his character – the secret spring that reconciles all his inconsistencies. A sensibility so profound can with difficulty be justly imagined, and therefore can very rarely be assumed. Her brother’s firmness, incapable of being always subdued, does not so fully enhance, as her tenderness would, this part of the character. The strong light which shows the mountains of a landscape in all their greatness, and with all their rugged sharpness, gives them nothing of the interest with which a more gloomy tint would invest their grandeur; dignifying, though it softens, and magnifying, while it obscures.”

“I still think,” said Mr. S—, without attending to these remarks, “that, in a popular superstition, it is right to go with the popular notions, and dress your witches like the old women of the place where they are supposed to have appeared.”

“As far as these notions prepare us for the awe which the poet designs to excite, I agree with you that he is right in availing himself of them; but, for this purpose, everything familiar and common should be carefully avoided. In nothing has Shakespeare been more successful than in this; and in another case somewhat more difficult – that of selecting circumstances of manners and appearance for his supernatural beings, which, though wild and remote, in the highest degree, from common apprehension, never shock the understanding by incompatibility with themselves – never compel us, for an instant, to recollect that he has a license for extravagance. Above every ideal being is the ghost of Hamlet, with all its attendant incidents of time and place. The dark watch upon the remote platform, the dreary aspect of the night, the very expression of the office on guard, ‘the air bites shrewdly; it is very cold;’ the recollection of a star, an unknown world, are all circumstances which excite forlorn, melancholy, and solemn feelings, and dispose us to welcome, with trembling curiosity, the awful being that draws near; and to indulge in that strange mixture of horror, pity, and indignation, produced by the tale it reveals. Every minute circumstance of the scene between those watching on the platform, and of that between them and Horatio, preceding the entrance of the apparition, contributes to excite some feeling of

dreariness, or melancholy, or solemnity, or expectation, in unison with, and leading on toward that high curiosity and thrilling awe with which we witness the conclusion of the scene. So the first question of Bernardo, and the words in reply, 'Stand and unfold yourself.' But there is not a single circumstance in either dialogue, not even in this short one, with which the play opens, that does not take its secret effect upon the imagination. It ends with Bernardo desiring his brother-officer, after having asked whether he has had 'quiet watch,' to hasten the guard, if he should chance to meet them; and we immediately feel ourselves alone on this dreary ground.

"When Horatio enters, the challenge – the dignified answers, 'Friends to this ground, and liegemen to the Dane,' – the question of Horatio to Bernardo, touching the apparition – the unfolding of the reason why 'Horatio has consented to watch with them the minutes of this night' – the sitting down together, while Bernardo relates the particulars of what they had seen for two nights; and, above all, the few lines with which he begins his story, 'Last night of all,' and the distinguishing, by the situation of 'yon same star,' the very point of time when the spirit had appeared – the abruptness with which he breaks off, 'the bell then beating one' – the instant appearance of the ghost, as though ratifying the story for the very truth itself – all these are circumstances which the deepest sensibility only could have suggested, and which, if you read them a thousand times, still continue affect you almost as much as the first. I thrill with delighted awe, even while I recollect and mention them, as instances of the exquisite art of the poet."

"Certainly you must be very superstitious," said Mr. S—, "or such things could not interest you thus."

"There are few people less so than I am," replied W—, "or I understand myself and the meaning of superstition very ill."

"That is quite paradoxical."

"It appears so, but so it is not. If I cannot explain this, take it as a mystery of the human mind."

"If it were possible for me to believe the appearance of ghosts at all," replied Mr. S—, "it would certainly be the ghost of Hamlet; but I never can suppose such things; they are out of all reason and probability."

"You would believe the immortality of the soul," said W—, with solemnity, "even without the aid of revelation; yet our confined faculties cannot comprehend *how* the soul may exist after separation from the body. I do not absolutely know that spirits are permitted to become visible to us on earth; yet that they may be permitted to appear for very rare and important purposes, such as could scarcely have been accomplished without an equal suspension, or a momentary change, of the laws prescribed to what we call *Nature* – that is, without one more exercise of the same CREATIVE POWER of which we must acknowledge so many millions of existing instances, and by which alone we ourselves at this moment breathe, think, or disquise at all, cannot be impossible, and, I think, is probable. Now, probability is enough for the poet's justification, the ghost being supposed to have come for an important purpose. Oh, I should never be weary of dwelling on the perfection of Shakespeare, in his management of every scene connected with that most solemn and mysterious being, which takes such entire possession of the imagination, that we hardly seem conscious we are beings of this world while we contemplate 'the extravagant and erring spirit.' The spectre departs, accompanied by natural circumstances as touching as those with which he

had approached. It is by the strange light of the glow-worm, which 'gins to pale his ineffectual fire'; it is at the first scent of the morning air – the living breath, that the apparition retires. There is, however, no little vexation in seeing the ghost of Hamlet *played*. The finest imagination is requisite to give the due colouring to such a character on the stage; and yet almost any actor is thought capable of performing it. In the scene where Horatio breaks his secret to Hamlet, Shakespeare, still true to the touch of circumstances, makes the time evening, and marks it by the very words of Hamlet, 'Good even, sir,' which Hanmer and Warburton changed, without any reason, to 'good morning,' thus making Horatio relate his most interesting and solemn story by the clear light of the cheerfulest part of the day; when busy sounds are stirring, and the sun itself seems to contradict every doubtful tale, and lessen every feeling of terror. The discord of this must immediately be understood by those who have bowed the willing soul to the poet."

"How happens it then," said Mr. S—, "that objects of terror sometimes strike us very forcibly, when introduced into scenes of gaiety and splendour, as, for instance, in the Banquet scene in Macbeth?"

"They strike, then, chiefly by the force of contrast," said W—; "but the effect, though sudden and strong, is also transient; it is the thrill of horror and surprise, which they then communicate, rather than the deep and solemn feelings excited under more accordant circumstances, and left long upon the mind. Who ever suffered for the ghost of Banquo, the gloomy and sublime kind of terror, which that of Hamlet calls forth? though the appearance of Banquo, at the high festival of Macbeth, not only tells us that he is murdered, but recalls to our minds the fate of the gracious Duncan, laid in silence and death by those who, in this very scene, are revelling in his spoils. There, though deep pity mingles with our surprise and horror, we experience a far less degree of interest, and that interest too of an inferior kind. The union of grandeur and obscurity, which Mr. Burke describes as a sort of tranquility tinged with terror, and which causes the sublime, is to be found only in Hamlet; or in scenes where circumstances of the same kind prevail."

"That may be," said Mr. S—, "and I perceive you are not one of those who contend that obscurity does not make any part of the sublime." "They must be men of very cold imaginations," said W—, "with whom certainty is more terrible than surmise. Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?"

"But what say you to Milton's image – 'On his brow sat horror plumed.'"

"As an image, it certainly is sublime; it fills the mind with an idea of power, but it does not follow that Milton intended to declare the feeling of horror to be sublime; and after all, his image imparts more of terror than of horror; for it is not distinctly pictured forth, but is seen in glimpses through obscuring shades, the great outlines only appearing, which excite the imagination to complete the rest; he only says, 'sat horror plumed'; you will observe, that the look of horror and the other characteristics are left to the imagination of the reader; and according to the strength of

that, he will feel Milton's image to be either sublime or otherwise. Milton, when he sketched it, probably felt, that not even his art could fill up the outline, and present to other eyes the countenance which his "mind's eye" gave to him. Now, if obscurity has so much effect on fiction, what must it have in real life, when to ascertain the object of our terror, is frequently to acquire the means of escaping it. You will observe, that this image, though indistinct or obscure, is not confused."

"How can anything be indistinct and not confused?" said Mr. S—.

"Ay, that question is from the new school," replied W.; "but recollect, that obscurity, or indistinctness, is only a negative, which leaves the imagination to act upon the few hints that truth reveals to it; confusion is a thing as positive as distinctness, though not necessarily so palpable; and it may, by mingling and confounding one image with another, absolutely counteract the imagination, instead of exciting it. Obscurity leaves something for the imagination to exaggerate; confusion, by blurring one image into another, leaves only a chaos in which the mind can find nothing to be magnificent, nothing to nourish its fears or doubts, or to act upon in any way; yet confusion and obscurity are terms used indiscriminately by those, who would prove, that Shakespeare and Milton were wrong when they employed obscurity as a cause of the sublime, that Mr. Burke was equally mistaken in his reasoning upon the subject, and that mankind have been equally in error, as to the nature of their own feelings, when they were acted upon by the illusions of those great masters of the imagination, at whose so potent bidding, the passions have been awakened from their sleep, and by whose magic a crowded Theatre has been changed to a lonely shore, to a witch's cave, to an enchanted island, to a murderer's castle, to the ramparts of an usurper, to the battle, to the midnight carousal of the camp or the tavern, to every various scene of the living world."

"Yet there are poets, and great ones too," said Mr. S—, "whose minds do not appear to have been very susceptible of those circumstances of time and space — of what you, perhaps, would call the picturesque in feeling — which you seem to think so necessary to the attainment of any powerful effect on the imagination. What say you to Dryden?"

"That he had a very strong imagination, a fertile wit, a mind well prepared by education, and great promptness of feeling; but he had not — at least not in good proportion to his other qualifications — that delicacy of feeling, which we call taste; moreover, that his genius was overpowered by the prevailing taste of the court, and by an intercourse with the world, too often humiliating to his morals, and destructive of his sensibility. Milton's better morals protected his genius, and his imagination was not lowered by the world."

"Then you seem to think there may be great poets, without a full perception of the picturesque; I mean by picturesque, the beautiful and grand in nature and art — and with little susceptibility to what you would call the accordant circumstances, the harmony of which is essential to any powerful effect upon your feelings."

"No; I cannot allow that. Such men may have high talents, wit, genius, judgment, but not the soul of poetry, which is the spirit of all these, and also something wonderfully higher — something too fine for definition. It certainly includes an instantaneous perception, and an exquisite love of whatever is graceful, grand, and sublime, with the power of seizing and combining such circumstances of them, as to strike and interest a reader by the representation,

even more than a general view of the real scene itself could do. Whatever this may be called, which crowns the mind of a poet, and distinguishes it from every other mind, our whole heart instantly acknowledges it in Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, Collins, Beattie, and a very few others, not excepting Thomson, to whose powers the sudden tear of delight and admiration bears at once both testimony and tribute. How deficient Dryden was of a poet's feelings in the fine province of the beautiful and the graceful, is apparent from his alteration of the *Tempest*, by which he has not only lessened the interest by incumbering the plot, but has absolutely disfigured the character of Miranda, whose simplicity, whose tenderness and innocent affections, might, to use Shakespeare's own words in another play, 'be shrined in crystal.' A love of moral beauty is as essential in the mind of a poet, as a love of picturesque beauty. There is as much difference between the tone of Dryden's moral feelings and those of Milton, as there is between their perceptions of the grand and the beautiful in nature. Yet, when I recollect the 'Alexander's Feast,' I am astonished at the powers of Dryden, and at my own daring opinions upon them; and should be ready to unsay much that I have said, did I not consider this particular instance of the power of music upon Dryden's mind, to be as wonderful as any instance he has exhibited of the effect of that enchanting art in his sublime ode. I cannot, however, allow it to be the finest ode in the English language, so long as I remember Gray's *Bard*, and Collins's *Ode on the Passions*. – But, to return to Shakespeare, I have sometimes thought, as I walked in the deep shade of the North Terrace of Windsor Castle, when the moon shone on all beyond, that the scene must have been present in Shakespeare's mind, when he drew the night-scenes in *Hamlet*; and, as I have stood on the platform, which there projects over the precipice, and have heard only the measured step of a sentinel or the clink of his arms, and have seen his shadow passing by moonlight, at the foot of the high Eastern tower, I have almost expected to see the royal shade armed cap-a-pee standing still on the lonely platform before me. The very star – 'yon same star that's westward from the pole' – seemed to watch over the Western towers of the Terrace, whose high dark lines marked themselves upon the heavens. All has been so still and shadowy, so great and solemn, that the scene appeared fit for "no mortal business nor any sounds that the earth owns." Did you ever observe the fine effect of the Eastern tower, when you stand near the Western end of the North terrace, and its tall profile rears itself upon the sky, from nearly the base to the battled top, the lowness of the parapet permitting this? It is most striking at night, when the stars appear, at different heights, upon its tall dark line, and when the sentinel on watch moves a shadowy figure at its foot."

