Chapter One

The Forces of Darkness: Meaning and Legacy

In studying some of Shakespeare’s major plays, the use of the supernatural comes out as a striking feature, because the supernatural elements form essential parts of the plays concerned so as to compel even a modern reader to get bewilderingly absorbed in them, as it were, in a mood of suspended disbelief. One feels inspired to study the Elizabethan Age, its conventions and beliefs related to the dark forces represented by ghosts, witches and magic. Sorcery and witchcraft, which were strongly prevalent in medieval Europe continued to sway the minds of the people even after the Renaissance. I derive my idea of the “forces of darkness” from John Lawlor’s chapter titled “Natural and Supernatural” (in his book The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare), in which he explains the expression “the dark powers” in connection with his analysis of Othello:

Evil has been emergent in Iago, that is all we know. But now we turn from victims of evil, Othello and Desdemona as acted upon by Iago, to those agents of evil who knowingly, of set purpose, would deal directly with the dark powers, the ‘spirits that tend on mortal thoughts’. (107)

Obviously, the emphasis in this context is more on the agents of evil, the clever individuals as well as the vested interests, the powers that be, in
society and the state, who knowingly manipulate the situations and the victims of “accident and design”. By extending the implications of Lawlor’s concept of “the dark powers”, I have studied the supernatural elements in some of Shakespeare’s plays in their political and/or psychological impacts on the action and characters. The Church, both Catholic and Protestant, did not completely rule out the beliefs in the supernatural, because the very concept of divinity as revealed in Christian mythology is itself supernatural. But the eternal opposition between Godhead and the Devil inevitably led to the concepts of Good and Evil. As a result the supernatural split into two forms of power revealed in “good magic” or divine miracles and “evil magic” or necromancy. Pico della Mirandola in his oration “On the Dignity of Man”, referring to the myth of the creation of Adam, says that God the Creator decided to make man a composite and indeterminate being:

Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have we made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the moulder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures, which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine. (5)

Thus, even during the Renaissance, man was conceived to be of dual natures, a being pulled in opposite directions in his beliefs and desires. The
Church particularly condemned black magic which made “men subject to and delivered over to the powers of wickedness” (Mirandola: 7).

The authorities in the state and the Church used this condemnation of black magic both in socio-political and religious matters. Verity cites Dr. Brands to refer to the case of one Mrs. Dyer who was victimised on the charge of witchcraft for no actual fault of her own but on the supposition of her complicity in causing Queen Elizabeth’s insomnia for several nights on account of acute toothache (175). James I (King James VI of Scotland) believed in witchcraft and encouraged with his presence the trials and burning at the stake of “two hundred witches” who were supposed to have occasioned the storm preventing his bride crossing to Scotland.

Shakespeare perhaps could not remain indifferent to these beliefs and practices. One may note how ambitious men and women – Humphrey and Eleanor in *King Henry VI, Part 2* and Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* – invoke the aid of the supernatural powers in furthering their evil designs. Shakespeare seems to have assimilated contemporary legends of magic from Merlin, Agrippa and John Dee, but his plays employed them so skillfully and ambiguously that they do not positively reflect Shakespeare's own beliefs or disbeliefs in the dark forces. *King Henry VI, Part 1* was probably written between 1591 and 1592, just a few years after the
publication of Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). A.W. Verity justifies his claim that *Macbeth* was also influenced by Scot’s book. A close study of the Shakespearean milieu in the light of the analysis in some recent studies on the 16th Century witchcraft by Norman Cohn, Sidney Anglo, Alan G. R. Smith, Christina Larner etc. reveals that the so called witches were actually religious and political victims of the Establishment functioning in the name of the “Rule of Law”. Since Shakespeare did not evidently try to incur the wrath of the powers that be, he seemed to evade the popular enjoyment of the persecution of the so-called witches and imply his veiled criticism of such acts through patterns of sensitive ambivalence – as in the treatment of Joan of Arc in *King Henry VI, Part I*.

II

A close study of the dark forces in Shakespeare’s plays must invariably begin with an objective survey of their impact on English society of that period and the great body of literature, especially drama, which grew up by imbibing the spirit of the age. Joel Hurtsfield in *Shakespeare’s World* has rightly commented, “I believe that the conditions of the twenty years that precede a man’s birth set the pattern of his early thinking and leave a mark
upon him” (18). It is, therefore, essential to take into consideration the social, political, religious and intellectual climate of the age in which Shakespeare grew up and wrote his plays.

The Elizabethan Age witnessed the flowering of the English Renaissance. This tide of knowledge touched almost every sphere of Elizabethan life and learning but yet, there persisted certain dark corners of medieval superstitions that the light of re-awakened knowledge could not illuminate. And such a persistent, dark, medievalist view of life generated beliefs in sorcery, witchcraft and demonology and other forms of supernaturalism. In his “The Supernatural in MACBETH and Elizabethan Superstition”, A. W. Verity refers to Dr. Brands, an authority in Elizabethan superstition to point out that both the 16th century and the early 17th century witnessed a strong belief in a great variety of evil spirits, “who disturbed the order of nature, produced storms by land and sea, foreboded calamities and death, disseminated plague and famine. They were for the most part pictured as old, wrinkled women who brewed all kinds of frightful enormities in hellish cauldrons; and when such bedlams were thought to have been detected, the law took vengeance on them with fire and sword” (175).

A study of the contemporary history of England reveals various incidents of witchcraft. In a sermon preached in 1588, Bishop Jewel
requested Queen Elizabeth fervently to take strong steps in order to prevent the dominance of witches and wizards. There are historical evidences of severe punishments, tortures and death at the stake having been meted out to many women accused of witchcraft under direct decrees by Queen Elizabeth and King James VI of Scotland. If the "representatives of God" were thus affected, then it is obvious that the common people would accept it as the supreme truth. The dark spirit of the age was so deep-rooted that even the innocent accused sometimes began to feel that they were really in league with the Devil. They even confessed that they were capable of riding through the air on broomsticks and making themselves invisible. Indeed, it appears strange that these women should themselves believe in sorcery (i.e. the power to fly and disappear) though a proof to the contrary was very much provided by their being burnt alive. The opium of superstitious belief affected them so much that they began to believe in it themselves. The situation can be adequately grasped if we refer to a much-circulated pamphlet of that age: Henry Goodcole's "Wonderful Discovery of E. Sawyer, a Witch (1621)". The pamphlet has a reference to Mother Sawyer, a wretched, old woman who was so harassed and persecuted by her neighbours that she really entered into league with the Devil by signing her soul over to him in her own blood. Ultimately, she was castigated as a witch
and burnt alive. Obviously, the wretched old woman with her unpleasant looks scared the neighbourhood and this, coupled with a few unhappy incidents, such as, death of a neighbour’s sow etc. (which may occur at any time and in any place) led to her being burnt alive at the stake on April 19, 1621 (Holzknecht:383-384).

Prior to this, King James VI of Scotland had supported the relentless persecution of witches in his book *Daemonology* (1597), and in 1604 a much demanded bill against sorcery was brought and passed. Thus, what was hencebefore a mere superstitious ritual, from now on became a law – an evil practice was sanctified in the name of religion; custom received the unquestionable seal of law.

But it was not old, hapless women alone who were castigated as witches in the Elizabethan Age. Even University scholars and learned men often became victims of this ruthless system. A case in proof is the history of John Dee, the famous Elizabethan magus. Dr. John Dee, (1527-1608), as Kitty Datta in her Introduction to Christopher Marlowe’s play *Doctor Faustus* points out, was a Cambridge man who was learned in law and had probably also studied medicine. In his lifetime he had repeatedly been branded a ‘conjuror’ having a close link with the Devil. Kitty Datta also refers to John Dee’s library catalogue (British Museum Harleian MS. 1879)
that shows his deep interest in different branches of occult science of that age (38).

It was common belief of the age that learned men, more prone to speculation, often fell victim to the temptation provided by the Devil. There are reported instances of secret links between the Devil and the tempted scholar. The Church published and propagated such liaisons in order to preach the exorcist power of the Church, i.e. the legitimate authority of exorcising Devils. Keith Thomas speaks of a law student called Briggs who in 1574 entered into such a dialogue, and it was ultimately John Foxe, a Puritan priest who acting as an exorcist commanded the Devil to flee. The Devil told him, “that there were no pains in Hell, that there was no God, that Christ was not the son of God, that Christ’s parents were unmarried, that the scripture was false, and that everything happened by mere nature” (Thomas: 574-575).

Obviously, the Church had a clear purpose behind such a programme. Under the effect of the Renaissance and the Reformation, scholars had begun to question the Christian doctrine of Sin and Damnation. As pointed out by Rev. Ronald Bayne, Thomas Norton’s English translation of Calvin’s work Institutions de la religion cheritienne came out in 1561, and it was so popular that it was printed five times before the end of the
Calvin’s “doctrine of predestination” preached that almost all humans are eternally damned and it is only a selected few races who would ultimately reach the promised Heaven. Such a negative thought led to much morbidity and despair. But both Luther and the Anglican Church preached that such despair should lead to repentance that would ultimately win the sinner back to God’s fold. But they also stressed that it is this despair which often leads man to ultimate faithlessness, and this actually is the doing of the Devil. Susan Snyder discusses this issue at length in “The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition” to point out that as per Calvin, it is only those predestined to damnation who would experience despair, and as all men are subject to despair at some time or the other, they would begin to lose hope of their souls being saved which is the ultimate hope of all Christians (28-29).

Again, the monarchy of England had always nurtured a fear of the “ungodly”, represented in the human consciousness as witches, devils, sorcerers etc. It was in fact a roundabout way of establishing God’s relation to the English monarchy by presenting it as being constantly under threat of evil attack. Peter Stallybrass says:
to suggest, then, that the monarchy was under demonic attack was to glorify the institution of monarchy, since that implied it was one of the bastions protecting the world from the triumph of Satan. (27)

He further establishes his assumption by alluding to Stuart Clark’s idea that if kingship stands for God’s rule on earth, a systematic order which is analogous to the father’s rule over the family and the head’s rule over the body, then just the opposite idea is represented by the Devil’s attempted rule over the Earth. Clark equates the Devil’s attempted rule to the unsystematic order of the woman ruling over the family and the body over the head (156-177). Thus interpreted the whole idea of witches and Devils, so zealously preached by the English rulers and believed by the common people throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century, appears to be a hegemonic agenda to establish the monarch’s unquestionable status as “God’s representative on Earth”. It was this belief of the common man that had kept many questionable dealings of these all too fallible rulers beyond questioning. But this belief was weakening with the on-going religious battle between the Pope and King James I of England. The latter’s deep interest and belief in witchcraft appears to be a means of re-establishing the King’s godliness and winning general sympathy by concocting tales of the Devil’s threat to the monarchy. This becomes even clearer when we learn from Peter Stallybrass that James I in his early work on the Book of Revelations had
associated the Devil with Antichrist in the guise of the Pope (27). Obviously, the implication and purpose become revealing enough.

The immense popular appeal that these "dark forces", cunningly propagated by both the King and the Clergy, had in Shakespeare's England, becomes evident upon close study of some other works by sixteenth and seventeenth century dramatists.

Belief in the Devil was a common feature of Shakespeare's England. The study of magic - not the "noble and laudable" kind (in the Baconian sense) of the Elizabethan men of science, but the "impious and damnable" magic, the wizard and witchcraft - gained prominence in Tudor and Stuart England. As a result, occult studies gained popularity amidst court poets and literary artists of the age, and the plays that came up faithfully followed these popular beliefs. Reginald Scot has pointed out that superstitious belief in demonology was an inextricable part of his childhood. He wrote that as children they were constantly terrified of accounts of ugly Devils with horns, fangs and claws. Obviously this was the picture of almost every home in England (of that period) where a child grew up, and so when the child developed into a mature being, his brain still remained crowded with such images.

Certain common features of this belief in demonology were presented
adequately through plays of this period. Rev. T. F. Thiselton Dyer discusses such characteristics in detail and relates them to Shakespeare’s plays (49-58). But they were also evident in the plays of other contemporary dramatists – a fact that points to their being common to all people in society:

One such belief was that Devils often entered into human beings and so completely gained a despotic control over them so as to render them perfectly helpless. (Dyer: 52-53)

Rev. Dyer refers to other authorities of Elizabethan demonology, such as, Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Imposters*, Mr. Spalding’s *Elizabethan Demonology* and Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* to expose this belief in demons and devils to be a mere sham. Mr. Spalding even suggested that these Devils possessed the power to change their shapes as and when it pleased them. Harsnett has recorded certain actual incidents, which occurred in England at this time. He comments:

..... there was also another strange thing which happened at Denham about a bird. Mistris Peckham had a nightingale which she kept in a cage, wherein Maister Dibdale took great delight and would often be playing with it. The nightingale was one night conveyed out of the cage, and being next morning diligently sought for, could not be heard of, till Maister Mainie’s devil, in one of his fits (as it was pretended), said that the wicked spirit which was in this examinee’s sister had taken the bird out of the cage and killed it........ (Dyer: 51)
However, both Norman Cohn and Christina Larner are of the view that though demonology was a common feature in Europe of that period, yet, in England, accusation of a pact with the Devil was uncommon. As Susan Snyder points out, the idea of the Devil was in fact popularized by Luther who spread the idea that it is the Devil who can persuade a man to despair (30). From Luther the idea passed into English Protestant writings and from there to common man.

III

In drama, the Devil first appeared as a tempter or an agent for meting out punishment to sinners. Kitty Datta, in her Introduction to Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* has pointed out that the Devil first appeared in Latin drama in France and more significantly in Germany. In English mystery plays the Devil was a macabre comic character with horns and forked feet. In the miracle plays, his place was usurped by the Vice. But it was really in *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*\(^1\) that we find the Devil being first represented in terms of the common medieval belief in demonology. When Gammer Gurton, “a gullible, suspicious village goody” loses her needle, Diccon draws a magic circle in order to call up the Devil – the Great Devil.
Obviously Diccon, referred to as “a vengeable knave....[and].... a bonable whoreson” (Holzknecht:20) by the dramatist, did not know anything about the actual art of conjuring Devils. But his pretense reveals that already such practices had become common in England and was being used by many a cunning knave for cheating innocent people.

Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) has been described as the “inverse *Hamlet*” with an old father (Hieronimo) avenging the murder of his son (Horatio), slain treacherously by Prince Balthazar with the help of a perfidious friend Lorenzo just on the eve of his avowal of love with Bel-Imperia, daughter of the Duke of Castile. Hieronimo feigns madness, is secretly helped by Bel-Imperia, and also aided by ghosts, and ultimately succeeds in identifying and killing the murderer (he also kills himself).

The play, however, which deserves a closer study for its intricate association with the theme of the supernatural, is *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe. The character of Faustus is essentially that of a Renaissance man of learning, and the story of his pact with the Devil reminds one, as Kitty Datta points out, about John Dee, another Elizabethan man of learning who was also denounced by society as a conjurer(38-39). Marlowe makes his Faustus perform the sin of writing the name of God backwards – a system believed to be essential for conjuring Devils. Thus
Faustus says:

Within this circle is Jehovah's name
Forward and backward anagrammatiz'd:
Th' abbreviated names of holy saints,
Figures of every adjunct to the heavens,
And characters of signs and erring stars,
By which the spirits are enforced to rise.

(I. iii. 8-13).

This shows that Marlowe, a contemporary of Shakespeare was well acquainted with the art of raising spirit, a specialized art in Elizabethan England. Another belief of the age was that Devils indulged in sexual relationship with humans. This idea is also presented by Marlowe towards the end of his play when the learned Doctor Faustus at his lowest degeneration of character sought union with Helen of Troy, which was fulfilled through her apparition assumed by a devil:

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies.
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena

(V.i. 99-105)

Helen here is not only the symbol of desire and pleasure as the most beautiful woman of the world, but also a composite symbol of the glory of the classical culture and civilization in which the Renaissance revived an interest. Psychologically, Helen became Faustus’s new Heaven, a substitute for the orthodox Christian Heaven. However, by his union with a spirit he incurred the sin of demoniality which presumably sealed his fate forever.

But Marlowe shows that Faustus could recover his code of values even at this phase of degeneration. His frenzy born of his terrors of damnation underscores his profound faith in Christ and God at the last ordeal:

O I’ll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?
See, see, where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!
Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!
Yet will I call on him.

(V. ii. 147-150)

He prays to God for redemption even after a hundred thousand years of damnation:

Impose some end to my incessant pain:
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,  
A hundred thousand, and at last be sav’d.

(V. ii. 171-173)

Faustus’s frantic bid to escape damnation makes him wish for some impossible possibilities like, dissolution into the elements of air or water, running “headlong into the earth” or survival through the mode of metempsychosis. But with the stroke of twelve the devils enter in the wake of thunder and lightning, and Faustus in the darkened hour calls upon God: “My God, my God! Look not so fierce on me”, as he is dragged to hell by the devils. Later on the three scholars talk about their horrid experience of hearing fearful shrieks and cries the night before and now discover “Faustus’s limbs,/All torn asunder by the hand of death”.

Marlowe was also aware of the on-going battle caused by Calvinism which had raised many a question in the minds of the University Wits and other scholars of the day. The ‘doctrine of predestination’ led men to question the effect of faith in the human world. Men began to speculate that if despair be the end result of all faith then why should men believe at all in God or hope for redemption?

Other two plays of this age which deal with similar themes of friars and scholars entering into a secret pact with the Devil out of a sense of acute dissatisfaction are Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay by Robert Greene and The
Merry Devil of Edmonton, a play commonly attributed to Michael Drayton. Greene showed how Friar Bacon’s knowledge was initially intended for a good cause, but the whole scheme ended in disaster. In Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay the episode of love between Lacy and Margaret has been intertwined with Friar Bacon’s long experiment with a Brazen Head and its ultimate disaster. In scene xi Bacon instructs Miles to keep watch for the Brazen Head to speak, because Friar Bungay and Friar Bacon have spent many sleepless nights waiting for the Brazen Head to speak, and now they want to take rest:

With seven years’ tossing necromantic charms,

Poring upon dark Hecat’s principles,

I have fram’d out a monstrous head of brass,

That, by the enchanting forces of the devil,

Shall tell out strange and uncouth aphorisms,

And girt fair England with a wall of brass.

(Sc. xi. 17-22)

But while Bacon falls asleep, a great noise is heard and the Brazen Head speaks three sentences – “Time is”, “Time was” and “Time is past”. Miles does not awaken Bacon and the stage direction shows the disaster:

[A lightning flashes forth and a hand appears that breaks down the Head with a hammer.] (95)
On the other hand, *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, sometimes attributed to Michael Drayton and sometimes even to Shakespeare, also portrays how a scholar who is well versed in the magical arts becomes a slave to the Devil. The very prologue of this play shows a close affinity to Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. Peter Fabel, the hero is a renowned scholar of Cambridge University who makes a compact with the Devil Coreb by signing a deed in blood. Coreb reminds one of Mephostophilis and the deed signed in blood is also reminiscent of *Doctor Faustus*. Hence, the play adds to the body of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama where the main theme is demonology, a popular belief of the age.

Witches were, on the other hand, another integral aspect of the supernaturalism, which flourished in this age. There are repeated references to women castigated as witches. A black letter tract printed by William Copland in the middle of the sixteenth century entitled “Jyl of Braintford’s Testament” shows how a hostess of a tavern at Brentford was accused of witchcraft. Reginald Scot described English witches as “Old, lame, and bleare-eied, pale fowle and full of wrinkles” (1). However, Peter Stallybrass, referring to Mary Douglas points out in his essay, “Macbeth and Witchcraft”: 
witchcraft beliefs are less a reflection of real ‘evil’ than a social
construction from which we learn more about the accuser than the
accused, more about social institution that tolerate/encourage/act on
those accusations than about the activities of those people (in England,
mainly women, mainly poor) who are prosecuted as witches. (25)

Tudor and Stuart plays highlight the popularity of this creed of
witchcraft. Thomas Middleton’s *The Witch* is a play which deals at length
with witches, Hecate and their customs; and for all this Middleton was
largely indebted to Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft*.

But the play which shows a far deeper and almost humanistic
understanding of this “witch concept” is *The Witch of Edmonton*. This play
was a joint venture by John Ford, William Rowley and John Dekker, and
was based on a real incident: on April 19, 1621 Elizabeth Sawyer of
Edmonton was executed on charge of witchcraft, and that very year this play
was presented at the court. Holzknecht in *Outlines of Tudor and Stuart Plays*
points out that the authors drew largely upon a contemporary pamphlet:
Henry GoodCole’s “Wonderful discovery of E. Sawyer, a Witch.”
1621(384). The play presents Mother Elizabeth Sawyer whom the dramatists
in course of the play refer to as a woman who is “poor, deformed and
ignorant”, and who is “hated like a seckness, made a scorn to all degrees and
sense…Reverence once had want to wait on age; now an old woman, ill
favored grown with years, if she be poor must be called bowd or witch ....If every poor old woman be trod on thus by slaves, reviled, kicked, beaten, as [she is] daily, she to be revenged had need turn a witch” (Holzknecht:384). Obviously, these words show a human and sympathetic attitude, almost unknown in the age, towards a so-called witch. She is presented as a wretched old woman who is slandered and persecuted by her neighbours relentlessly until she, in self-defense, makes a pact with the Devil. This shows that the dramatists did believe in witchcraft but at the same time they had a sensitive understanding which was unusual in that age.

Another aspect of this belief in the supernatural was that often when a man is murdered his ghost appears to proclaim to the world the cause of his unnatural death. In literature, such an idea of the ghost was introduced in the Senecan plays, which had influenced the English playwrights of the pre-Shakespearean and also Jacobean periods. Webster was deeply influenced by Seneca. Thus in The Duchess of Malfi the cardinal comments:

You have heard it rumored, for these many years
None of our family dies but there is seen
The shape of an old woman, which is given
By tradition to us to have been murder’d
By her nephews for her riches.

(V.ii.90-94)
The Duchess of Malfi is a revenge tragedy, with the action spread over Amalfi, Rome and Milan. The young widowed Duchess gets secretly married to her steward Antonio Bologna without the knowledge and approval of her two Arragonian brothers – the Cardinal and Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, who employed Bosola to spy on her. The couple finally decides to run away to the state of Eucona with their three children to live as free citizens. But by Bosola’s machinations their attempt is foiled. While Antonio flees to Milan, the Duchess is imprisoned in her palace – she is subjected to inhuman torture, which she bears with majestic indifference, and is finally killed. The whole play is almost melodramatic, but the use of the supernatural is surprisingly restrained and de-sensationalised. When Antonio and his friend Delio move towards the Cardinal’s place, they pass by a cloistered graveyard, totally unaware that the murdered Duchess was buried there. The last words of their utterances in conversation are significantly and repeatedly echoed, warning them against the visit:

Ant. I do love these ancient ruins; We never tread upon them but we set Our foot upon some reverend history. And questionless, here in this open court, Which now lies naked to the injuries Of stormy weather, some men lie interr’d
Lov'd the church so well, and gave so largely to't,
They thought it should have canopy'd their bones
Till doomsday; but all things have their end:
Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men,
Must have like death that we have.

_Echo._ Like death that we have.

_Delio._ Now the echo hath caught you:—

_Ant._ It groan'd methought, and gave

A very deadly accent.

_Echo._ Deadly accent.

_Delio._ I told you 'twas a pretty one: you may make it

A huntsman, or a falconer, a musician,

Or a thing of sorrow.

_Echo._ A thing of sorrow.

_Ant._ Ay sure: that suits it best.

_Echo._ That suits it best.

_Ant._ 'tis very like my wife's voice.

_Echo._ Ay, wife's voice.

_Delio._ Come, let's walk farther from't:—

I would not have you go to the cardinal's tonight:

Do not.

_Echo._ Do not.

_Delio._ Wisdom doth not more moderate wasting sorrow
Than time: take time for't; be mindful of thy safety.

_Echo._ Be mindful of thy safety.

_Ant._ Necessity compels me:

Make scrutiny throughout the passes

Of your own life, you'll find it impossible

To fly your fate.

_Echo._ O, fly your fate!

_Delio._ Hark: the dead stones seem to have pity on you

And give you good counsel.

_Ant._ Echo, I will not talk with thee,

For thou art a dead thing.

_Echo._ Thou art a dead thing.

_Ant._ My duchess is asleep now,

And her little ones, I hope sweetly: O heaven,

Shall I never see her more?

_Echo._ Never see her more.

(V. iii. 9-42)

But they take the echoes as natural phenomena and not as the supernatural voice of warning from the Duchess's ghost. As a result the inevitable happens – Antonio is killed by the Cardinal, the latter is killed by Bosola who too gets killed. Here the ghost of the Duchess could not save her husband or her children, but the villainous brothers were destroyed – though not by any supernatural agency.
Thus in Renaissance drama the ghost was looked upon as an avenging agent - it usually did not speak but its mere presence brought to light the crimes committed directly or indirectly. Here it must be remembered that the Shakespearean Age witnessed much personal and political rivalry, and this very often led to secret crimes and murders. Thus the belief in the ghost was possibly a means of terrorizing the perpetrators of secret crimes into believing that their deeds would certainly be exposed. Whatever may be the cause, the fact remains that the age strongly believed in ghosts who repeatedly appeared in the works of various dramatists of the age. In *The Old Wives’ Tale* by George Peele, the ghost of Jack helps Eumenides through the magical powers of a sorcerer named Sacropant. Again, ghosts appear repeatedly in George Chapman’s twin plays *Bussy D’Ambois* and *The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois*. The second play, in fact, reminds one of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, with the ghost of Bussy appearing before his brother Clermont and urging him to avenge his death. *The Atheist’s Tragedy* by Cyril Tourneur is another play, which too seems to have been inspired by *Hamlet*. Here also the ghost of the murdered father Montferrers appears to his son Charlemont and informs him of his uncle D’Amville’s evil plotting.
Thus we see that a major number of dramatists of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Age presented the so-called “dark forces” in their plays. Shakespeare possibly could not have been oblivious to such a prevalent dramatic motif of his time and adequately presents it in quite a few of his major plays.

The purpose of this present dissertation is to analyze the “dark forces”, such as, witches, devils and ghosts from the social, political, religious and dramatic perspectives. It is better to start with an overview of the critical argument raging through the literary world regarding the study of Shakespearean drama from a historical perspective – a concept which has been called “politicization” of the stage in Shakespeare’s day by the Cultural Materialists.

Such a study of Shakespeare’s drama from the point of view of his age can be traced back to 1874 when Richard Simpson presented two vital papers – “The Political Use of the Stage in Shakespeare’s Time” and “The Politics of Shakespeare’s Historical Plays”. But in the early 20th century critics such as E.E.Stoll and A.F.Pollard opposed this view. Lily.B.Campbell sums up their attitude by echoing A.F.Pollard’s comment:
No period of English literature has less to do with politics than that during which English letters reached their zenith and no English writers attitude towards the questions with which alone political history is concerned is more obscure or less important than Shakespeare’s. (4)

Even A.C. Bradley complies with this idea expressed in an isolated review of Shakespeare’s plays when in the Introduction to his famous *Shakespearean Tragedy* he writes:

> Nothing will be said of Shakespeare’s place in the history either of English literature or of the drama in general. No attempt will be made to compare him with other writers. I shall leave untouched, or merely glanced at, questions regarding his life and character, the development of his genius and art, the genuineness, sources, texts, inter-relation of his various works. (vi)

Thus, the central thrust of Bradley’s work is not historical but purely “dramatic appreciation” to understand the action and characters with their full intensity and truth. It must be remembered, as Lily B. Campbell says, “I do not believe that a poet can exist in a vacuum” (7). Truly enough, a poet is a product of his age; he is in fact a seer who looks deeper into the various aspects of his age and presents them in his poems or plays with a universal significance. He often looks into the soul of things with a perception which is denied to the common man. And all these apply to the greatest of playwrights William Shakespeare.
This approach to Shakespearean plays from the perspective of his age has been the major thrust of critical acumen of the post-1950s. Marxist critics, Feminists, New-historicists and Cultural Materialists have all tried to present readings of Shakespeare’s plays from the historical, i.e. social, religious, political and material point of view. However, this trend had begun much earlier in 1937 when W.C.Curry wrote Shakespeare’s Philosophical Patterns. He presented the idea that medieval scholastic philosophy, which had influenced the mindset of western thinkers for eleven centuries, was very much present in the air of the 16th century. Shakespeare himself in his concept of human nature followed unconsciously various scholastic systems – Curry felt that these ideas were present in the “habits of thought” of the age.

Such a historical perception was supported by the influential mainstream political critics such as E.M.W Tilleyard, Lily B. Campbell and L.C.Knights. They all tried to perceive a pattern in Shakespeare’s plays, particularly histories, and tried to relate it to a contemporary “Elizabethan world picture”. Campbell went to the extent of interpreting a “universal significance” in Shakespeare’s presentation of contemporary political life through his histories.
One man to challenge this “historicization” of Shakespeare’s plays was Jan Kott in his book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1961). He went to the extent of highlighting that Shakespeare’s plays are so general (as opposed to being representative of a particular age) that they may be presented from the point of view of every age. Thus Kott interprets *King Lear* in terms of absurd drama while *Hamlet* becomes a symbol of national self-destruction. Such concepts, though popular at that time were greatly challenged at a later date. John Elsom in his Introduction to *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* (1989) showed how Kott’s notion is no longer accepted.

But now, returning back to the 1970’s we find that the Marxist critics largely advocated this concept of “political interpretation” of Shakespeare. They constructed a Renaissance historical context known as “cultural system” through a selective consideration of class, political and religious doctrines and material practices of the day (Kamps: 6). Terry Eagleton felt, “Reading is an ideological decipherment of an ideological product” (62). Thus a critic had to take into consideration not only the ideology of the text (and the historical process which went into its making) but also the author’s own ideological make up.
The American New-historicists and the recent British Cultural Materialists, all aimed at a study of Shakespearean literature from a historical perspective. We have New-historicist Leonard Tennenhouse presenting Shakespearean history plays as a study of the changing political strategies. Again, Walter Cohen in his essay "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism" reads the whole play as a conflict between the two "modes of production". Similarly, Claire McEachern in "Henry V and the Paradox of Body Politic" presents a political interpretation of the "ambivalence" present in both "practice and effect" of Shakespeare.

But such "politicization" of Shakespeare, as Ivo Kamps tells us, was not well accepted by all critics. In the 1990s (neo)conservative critics such as Anne Barton, Graham Bradshaw, Richard Levin and Brian Vickers attacked Cultural Materialists for reducing Shakespeare's plays to texts on Leftist ideology. But in his "Introduction: Ideology and Discontents", Shakespeare Left and Right, Ivo Kamps refutes this view by saying that "politicization" as used by them appears to be a purposeful assignation of political ideology to something that is not political. But this certainly is not the case with Shakespeare's plays (1-14).

Thus, it is apparent that the major thrust of critical approaches to Shakespeare in the 20th century has been historical. The present study is a
humble attempt to keep up with this trend. My proposition is to present how the Shakespearean world and the ideological make up of the age influenced Shakespeare’s use of a recurring theme, i.e. the supernatural, in his plays. These “dark forces”, namely, the witches, ghosts and devils as well as omens and curses have been found in some of Shakespeare’s plays. But a study of five plays in particular, i.e. *Henry VI, Part I, Henry VI, Part 2, Richard III, Hamlet* and *Macbeth* reveals that operating beyond and behind these so called “dark forces” is a nexus of political and religious powers which use these contemporary beliefs in order to make others scapegoats for their own sins. These powers of the day try to weave a dark, menacing pattern around some of the characters in the play. But as we look deeper into the Shakespearean milieu with reference to recent studies on the 16th century witchcraft, such as, Norman Cohn’s *Europe’s Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-hunt*; Christina Larner’s and Alan Macfarlane’s *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, Alan G.R.Smith’s *The Reign of James VI and I*; Sydney Anglo. Ed. *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*; Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, we find that the so-called “dark forces” were in fact victims of the “rule of law”. It seems quite unconvincing that a man of Shakespeare’s
genius and sensitivity would remain unaware of such outrageous acts and abuses of power. Rather, Shakespeare seems to have criticized such heartless persecution of innocent people through a subtle pattern of veiled comments, because he evidently did not wish to incur the wrath of the “powers that be”.

The present dissertation, therefore, offers to analyze the five plays to trace a pattern in the dramatist’s presentation of these so called dark forces and establish the argument that the real propensities towards evil originate in the power-mongers, be it the King or the Clergy. But since the supernatural elements occupy a vital place in Julius Caesar, a brief analysis of their function in it is given here.

The Romans are found to be swayed in their everyday life as well as in their socio-political activities by beliefs in omens, signs, stars etc. which the soothsayers can read and predict. Julius Caesar himself feels disturbed when a man in the crowd confronts him and cries out “Beware the Ides of March”. When his wife Calpurnia tries to dissuade him from going to the Senate on the basis of her ominous dream, he calls for the horoscope-reader. When there is unnatural thunder and lightning on the previous night, Cassius feels disturbed by some other sights, such as, a slave holding out his flaming hand, a lion looking “surly” and passing him by. Cicero dismisses these omens saying, “Men may construe things after their fashion,/ Clean from the
purpose of the things themselves” ( I. iii. 34-35 ). On the fated day before the Capitol, when Caesar tauntingly says to the Soothsayer, “The ides of March have come”, the Soothsayer replies, “Ay, Caesar; but not gone”. Sometimes later the terrible event happens – Caesar is stabbed to death by the conspirators including his trusted friend Brutus. But Caesar dead proves more powerful than Caesar living. Just before the decisive battle at Philippi, Brutus nervously cries out:

The ghost of Caesar hath appear’d to me
Two several times by night, - at Sardis once,
And, this last night, here in Philippi fields:
I know my hour is come.

(V. v. 16-19)

Shakespeare in this play handles the supernatural forces operating through the guilty conscience of the characters concerned. The apparent theme of the play – the conflict between Republicanism and Caesarism is not borne out by the text, because Shakespeare’s interest is in the complex psychology of the characters. S.C.Sengupta rightly comments:

The spirit that hovers over Philippi and haunts the assassins symbolizes the mighty political force that re-establishes ‘absolutism’ but it is also a projection of their anguished conscience. Shakespeare shows penetrating
insight into the political realities, but he finds the heart of man more interesting. ( xxxv )
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. An overview of the Tudor and Stuart plays mentioned in this chapter is largely based upon *Outlines of Tudor and Stuart Plays* by Karl J. Holzknecht. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1952.

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