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## A Comparative Study of the Ghost Literary Motif in *Snow in Midsummer* by Guan Hanqing and *Hamlet* by Shakespeare

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**Abstract:** In classical Chinese literature, employing the literary motif of the ghost represents both the writers' desire to escape the pattern of didactic literature promoted by Confucianism and their attempt to revolt against the rigidity of the Confucian dogma that is far too entrenched in reality and inhibits their creativity. Written during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) by Guan Hanqing (1225–1302), *Snow in Midsummer* presents the injustice of Dou'E who dies for a crime she did not commit, with the girl returning to the world of the living in the form of a ghost to obtain her justice. The motif of the vengeful ghost also appears in Shakespeare's (1564–1616) play, *Hamlet*. In this essay, I will investigate comparatively the dramatic aesthetics through which the spirits are outlined in the two plays, the comedy used by Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare, respectively, in the scenes of the appearance of spirits, and last but not least, the religious substratum contained in the symbolism of these ghosts. After a contrastive analysis of the dramaturgical and aesthetic construction of the two spirits in these plays, I argue that, despite their belonging to two different cultural spaces, both authors question through the supernatural the moral values of the societies in which they lived.

**Keywords:** *Snow in Midsummer*, *Hamlet*, ghost, Guan Hanqing, Shakespeare, Shakespearean theater, *zaju* theater

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### 1. Introduction

In this essay I will focus on the aesthetics and functionality of the ghosts of Hamlet's father and Dou'E in a contrastive way, comparing their roles in the plays *Snow in Midsummer* by Guan Hanqing and *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. This comparison starts from some theoretical premises that are difficult to put in order, given that the two works belong to extremely different literary traditions. According to Western theories, which are based on the literary tradition of ancient Greece, *Hamlet* is a tragedy, a category of the dramatic genre that cannot be applied to *Snow in Midsummer*, because in the Chinese literary tradition, such theories have not been elaborated. And yet, as Hongyu Chen mentions in her essay "A Comparative Interpretation of the 'Anti-Power Center Concept' in 'Hamlet'"

and ‘Dou’E Yuan’”:

Masterpieces such as Guan Hanqing’s “Dou’E Yuan” and Wang Shifu’s “Western Chamber” are representative of Chinese culture, as are Greek theater in the Athenian period, British theater in the Elizabethan period, and French theater in neoclassicism. The emergence of Song and Yuan works, especially the rise of Yuan *zaju* plays, brought a great transformation of narrative style in Chinese literature. (94; my translation)

The *zaju* theater is, therefore, an emblem of Chinese literature, and the framing of Guan Hanqing’s work as a tragedy is a matter of westernization, a fact that does not deny in any way the aesthetic value of this play.

*Snow in Midsummer* is a *zaju* play, written during the Yuan Dynasty, being a representative work of this dramatic literary genre. The action of the work can be summarized as follows: the scholar Dou sells his daughter to Mrs. Cai for some silver that he needed to go to the capital to take the imperial exams. Thirteen years later, his daughter, Dou’E, becomes a widow at the age of only 20 after Mrs. Cai’s son, whom she married, dies. Old Zhang and his son, the Donkey, ask for a reward because they saved Mrs. Cai from Dr. Lu who owed her money, and tried to strangle her. They want the two women to marry them. Mrs. Cai agrees, but Dou’E flatly refuses. So, the Donkey plans to poison Mrs. Cai so he can force Dou’E to marry him. By mistake, however, he poisons his father and then accuses Dou’E of his death and tries to persuade her to marry him so as not to take her to court. Dou’E still refuses, so she is sentenced to death for killing old Zhang after being forced to take responsibility for a crime she did not commit. The three years of drought brought about by the unjust death of the girl bring to the district her father who was now a high official. Inspecting the cases of that district, the girl’s father discovers with the help of Dou’E’s ghost, who appears in his dream, the injustice she suffered. The unhappy case of the girl is thus reopened and, in the end, her innocence is proven and the guilty are punished.

## 2. The Stylized Interpretation of the Ghost in the Chinese Theater in Contrast to its Realistic Interpretation in the Shakespearean Theater

### 2.1 The Stylization of Dou’E’s Ghost

The Shakespearean theater is based on the dialogue between the characters that takes place naturally without interpretive artifices, with simple stage directions that ensure the realism of actions and gestures. The *zaju* theater is, on the other hand, sung, the interpretation being as exaggerated as possible. Unlike Shakespeare’s theater, the interpretive and stylistic force is more important here to the detriment of the epic. Through artificial interpretation, exaggerated stylization, repetition, and ritualization the play reaches the genuine, the natural.

Technically speaking, *zaju* style plays are a kind of operational representation composed of three parts: singing, speaking, and playing (gestures and dancing). Dialogues are performed in vernacular speech and songs while monologues are spoken or expressed in poetry. *Zaju* is characterized by a rather strict dramaturgical form, both in terms of prosody and music. A *zaju* play consists of four acts.

If the four acts were not enough for the author to express everything he had to express, the playwright could add a series of songs called *xiezi* (楔子), i.e. pieces of music that were inserted either at the beginning of the play or between two acts. The songs *xiezi* 楔子 were, in fact, the central part of the *zaju* plays; they presented the unfolding of the action, described the emotional conflicts and the complexity of the characters. The primary function of the songs in the *zaju* theater was to express the feelings and thoughts of the main characters. This is also the case in the play, *Snow in Midsummer*, in the scene in which the heroine mourns her fate:

*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!  
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! (Guan 60-61)*

The discourse in this play, which consists of song and speech, is perfectly represented in the scene of Dou'E's reunion with her father. In the fourth act, Dou'E appears in her father's dream, and while the ghost dances and sings, her father falls asleep, and so the two reunite in his dream. The father's remarks suddenly change in the ghost's song that appears in his dream. The nature of what is possible is unclear, because the past and the present overlap and are fused into a whole that takes place at the same time, but also in different dimensions on the stage (Zhao 15-16). Here is the emotional scene of their reunion:

DOU: (...) Wait, I suddenly feel drowsy. I suppose I am growing old, and am tired after travelling. I will take a short nap on the desk. (*He sleeps.*)  
(*Enter Dou E's ghost.*)  
DOU E: *Day after day I weep in the underworld,  
Waiting impatiently for my revenge.  
I pace on slowly in darkness,  
Then am borne along by the whirlwind;  
Enveloped by mist I come swiftly in ghostly form.*  
(*She looks about her.*) Now the door-gods will not let me pass. I am the daughter of Inspector

Dou. Though I died unjustly, my father does not know it; so I have come to visit him in his dreams. (*She enters the room and weeps.*)

DOU (*shedding tears*): Duanyun, my child! Where have you been?

(*Dou E's spirit leaves, and Dou wakes up.*)

How odd! I fell asleep and dreamed that I saw my daughter coming towards me; but where is she now? Let me go on with these cases.

(*Dou E's spirit enters and makes the lamp burn low.*) (Guan 50-53)

This scene is not only important because it is a key moment of the play's action, but it is also the best representation of the stylization of Dou'E's ghost that contrasts with the real world.

## 2.2 The Grave Realism of the Ghost in *Hamlet*

The appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet* is also a complex one. The king shows himself first to Marcellus and Bernardo and then to Hamlet. He refuses to talk to the first two, but they see him, so the ghost is not just a projection of Hamlet's troubled mind. Apparently, the ghost can't fight or get revenge alone, it needs the help of the living. But the description of its appearance as a dead body dressed for war conveys the idea of its materiality:

HAMLET: Angels and ministers of grace defend us!  
 Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,  
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
 Thou comest in such a questionable shape  
 That I will speak to thee: I'll call thee Hamlet,  
 King, father, royal Dane: O, answer me!  
 Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell  
 Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,  
 Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,  
 Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,  
 Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws,  
 To cast thee up again. What may this mean,  
 That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel  
 Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,  
 Making night hideous; and we fools of nature  
 So horridly to shake our disposition  
 With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?  
 Say, why is this? wherefore? what should we do? (Ghost beckons HAMLET).

(Shakespeare 45-46)

From this description, we can already notice the contrast between the description of the two spectacles. Dou'E's ghost is dancing and singing while expressing her sorrows, while the king's ghost is described through Hamlet's eyes as a walking corpse that has risen from the mysterious underworld. Even

the fact that the king's ghost is described indirectly through Hamlet's eyes denotes its untouchable aura. While Guan Hanqing chooses to humanize Dou'E through her discourse, making the reader empathize with her sufferings, Shakespeare presents the king's ghost as a scary spectacle that looks like it has crawled back from its grave to get its revenge. Also, the interaction that the ghosts have with their loved ones shows the contrast of their representations. Dou'E's reunion with her father is touching, as the two express their sadness for their separation and the girl's tragic faith, but Hamlet is doubtful about his father's appearance, wondering if the ghost is really his father or if it is a demon that has come to tempt him to sin. The doubt that Hamlet expresses is also linked to the realism of the Shakespearean play; he finds it hard to believe that ghosts exist because this is a contradiction to his religious beliefs and the natural laws.

### 3. The Presence of Comedy in Tragedy and its Role in Defining the Ghosts in the *Zaju* and the Shakespearean Theater

#### 3.1 The Comedy in *Snow in Midsummer*

Guan Hanqing uses biting satire in "Snow in Midsummer," making a sarcastic commentary full of irony, but due to the tragedy of the play, the subsequent critics overlooked the aspect of comedy and satire ubiquitous in the play. The concomitance of solemnity and comedy is, moreover, a basic feature of *zaju* plays. This can be seen in the following passage:

*(Dou E's spirit enters and makes the lamp burn low.)*

DOU: Strange! I was just going to read a case when the light flickered and dimmed. My servant is asleep. I must trim the wick myself. *(As he trims the lamp, Dou E's spirit rearranges the file.)* Now the light is brighter, I can read again. This concerns the criminal Dou E, who poisoned her father-in-law. Strange! I read this case first, and put it under the others. How has it come to the top? Since this case has already been dealt with, let me put it at the bottom again and study a different one. *(Once more Dou E's spirit makes the lamp burn low.)* Strange! Why is the light flickering again? I must trim it once more. *(As Dou trims the light, Dou E's spirit once more turns over the file.)* Now the lamp is brighter, I can read another case. "This concerns the criminal Dou E, who poisoned her father-in-law." How extraordinary! I definitely put this at the bottom of the pile just before I trimmed the lamp. How has it come to the top again? Can there be ghosts in this office? Well, ghost or no ghost, an injustice must have been done. Let me put this underneath and read another. *(Dou E's spirit makes the lamp burn low again.)* Strange! The lamp is flickering again. Can there actually be a ghost here tampering with it? I'll trim it once more. *(As he trims the wick, Dou E's spirit comes up to him and he sees her. He strikes his sword on the desk.)* Ah, there's 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! (Guan 53-55)

In this scene, Dou'E's ghost plays a little with his father, teases him, before appearing in front of him. Dou becomes more and more frightened until, when his daughter's ghost appears, he jumps in

fear. It is thus observed that the incongruity between his argument, the fact that he is “sent by the emperor” (original: *Lǎofū shì cháotíng qīnchāi*), and his fear of the unknown, of the supernatural, has comic effects and humanizes the scene. Instead of a serious and solemn scene, as in the scene of the appearance of the king’s spirit in “Hamlet,” the tone of the *zaju* play is much more relaxed. This gives originality to Guan Hanqing’s play, given that in Chinese literature such ghost scenes were not characterized by humor. However, the author does not caricature the characters or ridicule the scene, but rather humanizes the characters and makes the scene more truthful and believable, and thus the solemnity coexists with humor.

### 3.2 The Tragic Comedy in *Hamlet*

Comedy is also present in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet*, through Hamlet who uses madness to take on the role of the “clown” of the court that tells the truth hidden behind jokes and irony. His intelligence gives him the opportunity to take on the role of the jester, and this fake madness and role as a jester also give him the opportunity to tell the truth about his father’s death right in front of the king and queen. And so, madness and clownery become his mask to hide his true feelings of deceit and confusion. He disguises his accusations towards the queen and the king as simple jokes or nonsensical lines spoken by a madman. Through this role as a jester, he can also gain time to find out if his father’s ghost really told the truth or if it was just a demon that urged him to commit a crime. Hamlet uses mainly irony as an instrument of humor, for example, his sarcastic comment at his mother’s wedding: “HAMLET: Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked-meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.” (Shakespeare 27).

In the second meeting with his father’s ghost, his speech is at the crossroads between humor and drama, given that he addresses his father as follows: “Ghost: (*Beneath*) Swear. / HAMLET: Ah, ha, boy! say’st thou so? art thou there, truepenny? / Come on: you hear this fellow in the cellarage: / Consent to swear. (...) Ghost: (*Beneath*) Swear. / HAMLET: Well said, old mole! canst work i’ the earth so fast? / A worthy pioner! Once more remove, good friends” (60-61).

Manfred Draudt in his essay “The Comedy of Hamlet” interprets this inappropriate behavior that precedes his approval that he will simulate madness as just a moment of hypocrisy, acting, an attempt to disguise the seriousness of the ghost’s revelation and what a powerful effect it had on him. A feature of this scene, but also the whole play, is the unusual combination of formidable, fantastic events with comic elements. Such scenes are also represented by the scene of the murder of Polonius with Hamlet’s insensitive answer, but also by the grotesque scene with the gravedigger and the skull of the jester Yorick (79).

Thus, despite the dark themes of hidden injustices and the revenge sought by ghosts in the world of the living, both Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing choose comedy to disguise the most serious possible comments and ideas as jokes and innocent ironies that humanize the characters.

## 4. Wandering Spirits Seeking Justice - Moral Canons Represented by Ghosts in *Snow in Midsummer* and *Hamlet*

Justice is a common theme in the two plays. The way in which justice is obtained in both works is atypical to the court, but this reflects how ideal or “poetic” justice works in people’s imaginations.

Catherine Diamond argues in her work, “Public Courtrooms, Private Revenge: Concepts of Justice in Chinese and Western Theater,” that the idea of personal justice, or the desire for revenge, is a common and even instinctive response of people, and theater, in this case, depicts passionate characters led by this sole motive. Revenge has been a crucial theme since the beginning of the theatrical tradition because the deep sense of hurt felt, backed by ancient debt codes, challenges the public order and the security established by obedience to the law (Diamond 60).

The two plays, although written in totally different historical and cultural spaces, use the theme of revenge for the same reason: not only because of the passion and intensity brought on stage by it but also because it is an emotion shared and fully understood by people. The theme of revenge captivates viewers and draws them into the moral dilemma between their feelings and their knowledge of what they know is right (66).

In both *Hamlet* and *Snow in Midsummer*, the appearance of ghosts in the world of the living has a judicial purpose: both Hamlet’s father and Dou’E have been unjustly killed and return as ghosts to reveal the truth behind their deaths. The two spirits represent moral values that are based on beliefs specific to the period and the historical space in which the authors lived.

#### 4.1 The Paradox of Confucianism in *Snow in Midsummer*

In China, the law is a form of natural order according to the Confucian doctrine, identical with the idea of morality. Guan Hanqing transmits the same idea in *Snow in Midsummer*, where the initial corrupt and unjust judgment is corrected by the girl’s father at the end of the play when he reopens Dou’E’s case and, correctly applying the law, he brings justice. Although the truth is revealed by a ghost—a controversial element that can be interpreted as a counter-discourse to the Confucian doctrine that does not accept the existence of ghosts because they are related to the metaphysical—the law triumphs and judges what is moral and immoral. Divine judgment and human judgment merge into a single abstract and idealized judgment. The question of the morality of the act of revenge never arises, and it is clear to both the author and the reader that this act must take place, both knowing from the outset that this is the moral thing that must be done to restore harmony in the universe. This is the kind of poetic justice present in Guan Hanqing’s play.

The Confucian attitude expressed in the *Analects* towards the concept of revenge is ambiguous and hardly condemns the desire for revenge. Confucianism tends to direct rather than curb natural impulses, allowing for a flexible interpretation of the right answer to obtain personal justice (61). Here is the fragment from *Analects* in which Confucius talks about justice:

Some one said, “What do you say concerning the principle that injury should be recompensed with kindness?”

The Master said, “With what then will you recompense kindness? Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness.” (36)

Although justice here is not specifically defined as shared by the state and could therefore include revenge, wronged characters in Chinese plays often take some nominal legal procedures into account (Diamond 61). This also explains why Dou’E’s ghost chooses to get justice through the law and not on its own.

#### 4.2 Complex Religious Values Presented through the Ghost in Hamlet

In *Hamlet*, on the other hand, there are clearly present ideas specific to the Christian doctrine, which apply to the concept of revenge: is the act of revenge in this play moral or not? As Diamond argues, revenge is outlawed and destroys socio-political harmony, threatening to bring chaos through endless conflicts and usurps the right to the final judgment that belongs only to God or his messengers on earth (61).

The only acceptable revenge, then, remains that of divinity to bring divine justice: “Vengeance is mine, I will pay them back, for the time when they make a false step. For the day of their ruin is close, doom is rushing towards them, for he will see to it that their power fails. that neither serf nor free man remains” (The New Jerusalem Bible, Deuteronomy 32:35). The Catholic faith forbids revenge. The honor, on the other hand, of Hamlet’s personal integrity needs to be vigorously defended. His honor is inconsistent with his faith, and for its defense, it leads to an autonomous moral code difficult to reconcile with Christian ideals.

In his book *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the ghost of the king in the play may be a symbol for the ghost of Shakespeare’s father, John Shakespeare, who died in 1601, the year the play was probably written. Thus, *Hamlet* reveals that the Protestant playwright was probably haunted by the spirit of his Catholic father who was suffering in Purgatory (248-249). This can also be confirmed with the help of a document discovered in the writer’s house: a will of John Shakespeare in which he implored that after his death prayers of indulgence be made for the release of his soul from Purgatory. Thus, Greenblatt speculates that with the death of Shakespeare’s father and the attack of the Protestants on the Catholic faith of that period, “the space of Purgatory becomes the space of the stage,” as a place for communication between the dead and the living (256-257). However, according to Mark Pizzato, in his book *Ghosts of Theater and Cinema in the Brain*, the desire for revenge of the ghost in the play may be the exact reason why the ghost is stuck in Purgatory. Its demand even ends up creating a Purgatory from the life of Hamlet whose witnesses are the spectators, and all three parts end up going through a cathartic cleansing experience by the end of the play (117).

If in *Snow in Midsummer* the concept of human justice and that of supernatural justice merge to reach an ideal poetic morality, in *Hamlet* the conflict between human justice and religious morality is much more pronounced. The boundaries between what is moral and what is right are blurred because they come into conflict; the concepts of what justice and morality mean are thus tested.

Whether explicitly or implicitly condemned or allowed, the motif of revenge is present in both European and Chinese theaters because its passionate and active response allows the audience to violate the restrictions of an orderly society (Diamond 61). This is also the case with the works of Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing. The significant difference between them is that the honest vengeful ghost in the Chinese play is rewarded with justice while the ghost of the king in *Hamlet* brings only trouble and confusion; in the end, Hamlet is forced to examine his immoral nature and his obsession with revenge. Guan Hanqing’s play attracts readers through the poetic justice obtained by the innocent characters. Shakespeare, on the other hand, intrigues the readers of his work through the intellectual and spiritual conflict, between Hamlet’s honor and integrity, and the pre-established social order and laws.



## 5. Conclusions

Although the motif of the ghost in classical Chinese literature becomes a symbol of the authors' revolt against the rigidity of Confucian social constructs, Guan Hanqing's work still retained a moralizing note, turning literature into a moralizing tool, as it was also viewed by Confucianism. This literary paradox of the ghost's motif found in *Snow in Midsummer* outlines a powerful heroine, Dou'E, who returns to the world of the living to obtain justice in the form of a wandering spirit. By comparison with the ghost present in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, we distinguish the stylistic and aesthetic differences that intervened in shaping the ghost of Dou'E and the ghost of the king of Denmark. These differences, of course, occur due to the literary and cultural traditions to which the two writers refer, and yet it can be seen that the role of the two ghosts in their plays is a common one. Both playwrights problematize, through the literary motif of the ghost, the idea of morality promoted by society and religious dogmas that massively influence the concepts of good and evil, moral and immoral. Through Dou'E's injustice, Guan Hanqing criticizes the justice system during the Yuan dynasty, thus exposing the corruption of those who, instead of seeking the justice of ordinary people, are content to find a culprit as soon as possible to close the case. And so, Dou'E's spirit represents the will of Heaven, which has to bring justice to the human world, because the justice system had failed due to people's corruption and immorality. Here lies Guan Hanqing's social critique: the justice system that is supposed to protect people is so rotten with greed that it fails miserably and punishes the innocent while the guilty run free. Shakespeare uses the motif of the vengeful spirit to present the conflict between Christian dogma, which sees revenge as a sin, and private justice, which can sometimes be achieved only through revenge. Hamlet has to commit a sin to be able to keep his honor and bring justice for his father. Personal justice and religious justice are not in harmony: one of them needs to be sacrificed for the other one to be fulfilled, and Hamlet needs to decide which one he chooses. This conflict represents Shakespeare's critique on the rigidity of the Christian values that are sometimes incompatible with people's personal moral values.

Although the two plays are part of two different cultural and historical spaces, and the spirits present in the plays are outlined in different styles according to the type of theater they are part of, namely the stylized aesthetics of the ritualized gestures in the *zaju* theater and the realistic aesthetics typical of Shakespearean theater, the ghosts of these two works come to have common points. They embody through their roles the beliefs and ideas of the authors about the morality of religious doctrines. Thus, in both plays, paradoxes and contradictions appear between what is moral from a legal point of view and what is moral from a spiritual point of view. The ghosts in the two plays by Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare thus bring to readers the ambiguity of the morality of society, despite the fact that they fall into different cultures, with different morals. It is observed how morality cannot be universal and how the two authors are caught in this paradox of trying to rebel against the morality canonized by religions but failing because of their own values that were deeply influenced by these canons rooted in the subconscious of the masses for hundreds of years.

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