

Call For Papers

Ghost Scenes / Scènes de spectres

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Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Institut de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l'âge Classique et les Lumières (IRCL - UMR 5186)
Montpellier, France

Keynote Speaker:

François Lecerle, Sorbonne University

Organised by Pierre Kapitaniak (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), Thierry Verdier (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3) and Andrew Hiscock (Bangor University, GB).

This international conference addresses the nature and functions of ghost scenes in the performing arts in France, Britain and elsewhere in Europe from the **16th to the 18th** centuries. Spectral appearances may be considered from aesthetic, dramatic and/or scenic, metatheatrical, metaphorical, socio-cultural, political, philosophical, and other perspectives – and here the list is by no means exhausted.

The ghost is a familiar figure, indeed a pillar of revenge tragedy. This legacy of classical tragedy, from Aeschylus to Seneca, where protatic ghosts commented on the action, provided a model for European dramatists from the 16th century onwards, before gradually giving way to new forms during the Enlightenment. When one thinks of ghosts on stage, it is the late father of Prince Hamlet stalking the battlements of Elsinore that first springs to mind. However, if this early modern figure looms particularly large in the consciousness of modern audiences, it can deflect attention from a wealth of examples elsewhere in the period. If it is true that Old Hamlet's ghost has come to embody (or rather disembody) the vengeful ghost *per se*, it is easy to forget that at the turn of the 17th century it was a highly original innovation whose immense success shaped the theatre ghost in Britain for decades and even centuries to come.

In France, more than sixty years later, the ghost takes on a tangible form when it animates the Commander's statue in Molière's play, as signalled in the very title, *Dom Juan ou le festin de pierre*, especially in its English version, *Dom Juan or the Feast with the Statue*.

But what exactly is a "ghost scene"? It is a scene in which the playwright stages the apparition of a revenant, a deceased person's soul which returns to haunt its murderer or, on the contrary, to spur on a loved one in order to be avenged. A violent death is thus necessary so that the dead person be prevented from resting in peace. In accordance with popular and learned traditions of thinking, these apparitions usually take place at night, when the realm of the dead can encroach on that of the living. In the theatre, especially when it is in the open air, this implies conventions that signify the darkness of night, which have already been the subject of a previous conference (see *ASF* n° 4, 2015). While night scenes invite considerations about the very nature of theatre and what can be seen there, this is complicated by the presence of a supernatural being and the further uncertainties it raises. When the ghost becomes involved in the action, it appears as a figure of authority, whom none dares disobey, like the spirit of the prophet Samuel that the Pythoness conjures up before Saul in Jean de La Taille's *Saül le furieux* (1572). In this respect, drama radically opposes theology. More specifically, for Protestants, who rejected Purgatory (and with it the possibility of the soul's return), the authority of a ghost is unthinkable, since it constitutes a diabolical imposture. One may therefore wonder how theatre accommodates those professions of belief, or subverts them, through the figure of the ghost.

For theologians, illusion is always of demonic essence and therefore dangerous; for playwrights, it is inherent in the very aesthetics of theatre and therefore eminently playful. This opens up a further venue of exploration, since ghost scenes often play on the very reality of the other characters' sense of experience. From the 17th century onwards, for instance, a particular kind of scene emerges, with "vain phantoms", as in Corneille's *Illusion comique* (1634), where characters whom others believe to be deceased disguise themselves as ghosts, with financial or matrimonial motivations in mind, or in hope of reconciliation.

"Who's there?" exclaims Bernardo in *Hamlet*. This opening question draws attention to the fact that a ghost, in order to be a ghost, must be identified as such. Contributions may consequently wish to examine the paradoxical way in which theatre seeks both to establish the resemblance of the ghost to a living character and to identify its spectrality. Furthermore, the presence on stage of an immaterial being questions the pact of performance, inviting the audience to accept that a flesh-and-blood actor can embody this essentially disembodied being. Is the ghost a codified figure? What are the visual and aural codes that often play on an opposition between the staging and the text? How can the "realistic" constraints of the former be compensated by and contrasted with the freedom the latter offers? To what extent do the various components of performance, such as music and lighting, enable the director to break free of "realistic" constraints?

In its remanence of humanity, the spectre is the perfect metaphor for the actor who impersonates someone who is not (or no longer) present, and it is no coincidence that the term "shadow" (*umbra*) should designate both ghost and player. Yet corporeity is not the only feature of the spectral figure that draws attention to the workings of the theatre. Etymologically (*spectare*), the spectre is what we think we see and consequently what attracts the gaze... of its etymological kindred, the spectator. It is therefore unsurprising that such scenes of apparition should provoke a variety of viewing responses, in turn making the ghost visible to all, to one or a few characters, or to the spectators alone. It is the ghost of Banquo who both sits and does not sit at the banquet table.

In the 18th century, theatre machinery and theories of acting, for instance by Aaron Hill and Diderot, encourage a reassessment of the ghost on stage and of characters' responses, in stagings such as David Garrick's *Hamlet* in the 1770s. A study of contemporary accounts of performances also provides insights into reception, which can be complemented by scrutinising paintings through which artists like Fuseli or Blake wished to immortalise that fleeting instant of an apparition.

Is the ghost always necessarily present on stage? Are there other ways of provoking dread in onlookers – be they on or off stage? The study of 18th century texts and stage designs, as in Voltaire's *Semiramis* (1748), may cast light on scenographic and textual strategies: characters announcing that they have seen a ghost before its appearance on stage, a chest carried onto the stage, the movement of a drapery, an element of the set (a tomb). Ghosts also appear in comedies, as in Samuel Foote's *The Orators* (1762), which stages the trial of a spirit brought before a spectral jury that includes Banquo's ghost.

Startling, elusive, diverse, stage ghosts have inspired the illustrators of editions of Shakespeare's complete works, as well as painters, generating a sub-genre of "spectral" art in the 18th century. Music and lighting also contribute to create illusion and suspense, sometimes replacing the embodiment of a ghost by an actor. In recent decades, digital effects have also contributed an additional dimension to adaptations of 16th-18th century plays – as if, from century to century, the ghost reinvented itself to meet the challenges of new technologies.

This conference, therefore, invites a variety of theoretical approaches to explore this corpus of performing arts in France, Britain and on other European stages, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.

Abstracts of no more than 250 words should be submitted by **15 July 2021**, together with a one-page *curriculum vitae* to pierre.kapitaniak@univ-montp3.fr. Papers will be accepted in English and French.