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Joseph Harris

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Undiscovered countries: Shakespearean shadows in Jean-François Ducis's *Hamlet*

JOSEPH HARRIS

Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Royal Holloway, University of London, London, UK

To English eyes, France's first stageworthy adaptation of a Shakespeare play, Jean-François Ducis's Hamlet (1769), is a pale but gloomy shadow of the original. One of the few elements of Shakespeare's tragedy that Ducis retains is the Ghost of Hamlet's father, who presses the hero on to avenge the original murder. But Ducis's Ghost is both more savage and more ambiguous than Shakespeare's; being perceptible to none but Hamlet, it may be no more than a hallucination. More bloodthirsty than its Shakespearean counterpart, it demands that Hamlet kill his mother Gertrude alongside Claudius, thus producing a conflict of loyalties that leads him to doubt the moral legitimacy of his mission. Although Ducis himself later felt compelled to rewrite his own ending, in all versions Hamlet's sustained refusal to accede to the Ghost's demands eventually marks his triumph over both his melancholy and his incapacities as incumbent ruler of Denmark.

KEYWORDS Ducis, Shakespeare, Hamlet, adaptation, tragedy, ghosts, supernatural

According to Shakespeare's Hamlet, death is 'the undiscovered country': a world beyond our own 'from whose bourn | No traveller returns'.[1] For Jean-François Ducis, the first adapter of Shakespeare's plays for the French stage, Shakespeare's homeland remained another such 'undiscovered country'. Despite his adulation of

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), III. 1. pp. 78–9. Subsequent references to this play will be given in the text.

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Shakespeare, Ducis never visited England and – notoriously – never learned the language of the playwright whose tragedies he sought to adapt to French tastes. Both linguistically and geographically, then, in terms of both words and worlds, an almost impermeable boundary separated Ducis from Shakespeare. Accordingly, when writing his adaptations Ducis thus had to rely on translations – which meant, at least at first, the patchy and unactable translations-cum-synopses of Pierre-Antoine de La Place's *Théâtre anglais* (1745–48). La Place's editions typically combine loose, somewhat bowdlerized prose translations of important or otherwise striking episodes with short plot summaries of those scenes deemed unworthy of attention, leading Melchior Grimm to warn pointedly that 'celui qui ne connaît Shakespeare que d'après les traductions de M. de La Place' – in other words, one such as Ducis – 'peut être sûr de n'en avoir aucune idée'.[2] In the passage from Shakespeare, via La Place, to Ducis, many of the excesses that are so distinctive of Elizabethan tragedy – the various subplots; the baseness and comedy; the corporeality and onstage violence; the expansive cast – are all stripped away, leaving behind, to English eyes at least, a pale shadow of the original. And yet, while Ducis's plays forced Shakespeare into a neoclassical French straitjacket, they also left in enough residual English barbarism to whet the appetite of audiences eager for new dramatic fodder.

Ducis's first Shakespeare adaptation, *Hamlet*, is a fascinating and curious play, quite aside from its long and complicated publishing history.[3] Among other things, it removes many of the original tragedy's most iconic elements, even those present in the La Place version. Gone are Hamlet's feigned madness, Yorick's skull, the play-within-a-play episode, the murder of the 'rat' Polonius behind the curtain, and the closing swordfight. What remains is a far tighter, leaner plot in line with French expectations and conventions; it obeys for example, the unities of time, place, and action, and replaces Shakespeare's (and La Place's) mixture of prose and verse with alexandrine couplets throughout. Ducis also rearranges family relations (turning Claudius from Hamlet's uncle into a more distant relative and making him the father of Hamlet's beloved Ophélie) and reinstates the laws of primogeniture, making Hamlet the new king and thus the remaining target of the ambitious villain Claudius's schemes.

One of the few unruly elements of Shakespeare's play that Ducis does not expunge, though, is the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father – that one traveller who does return, despite Hamlet's claims, from the 'undiscovered country' of the afterlife to press him on to vengeance. This article explores some of the stakes of the Ghost in Ducis's play as a mediator between different worlds. As I shall demonstrate, although the Ghost offers one of the most obvious ways in which the French play is intertextually haunted by its Shakespearean original, Ducis reworks it in some radically different ways to suit the world of eighteenth-century French theatre.

[2] Grimm, *Correspondance littérature, philosophique et critique*, ed. by Maurice Tourneux, 16 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1879), VIII. p. 490.

[3] First performed in at the Comédie-Française in September 1769, it was published with (among other changes) an entirely rewritten final act the following year; Ducis returned to the play at the end of his life and rewrote it quite obsessively in the period from 1803 to 1815. For more on the variants, see John Golder's excellent *Shakespeare for the Age of Reason: The Earliest Stage Adaptations of Jean-François Ducis 1769–1792* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1992), pp. 13–72, and the forthcoming critical edition, *Hamlet*, ed. by Joseph Harris (Cambridge: MHRA Critical Texts, 2024), 'Introduction'.

Staging the Ghost

One of the most dramatically striking ways the Ghost straddles different 'worlds' lies in Ducis's choice of staging. Shakespeare's play leaves little doubt that the ghost of Hamlet's father has some genuine ontological existence. The Ghost is played onstage by an actor and is listed in the *dramatis personae*; it is fully visible and audible to the audience, and we witness it in conversation with Hamlet. While it generally refuses to speak to anyone but Hamlet, it is also sporadically visible and audible to other characters. At certain points, though, only we (the audience) and Hamlet are able to see it. The most striking and poignant example of this is Shakespeare's famous 'bedchamber scene'. Here, disturbed by Hamlet's apparent hallucinations, his mother Gertrude asks him

> Alas, how is't with you,
>
> That you do bend your eye on vacancy
>
> And with th'incorporal air do hold discourse? (III. 4. 113–15)

Ducis seems to have found this scene particularly compelling; as we shall see shortly, he will often draw on this scene's emotional potential in his own play.

Ducis, however, was convinced that French audiences would never have tolerated seeing the Ghost performed by an actor onstage; he explains his deep regret in a letter to the actor David Garrick that he could not bring 'l'ombre terrible qui expose le crime et demande vengeance' before a French audience.[4] He does not explain why, but one explanation may lie in Voltaire's unfortunate experiences a couple of decades earlier. Similarly impressed to Ducis by Shakespeare's Ghost, Voltaire had found it held a considerable dramatic power even over the most enlightened theatregoers:

> Il faut avouer que, parmi les beautés qui étincellent au milieu de ces terribles extravagances, l'ombre du père d'Hamlet est un des coups de théâtre les plus frappants. Il fait toujours un grand effet sur les Anglais, je dis sur ceux qui sont le plus instruits, et qui sentent le mieux toute l'irrégularité de leur ancien théâtre.[5]

So commanding is the Ghost's dramatic presence, implies Voltaire, that it somehow overrides even the aesthetic shortcomings and irregularity of Elizabethan theatre. Part of what makes the Ghost in Hamlet so dramatically compelling, Voltaire explains, is its integration into the plot; rather than being a narratively superfluous addition, it actively propels events in the mission it entrusts to Hamlet. Following Shakespeare's model, Voltaire himself attempted to bring vengeful ghosts onstage in his own *Ériphyle* (1732) and *Sémiramis* (1748), but with famously little success; indeed, the cluttered stage of *Sémiramis* led to a notorious episode in

[4] Ducis, letter to Garrick, 14 April 1769, pp. 7–8, in *Lettres de Jean-François Ducis*, *édition nouvelle*, ed. by Paul Albert (Paris: Jousset, 1879), p. 8.

[5] Voltaire, 'Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne,' in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk and others, 205 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2003), 30A: *Œuvres de 1746–1748 (I)*, ed. by Karlis Racevskis and Robert Niklaus et al., pp. 139–64, p. 161.

which aristocratic spectators, who had paid for the premium seats on the stage, were asked to make way to let the ghost pass.[6]

Even though Ducis was writing a full decade after these awkward onstage seats had been removed from Parisian theatres, he still felt unable to follow Shakespeare's and Voltaire's examples in his depiction of the Ghost. Instead, he chose to evoke the Ghost's otherworldly presence onstage through Hamlet's own words and performance alone. By trapping his protagonist in a world of nightmarish multi-sensory visions exclusive to him, Ducis thus evokes a stark and poignant disjuncture between the world we see onstage and the frenzied apparitions that torment Hamlet and which we can only learn of second-hand. This technique was not, of course, his invention: Racine, for example, had famously shown his maddened Oreste tormented by visions of ghosts and Furies at the end of his *Andromaque* (1667).[7] Yet, whereas Racine limits Oreste's supernatural visions to the final scene, Ducis makes far more extensive use of the technique, to at least some spectators' distaste. Acknowledging the considerable representative burden Ducis's staging places onto the actor playing Hamlet, one commentator snidely suggested that Ducis was trying to kill off his leading man with such a taxing role: 'Vous voulez donc tuer ce pauvre M. Molé … jamais sa poitrine ne soutiendra jusques au bout ce ton lugubre et infernal qu'il a pris'.[8] Others felt that overuse of the technique compromised its dramatic potential. As a review by Jean-François La Harpe wryly put it, while a brief ghostly apparition will make us tremble, if a spectre comes and goes too often, then 'nous finirons, comme Dom Juan, par l'inviter à souper. Plus un ressort est merveilleux, plus il faut le ménager'.[9] Diderot echoes this suggestion that overuse of ghosts can produce (inadvertent) comedy, claiming that it was clumsy of Ducis to 'employer une machine de cette espèce pendant cinq actes' since 'sa durée en empêche la terreur et la rend ridicule'.[10] Although Diderot is slightly overstating matters when he suggests that Ducis's Ghost 'appears' onstage in all five acts, certain aspects of Ducis's staging – as we shall see shortly – make it hard to determine exactly when the Ghost is supposed to be present.

Madness, melancholy, and hallucination

Ducis's decision to hide the Ghost from our eyes has various psychological and dramatic consequences. Most obviously, it raises the possibly that the Ghost is only a

[6] See Pierre Frantz, 'Voltaire et ses fantômes,' in *Dramaturgies de l'ombre*, ed. by Françoise Lavocat and François Lecercle (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005), pp. 263–75 (p. 269).

[7] For more on Racine's use of the technique, see Joseph Harris, 'Racine's Spectral Stagecraft: *Andromaque* (1667),' in *Haunting Presences: Ghosts in French Literature, Film, Photography and Theory*, ed. by David Evans and Kate Griffiths (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 60–74, and 'Tragic Trauma? Remorse, Repetition and the Orestes Myth,' in *Early Modern Trauma: Europe and the Atlantic World*, ed. by Erin Peters and Cynthia D. Richards (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), pp. 301–22 (especially p. 298). **AQ1**

[8] Anon, *Lettre d'un jeune homme à l'auteur de la tragédie d'Hamlet* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1769), pp. 31–2. We might note that the play's first run was indeed cut short when Molé fell ill.

[9] Jean-François de La Harpe, in the *Mercure* (March 1770), pp. 72–85 (cited in Golder, p. 53).

[10] Diderot, 'Hamlet, tragédie de Ducis,' in *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, III: Belles-lettres (Paris: Claye, 1875), pp. 471–76 (p. 474).

hallucination on Hamlet's part. Indeed, in Ducis's play we learn that the Ghost is only one of various visions to torment Hamlet, who is also apparently assailed by macabre, quasi-Gothic, hallucinations of corpses, coffins, bloody fires, deathly shadows, and cries of vengeance. Sometimes, as we shall see, his visions of the Ghost even absorb his attention to the point of blocking out his awareness of those around him. This understanding of the Ghost as a hallucination is in many ways typical of Ducis's age. While belief in ghosts had been an important and fraught theological matter in Shakespeare's day, becoming (at least in England) 'a shibboleth which distinguished Protestant from Catholic almost as effectively as belief in the Mass or Papal Supremacy',[11] by the Enlightenment, disbelief in ghosts had largely overcome sectarian divisions. In articles like 'superstition' and 'fantôme', the *Encyclopédie* vociferously allied itself with what Colin Davis has called the Enlightenment's 'mission [...] to get rid of ghosts definitively'.[12] As Davis also notes, however, neither ghosts nor belief in ghosts can be laid to rest so easily; ghosts continued to exert a cultural fascination on the eighteenth-century mind for all its empiricist aspirations. Rather, in Terry Castle's words, the Enlightenment 'did not so much negate the traditional spirit world as displace it into the realm of psychology'.[13]

We should not assume, though, that this psychological paradigm for explaining ghosts is exclusive to the eighteenth century. After all, 'strange voices, visions, [and] apparitions' had often been diagnosed as symptoms of melancholy even in the early seventeenth century,[14] and both Shakespeare and Ducis repeatedly code Hamlet as melancholic. Indeed, Ducis has three of his Hamlet's companions explicitly relate his visions to what Ophélie calls 'le noir poison de sa mélancolie'.[15] Of course, since melancholy had also been associated with genius at least since Aristotle, Ducis leaves open the possibility that the visionary Hamlet is able to tap into a reality inaccessible to his more prosaic companions. Unsurprisingly, then, this psychological explanation is already at work in Shakespeare's play, such as when Gertrude insists to her son that the Ghost he sees is in fact 'the very coinage of your brain' (III. 4. 135). Yet, just as Shakespeare and Burton thus anticipate later psychological accounts, Ducis does not entirely resist the lure of the earlier supernatural paradigm. After all, Ducis's whole plot, like Shakespeare's, hinges on Hamlet's otherwise seemingly impossible discovery of his father's secret assassination. In this respect, the very factor that had impressed Voltaire about Shakespeare's Ghost – its capacity to set the plot in motion – precisely hinges on the pre-Enlightenment notion that the Ghost does have some ontological existence.

Interestingly, though, even Hamlet's otherwise inexplicable awareness of the murder is not enough to prompt the guilty Claudius to suspect supernatural

[11] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (New York and London: Penguin, 1991), p. 589.

[12] Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), p. 6.

[13] Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 161.

[14] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Angus Gowland (London: Penguin, 2023), p. 134.

[15] Jean-François Ducis, *Hamlet, tragédie, imitée de l'anglais* (Paris: Gogué, 1770), III. 2. 830. Subsequent references to this play will be given in the text.

involvement. In the play's opening scene, indeed, the starkly anti-superstitious Claudius refuses to lend credence to any of the ominous portents – tempests, ravaged fields, sightings of the dead king – that have been besetting Denmark since the old king's death. He asks:

Penses-tu que des dieux l'éternelle puissance

Daigne aux jours d'un mortel mettre tant d'importance,

Et que leur paix profonde interrompe sa loi

Pour la douleur d'un peuple, ou le trépas d'un roi ? (I. 1. 129–32)

Claudius will echo this scepticism when he later dismisses the Ghost as a murky fiction invented by Hamlet in order to make 'obscurs reproches' to him (V. 5. 1331), as we shall see shortly. Incidentally, we should also note that Claudius refers here to 'les dieux' in the plural. Here as elsewhere, Ducis largely sidesteps the fraught theological issues raised by the Ghost in Shakespeare's play by transplanting his action into the loosely pagan world of conventional French tragedy – even if some of his characters' reflections on repentance and divine mercy seem incongruously Christian in spirit.

While the cynical Claudius thus rejects the Ghost as merely a fabrication, those closer and more sympathetic to Hamlet believe that his visions are sincere but mistaken; much like Gertrude in Shakespeare's 'bedchamber scene', they can only look on in helpless horror as Hamlet is beset and harassed by a spectre they can neither see nor hear. Sometimes, Hamlet almost seems to enter a trance. On his first appearance, Hamlet runs onstage 'précipitamment, et comme poursuivi par un fantôme' (II. 4, stage direction) before collapsing into an armchair. This time at least, his friend Norceste – a sort of Horatio equivalent – is able to awaken him from his terrified trance and coax him back into sanity, telling him 'Revenez d'une erreur si funeste; | Ouvrez les yeux, seigneur, reconnaissez Norceste' (II. 5. 489–90). In the following two acts, however, the Ghost proves harder to dispel. In act III, for example, the distressed Gertrude and Ophélie try to talk sense into him with glib exhortations ('Sors de ce trouble extreme'; 'Rappelle un peu tes sens' (III. 2. 862–63)), but to no avail. Only when the Ghost leaves of its own accord, apparently dismayed by Hamlet's inaction, does he awaken from his visions and acknowledge the presence of the two women. John Golder sums up the pathos of this situation: 'deserted by a father whom he has failed, and deprived of the means of self-immolation, Hamlet is flanked pathetically by the two tenderly solicitous women whom his duty demands that he destroy'.[16]

For all his terrifying visions, though, Ducis's Hamlet does not exactly lose his reason, at least not in the way Shakespeare's Hamlet does when his originally feigned 'antic disposition' (I. 5. 170) gradually seems to corrode his actual sanity. After all, the madness of Shakespeare's Hamlet relates more to his reasoning faculties than to his senses; he might call Polonius a 'fishmonger' (II. 2. 171), but he is not hallucinating imaginary fishmongers. Ducis's Hamlet, conversely, mostly

[16] Golder, p. 35.

retains his reasoning faculties, but is assailed by sensory apparitions whose existence he is reluctant to challenge. Effectively, Ducis here takes a murky element of Hamlet's psychology and attempts to 'tidy it up' for a French audience. He does not remove the basic question ('is Hamlet mad or not?'), but he clarifies its stakes by providing a pair of clear alternatives ('is the Ghost real or not?').

Heavenly injustice

So what can we glean about the Ghost from Ducis's words? We learn in the play's first scene that some Danish commoners have seen 'l'ombre de leur roi' stalking the land, apparently clad in armour (I. 1. 42). The Ghost that haunts Hamlet is also clearly recognizable to him as the late king; indeed, when recounting his night-time visitations to Norceste, Hamlet directly refers to it as his father:

> Deux fois dans mon sommeil, ami, j'ai vu mon père,
>
> Non point le bras levé, respirant la colère ;
>
> Mais désolé, mais pâle, et dévorant des pleurs
>
> Qu'arrachait de ses yeux l'excès de ses douleurs. (II. 4. 529–32)

Yet, despite clearly regarding the Ghost as that of his father – and despite, for that matter, Ducis's own repeated claims in his paratexts that he regards his Hamlet as 'un modèle de tendresse filiale'[17] – Hamlet tends to respond to it with fear and horror rather than with filial affection. Hamlet's first lines, heard from offstage, set the tone here: 'Fuis, spectre épouvantable, | Porte au fond des tombeaux ton aspect redoutable' (II. 4. 485–86). His horror at the Ghost thus clearly contrasts with warmth he reveals when he recalls the 'soins assidus' and 'tendresse' with which 'Ce père infortuné cultiva ma jeunesse' (II. 4. 513–14), or the sorrow he reflects when he wanders the palace seeking out 'les pas de mon malheureux père' (II. 4. 522). All he finds when wandering the palace, however, are reminders of his bloody duty: 'les ordres sanglants que j'ai reçu des cieux' (II. 4. 523–24). For all his paratextual claims, then, Ducis does not seem to be interested in Hamlet's love for his father; the filial bond linking Hamlet to his father in this play is one of duty rather than of affection.

Yet Hamlet's duty is not merely a matter of private, family vengeance; after all, the murder was an act of regicide and has therefore attracted divine wrath. Indeed, in his reference to 'les cieux' above, Hamlet anticipates a connection that will recur insistently through the play. Rather than regarding the Ghost as a beloved paternal figure, Hamlet tends to treat it as the mouthpiece of divine will.[18] The Ghost itself encourages such a conflation, telling Hamlet for example

[17] Letter to David Garrick (14 April 1769), in *Lettres de Jean-François Ducis*, p. 8.

[18] This will change slightly in some nineteenth-century versions which increase Hamlet's nostalgic devotion to his father and have him address the Ghost as an 'ombre chère et funeste' and later directly as 'Mon père'. See Ducis, *Hamlet, tragédie, imitée de l'anglais. Nouvelle édition, avec des changements considérables, un cinquième acte nouveau, et conforme au manuscrit de la Comédie Française* (Paris: les Libraires Associés, 1809), III. 2. 870; V. 6. 1460.

that 'C'est moi, ce sont les dieux qui conduiront tes mains (II. 4. 544). By act IV, indeed, Hamlet can speak directly of 'ces dieux qui m'ont parlé' (IV. 2. 1039) even though his only supernatural interlocutor has been the Ghost.

The deadly mission entrusted to Ducis's Hamlet is rather more complicated than that facing Shakespeare's protagonist. In Shakespeare's play, the Ghost specifically insists that Hamlet must restrict his vengeance to Claudius alone; as for his mother, Gertrude, he must

leave her to Heaven,

And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,

To prick and sting her. (I. 5. 85–8)

This command makes sense within the context of Shakespeare's play, given both the taboo nature of matricide and Gertrude's lesser status as Claudius's accomplice.[19] Even so, his Hamlet sometimes struggles with this constraint. Before confronting his mother in the 'bedchamber scene', for example, he has to remind himself to 'be cruel, not unnatural' towards her: to 'speak daggers to her but use none' (III. 2. 385–86). La Place's adaptation pushes Hamlet's animosity towards his mother still further: here, Hamlet fantasizes about slaughtering Claudius and Gertrude together and thus achieving vengeance (in a resonant alexandrine curiously hidden in the overall prose) 'par le sang tout fumant des bourreaux de mon père'.[20]

The Hamlet of Ducis's sources thus instinctively seeks greater and bloodier vengeance than his mission allows. Ducis, conversely, inverts the situation by making the Ghost bloodthirstier than the protagonist. Explicitly demanding the blood of both Claudius and Gertrude, the Ghost tells Hamlet 'Ne crains point, par tes coups, d'outrager la nature. | Répands, sans distinguer, le sang des inhumains' (II. 4. 542–43). The Ghost's brutal demand here is at least partly justified in this play, thanks to one fundamental change that Ducis made to the source text: to make Gertrude, not Claudius, the primary killer. While the Ghost tells Hamlet this, it does not reveal the intense guilt that has wracked Gertrude's conscience ever since and soured her relations with Claudius. Instead, the Ghost openly encourages Hamlet to defy the natural law by indiscriminately taking the lives of both these 'inhumains'. So Ducis inverts Shakespeare's basic situation here, forming a strange chiasmus. In both plays, there is a mismatch between what the Ghost commands and what Hamlet actually wants – but, while in one case he imagines killing his mother, in the other he seeks to spare her life.

At times, indeed, the sheer savagery of the Ghost's demands leads Hamlet to doubt its ethical credentials and even, perhaps, its origins. From which other world has this Ghost actually come? Is it actually a genuine spectre at all? This was of course a concern in Shakespeare's play too, since Renaissance thought

[19] In this respect, writers such as the abbé Prévost had regarded *Hamlet* as preferable to its mythological counterpart, the Electra myth, in which Orestes kills his mother, Clytemnestra, as well as Aegisthus. See Helen Phelps Bailey, *Hamlet in France from Voltaire de Laforgue* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), p. 6.

[20] Pierre-Antoine de La Place, *Hamlet, Prince de Danemarc, tragédie traduite de l'anglois de Shakespeare*, in *Le Théâtre anglois*, 8 vols (London [Paris?]: [n. pub.], 1745–48), II (1746), pp. 295–416 (III. 14).

often held that demons could 'assume the shape of dead men in order to deceive their grieving relatives'.[21] Shakespeare's Hamlet gives some reflection to this possibility:

> The spirit that I have seen
>
> May be a de'il, and the de'il hath power
>
> T'assume a pleasing shape. (II. 2. 533–35)

Yet, although Shakespeare's Hamlet does give much thought to this possibility, it does not always seem to bother him unduly; he refers to himself at one point as being 'prompted to my revenge' by both 'heaven *and* hell' (II. 2. 519, my italics).

Conversely, Ducis's Hamlet generally assumes that the Ghost's mission is a divine one, one which he cannot shirk without condemning himself. This conviction is particularly apparent in the 1769 manuscript, where he claims that, since his mission has been given to him by the gods, 'C'est à moi de l'entendre, et je ne puis sans crime | Ni douter de l'arrêt, ni sauver leur victime'.[22] Nevertheless, the sheer savagery of this mission rather challenges Hamlet's power to obey. Even before the play starts, he has been attempting to reason his way out of his predicament – seeking, as he puts it, to 'démentir les dieux' (II. 5. 568) – thereby incurring the wrath of the disappointed Ghost. Despite his fear of the Ghost, Hamlet still occasionally finds it within him to actively challenge the legitimacy of his mission, in exclamations such as: 'Tu m'as séduit, ô ciel ! non, jamais ta justice | Ne m'aurait commandé cet affreux sacrifice !' (II. 5. 605). While this rebellion is addressed to heaven, not to the (apparently absent) Ghost, in the following act Hamlet will challenge the Ghost's legitimacy rather more directly. When it interrupts a conversation he is having with Gertrude and his beloved Ophélie, Hamlet directly accuses it of being a devilish illusion:

> Viens-tu pour me troubler d'un prestige odieux ?
>
> Viens-tu pour m'annoncer la volonté des dieux ?
>
> Si tu n'es des enfers qu'une noire imposture,
>
> Qui t'a donné le droit d'affliger la nature ? (III. 2. 871–74)

The Ghost, from what we can tell, does not answer Hamlet's barrage of questions; as in Shakespeare's 'bedchamber scene', it simply looks on in sorrowful disappointment before silently disappearing (III. 5. 883–88). Distressed by the Ghost's dismay, but refusing – or perhaps powerless – to kill his own mother, Hamlet draws his sword and hopes to follow it into the afterlife, until Gertrude wrests his weapon from his hands.

The Ghost's disappearance here is intriguing, since the direction of its movement might seem to indicate whether it is returning to heaven or to hell. Yet Ducis cleverly refuses to grant any clear-cut answer to this question. On their first encounter,

[21] Timothy Chesters, *Ghost Stories in Late Renaissance France: Walking by Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 3.

[22] Archives de la Comédie-Française, MS267, 'Hamlet, Tragédie en 5 actes par M. Ducis – 1769' (IV. 2).

Ducis's Ghost – echoing Shakespeare's – had proved stubbornly taciturn when Hamlet pressed it for information about the afterlife,[23] and Ducis himself seems equally reticent to give us a clear answer in this scene either. After all, Ducis's Hamlet can presumably see for himself whether the departing Ghost here is rising upwards, descending, or simply fading away. In the equivalent scene in Shakespeare, the Ghost – being played by a living actor – can leave the stage only through a 'portal' or doorway (III. 4. 134). Of course, Ducis's Ghost is not bound by the laws of gravity; indeed, one of the very first things we learn about it is that it can fly.[24] Yet although Ducis's Hamlet himself can presumably follow the Ghost's movements with his eyes, his evocation of the Ghost's departure is tantalizingly ambiguous: 'Attends, ombre immortelle, | Je te suis vers la voûte où ton sort te rappelle' (III. 5. 885–86). Much hinges here on the ambiguity of the word 'voûte'. On a prosaic level, the palace is itself vaulted, so it may be that the Ghost merely departs horizontally, much like its Shakespearean equivalent, into what are elsewhere called the palace's 'voûtes funèbres' (V. 1. 1203). Hamlet's desperate, suicidal response to the Ghost's departure here, though, suggests that this is unlikely. Still on a prosaic level, the 'vault' may be part of the underground family vault where the king's ashes were placed before being retrieved in act IV; the word is not explicitly used in this way here, but we do find allusions to such 'vaults' in Ducis's later *Roméo et Juliette*,[25] and Hamlet elsewhere talks about his father 'rising' from the 'sein des morts' (IV. 4. 1132–33). Since, in standard poetic discourse, the word 'voûte' is typically associated with the heavenly 'arch' or 'vault' of the sky,[26] we might instead assume that the Ghost is rising heavenward. Yet Ducis complicates this assumption by associating vaults with the underworld almost from the start of his play. In the opening scene, he has Claudius recount how some Danish citizens apparently saw the old king's ghost stalk the land, 'Comme si des enfers forçant la voûte obscure, | Ce spectre à main armée effrayait la nature' (I. 1. 41–2). Like his predecessor, Ducis thus taunts his spectators by refusing to give a clear answer.

Between Ghost and urn

The most intense example of Hamlet's rebellion against the Ghost's mission comes in act IV, in what proved to be the play's most popular scene. In order to test his mother's conscience, Hamlet forces her to swear her innocence on an urn containing his father's ashes. The urn plays an important symbolic and psychological role in the play, not only for Hamlet but also for other characters. As the receptacle of

[23] Ducis's Ghost insists that 'Ces leçons du cercueil, ces secrets du trépas, | Aux profanes mortels doivent être invisibles' (II. 4. 552–53), echoing its precursor's claim of being 'forbid | To tell the secrets of my prison-house' (I. 5. 13–14).

[24] On his first appearance, the terrified Hamlet tells Norceste and Voltimand that 'Il vole sur ma tête' (II. 4. 488).

[25] Ducis, *Roméo et Juliette*, *tragédie* (The Hague: Constapel, 1783), V. 2.

[26] 'On dit figurément & poëtiquement, *La voûte du Ciel, la voûte des Cieux, & la voûte azurée, la voûte étoilée, la voûte céleste*, pour dire, *Le Ciel*', *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th edition (Paris: Brunet, 1762), art. 'VOÛTE'.

the late king's physical remains, after all, the urn is the tangible, physical, visible counterpart of his spiritual presence, the Ghost. Hamlet is the first to experience its strange dramatic and psychological power. When he is first presented with it, Hamlet is 'pénétré de douleur' (IV. 1. 953, s.d.) and barely able to speak, uttering only a forlorn 'hélas' when Norceste places it on the table (IV. 1. 957). Having regained his eloquence in the next scene – an interesting pseudo-Cornelian standoff in which he and Ophélie nobly realize that their family duties will forever set them apart – he shortly addresses a poignant soliloquy to his father's ashes, which he claims he can feel trembling and murmuring.

Hamlet's encounter with the urn seems to mark a turning-point in his relation to his duty. Whereas previously he has regarded his mission as something external, imposed onto him by the unforgiving Ghost, Hamlet for the first time embraces it as his own personal duty, albeit one which he recognizes may well prove fatal to him too:

> Cendre plaintive et chère, oui, j'entends ton murmure :
>
> Oui, ce poignard sanglant va laver ton injure ;
>
> C'était pour te venger que j'ai souffert le jour.
>
> C'en est fait, je te venge, et je meurs à mon tour. (IV. 3. 1109–12)

Having established the urn's power over Hamlet, Ducis now demonstrates its effect on Gertrude. Hamlet confronts her, directly accusing her of the murder and forcing the urn into her hands. Forced to swear her innocence but seemingly unable to perjure herself, Gertrude is reduced to a similar inarticulacy to Hamlet earlier and collapses into an armchair, uttering only 'Eh bien … oui … moi … j'atteste … | Je ne puis plus souffrir un objet si funeste' (IV. 4. 1161–62).

Counterintuitively, although her confusion clearly indicates her guilt, her deep remorse nonetheless stays her son's hand: in an interesting display of devotion to his mother, he appeals to the Ghost, begging it to be satisfied by her sincere repentance:

> Chère ombre, enfin tes vœux n'ont plus rien à prétendre ;
>
> L'excès de ses douleurs doit apaiser ta cendre.
>
> Tu la vois dans mes bras, elle est prête à périr :
>
> Ses remords sont trop grands pour ne pas t'attendrir.
>
> Pardonne, ou s'il te faut un sanglant sacrifice,
>
> Je vais t'offrir fumant le cœur de son complice. (IV. 4. 1169–74)

Hamlet's invocation of the Ghost here – his last address to it in the play – marks something of a change in two key respects. For a start, this is the first time he treats the Ghost with anything like affection; echoing his earlier address to the 'cendre plaintive et chère', he directly calls it a 'chère ombre'. His earlier communion with the ashes thus appears to have realigned his affective relationship to the Ghost, whose commands he now treats as negotiable and to whose clemency

he now appeals. Secondly, this is the first time that Hamlet takes the initiative in his interactions with the Ghost. Previously, the Ghost has always appeared before Hamlet, whether visiting him as he sleeps, pursuing him onto the stage, or emerging silently to remind him of his duty. Here, though, Hamlet proactively summons the Ghost himself, or at least rhetorically invokes it. Indeed, it is not even clear whether the Ghost is really 'present' before Hamlet, or whether he is merely apostrophizing his dead father rhetorically rather than talking to a genuine unseen interlocutor. In any case, we do not learn how the Ghost responds to these appeals to mercy; the act soon ends in chaos and confusion as Gertrude attempts to shield the arriving Claudius from her furious son, before Hamlet himself runs off, afraid of harming his mother in the process.

This, at least, is what happens in the play's most famous version, that published in 1770. This scene had been somewhat different in the play's very first performance, in 1769 – a version which seems, fleetingly, to give the Ghost a slightly fuller existence than any of the published editions. Seemingly summoned to the stage area by the proximity of Claudius, the Ghost appears before Hamlet to dictate his bloody mission once again. For the first time, Hamlet, as if in a trance, seems to consent:

HAMLET, *s'adressant au spectre.*

Oui, je t'entends : tu vas être obéi.

Oui, tous deux dans leur sang …

(À sa mère.)

Que faites-vous ici ! [27]

Hamlet's surprise at seeing his mother here, despite their long preceding conversation, implies that the Ghost has absorbed his attention to the exclusion of all else. Much the same thing happens a few lines later, but with a further twist. Gertrude falls at her son's feet, and, turning his eyes away as if in horror at an act he cannot fully control, he raises his dagger:

GERTRUDE, *se laissant tomber d'effroi aux pieds d'Hamlet.*

Ciel !

HAMLET.

Détournons les yeux.

(Il tire son poignard.)

LE SPECTRE.

Frappe.

HAMLET.

[27] Arch. C.-F. MS267 (IV. 6).

J'entends sa voix.

(Se tournant pour frapper sa mère.)

C'en est fait. À mes pieds ! est-ce vous que j'y vois ?[28]

As the manuscript indicates, the Ghost thus makes itself heard just once, uttering the single deadly command to strike. Ducis was probably inspired here by Shakespeare's Ghost, whose disembodied voice is heard calling out in the first act with the command 'swear' (I. 5. 149; 155; 160).[29] Whatever the case, for a second time in only a few lines, Hamlet is awakened from his murderous trance to recognize his mother again; he shortly shoos her away to safety, and the act ends.

Frustratingly, Ducis gives no indication of how the Ghost's disembodied voice might have been staged, nor even of whether Gertrude also hears its command. Yet in a couple of later scenes – all limited to this first manuscript version – Gertrude does seem to show a greater awareness of the Ghost's presence, as though her auditory encounter with it has now granted it some nebulous existence in her mind. At the start of act V, she confesses that she can almost see her murdered husband inviting her to take poison and join him:

Je crois voir mon époux du séjour ténébreux

Me crier : « viens, suis-moi dans cet abîme affreux. »

Il semble encor m'offrir la coupe empoisonnée,

La coupe où par mes mains la mort lui fût donnée.

Cesse enfin de te plaindre, époux trop malheureux !

Mes remords m'ont punie au-delà de tes vœux. (V. 1)

Although her imagery is vivid, we should note that Gertrude's account is couched in phrases like 'je crois voir' and 'il semble', which make her evocation of the Ghost rather more circumspect and cautious than her son's vividly hallucinatory evocations. Even when she addresses her late husband directly, telling her 'époux trop malheureux' to be content with her remorse and suffering, her language is barely distinguishable from more conventional tragic uses of rhetorical apostrophe.

A few scenes later, Gertrude again appeals to the Ghost in an attempt to protect her son:

Et toi, spectre terrible et qui dans ce séjour

As troublé la nature, et fait pâlir le jour,

Si ton aspect est vrai, s'il faut venger ta cendre,

Viens, ton fils va périr, parais pour le défendre. (V. 5)

[28] Ibid.

[29] Plausibly – albeit without textual evidence – La Place states that the Ghost cries this out 'd'une voix tonnante' (I. 13).

Although this time Gertrude ostensibly addresses the late king as a fearsome and threatening spectre rather than as her late husband, she does appeal to its remaining paternal instincts ('ton fils va périr') alongside her suggestion that Hamlet must be kept alive if he is to achieve vengeance. As before, we cannot say for sure that she can actually see the Ghost or that she believes it present; indeed, her final words here – 'parais pour le défendre' – imply that she is actively attempting to summon it rather than responding to its presence. Whatever the case, this is the last time the Ghost is evoked in this version, at least as a supernatural entity. Claudius's men attack Hamlet offstage, but Hamlet survives and triumphs even without supernatural assistance; a band of loyal subjects stands by him and repels the attack. Defeated, Claudius refuses to surrender and suddenly kills himself. A little later, Gertrude kills herself too, insisting that her husband is now truly avenged and giving her blessing to the marriage of Hamlet and his beloved Ophélie.

Shadowy conclusions

In the original manuscript version, the Ghost thus seems to take on a curious life of its own. What starts out as potentially no more than a hallucination conjured up by the melancholic protagonist turns out, at the climax of the urn scene, to be real – so real, indeed, that its existence impresses itself onto the mind of the formerly sceptical Gertrude. For whatever reasons, however, Ducis does not seem to have been content with various aspects of this conclusion, including his handling of the Ghost. Accordingly, he overhauled the play considerably between the first performance and its publication in 1770. For a start, he cuts out the Ghost's voice entirely from the 'urn scene', leaving Hamlet to close act IV with these words of warning to his mother:

> Craignez qu'ici cette ombre menaçante
>
> Ne vienne raffermir ma fureur chancelante.
>
> Fuyez, sortez, vous dis-je : ou plutôt je vous fuis
>
> Je crains tout de moi-même en l'état où je suis. (IV. 5. 1183–84)

Of course, Hamlet's deictic expressions 'ici' and 'cette ombre' here might imply that the Ghost is still present to him, but this first impression is swiftly undermined by the warning that it might 'come' (*venir*) to urge him on to vengeance. It is almost as if Hamlet changes his mind mid-sentence; aware that he can exploit the Ghost's invisibility to everyone but himself, he strategically conjures it up to scare his mother before realizing that his threat might be more effective if he keeps it distant.

If the Ghost is supposedly present in the 1770 final act, its appearance is far more muted. Yet Ducis compensates tonally for its absence with a range of almost Gothic staging techniques. The whole final act takes place 'dans la nuit' (V. 1, s.d.), thus replacing the supernatural 'ombre' with literal shadows. In a rather melodramatic monologue, the villainous Claudius openly welcomes these shadows since they can hide his crimes:

> Ô nuit ! temps de forfaits, nuit profonde et terrible,

Épaissis sous ces murs tes voiles ténébreux !

J'aime à voir ton horreur ; ce moment dangereux

Me fait monter au trône ou m'envoie aux supplices … (V. 5. 1136–39)

At the start of the act, Claudius reveals that he has just murdered Gertrude and spread the rumour that he has fled the palace, hoping to catch Hamlet unawares and kill him. Given that his primary goal throughout has been to seize power, however, the first thing Claudius mentions when he fantasizes about murdering Hamlet is revealingly unexpected: 'Je ne l'entendrai plus dans ses obscurs reproches | De ce spectre vengeur conjurer les approches' (V. 5. 1332). This couplet seems to reflect Claudius's bad conscience. Even though he has so far brushed aside any supernatural omens, he is clearly unsettled by Hamlet's troubling evocations of this 'spectre vengeur'. This brief, indirect acknowledgement of Claudius's guilt here is of course nothing like the lengthy, impassioned, monologue of repentance that Shakespeare's Claudius launches into after his conscience is 'caught' by Hamlet's dumb show. Yet it also shows a side to Claudius that Ducis's nineteenth-century versions will purge entirely; in these later versions the calculating Claudius will secure his claim to the throne by directly accusing Hamlet of his father's murder and presenting his visions of the Ghost as supernatural punishment for his unnatural deed.

Ironically, the very darkness that Claudius welcomes foreshadows his downfall. Misled by the darkness, he briefly mistakes the arriving Hamlet for his advisor Polonius, and a tense, climactic confrontation between the two men ensues. Ducis uses various techniques to have the power dynamic during this scene shift considerably. Hamlet apparently gains the upper hand by his unexpected arrival from the shadows, even though – as Claudius immediately remarks – he is also unaccompanied. Speaking with uncanny composure for a man who is face to face with a deadly enemy, Hamlet confesses his vulnerability and dispossession: he has lost his father, his lover, his happiness, the support of his guards, and the presence of his friend Norceste. Despite all this loss, however, he exudes a newfound self-possession, which he shortly explains reflects the supernatural support he enjoys:

Tremble, barbare : un dieu me parle et me conduit.

Pour venir jusqu'à toi, cachés dans la nuit sombre,

De mon père en ces lieux mes pas ont suivi l'ombre.

Voici le lieu funeste où ce père adoré

But le poison mortel par tes mains préparé,

C'est là que devant lui, pour remplir ma parole

À ses mânes sanglants il veut que je t'immole.

Frémis, il est présent. (V. 6. 1362–69)

Far from being solitary, abandoned, and vulnerable as he first claims (and as he might appear to the literal-minded, unsuperstitious Claudius and to the spectator), Hamlet is in fact secretly accompanied by invisible, supernatural forces.

Working in tandem, the Ghost and some unspecified god are now guiding his steps and his actions; this time, though, Hamlet is in a state of complete lucidity rather than the semi-conscious daze in which he threatened Gertrude in act IV. Having first set the plot in motion by revealing the original murder to Hamlet, the Ghost is now bringing events full circle by providing him with the further crucial piece of information that he could not otherwise have known: Claudius's current location. Fittingly, indeed, Ducis reveals to us only now the full significance of this location: this is, we learn, the very room where the original regicide took place.

Yet Ducis has one further *coup de théâtre* up his sleeve which shifts the balance of power again, briefly, in favour of Claudius. In a striking double move, Claudius opens a door to reveal Gertrude's dead body, while a number of conspirators burst out and surround Hamlet. Despite this twofold setback, Hamlet whips out his sword and fatally stabs the would-be usurper, with alarming swiftness. Hamlet now gives some retroactive justification for his implausibly deft swordsmanship, explaining to the humbled conspirators that kings live under the protection of some guardian spirit that either protects their lives or avenges their deaths:

> Et ne saviez-vous pas, quand une main perfide
>
> Va lever fur les rois un poignard homicide,
>
> Qu'un génie alarmé pour eux et leurs États
>
> Ou veille fur leurs jours, ou venge leur trépas ? (V. 6. 1379–82)

On one level, Hamlet's somewhat leading question here serves as an attempt to paper over the *invraisemblance* of this denouement with awkward pro-monarchical propaganda. Yet it harks back fittingly to the play's opening scene, in which the cynical Claudius had scoffed at his subjects' superstitious belief that the ominous events plaguing Denmark are signs of the gods' displeasure at the former king's death:

> Penses-tu que des dieux l'éternelle puissance
>
> Daigne aux jours d'un mortel mettre tant d'importance,
>
> Et que leur paix profonde interrompe sa loi
>
> Pour la douleur d'un peuple, ou le trépas d'un roi ? (I. 1. 77–80)

In retrospect, these lines appear to be Claudius's undoing. Cynical and literal-minded, he fails to appreciate the value of the supernatural world, and Hamlet's victory over him accomplishes his comeuppance. This is not the only case of Claudius's words in the opening scene coming back to haunt him. In a memorable image, Claudius had also twice metaphorically cast the weak and melancholic Hamlet as himself a ghost: 'un faible roi qui ne peut gouverner, | Une ombre, un vain fantôme inhabile à l'empire' (I. 1. 84–5).

At the time, Claudius's imagery was not entirely unfounded; at the start, Ducis's Hamlet had indeed been a mere shadow of a king, passively subject to a melancholy which makes him susceptible to ghostly visions. By the end of the play, however,

Claudius rather has to eat these words. Hamlet is no longer a metaphorical shadow of kingship but has instead proven himself worthy of the throne. Moreover, his accession to self-mastery can be traced through his evolving relationship to the Ghost: initially bullied and tormented by it, by the end of the play he can now actively summon it, speak on its behalf, rhetorically recast it as a benevolent guardian spirit or 'génie', and work with it to achieve Claudius's defeat. In this respect it is perhaps significant that the only characters in the play to whom the Ghost makes itself visible are Hamlet himself and the Danish people. Hamlet's capacity to perceive the Ghost thus aligns him with his (offstage) subjects, whom Claudius treats with contempt but whose loyalty to Hamlet is well established.

Although the play's conclusion is not entirely happy – Hamlet's mother is dead, and his now orphaned beloved forever lost to him – the play still ends on a note of triumph. Hamlet not only has survived but has asserted mastery over both the Ghost and himself; he overcomes his moribund, melancholic passivity and fully assumes the responsibilities of kingship, avenging the late king and proving himself in one fell swoop. Of course, as the pre-Revolutionary world of the *ancien régime* gave way to the bloodthirsty republicanism of the Terror and beyond, this unabashedly royalist ending would require some heavy reworking. Ducis realized that new texts, and new words, would be needed for this new post-Revolutionary world. Nonetheless, as his treatment of the Ghost reveals, Ducis defiantly embraces tragedy's right to anachronism, to untimeliness. While mostly adhering to Enlightenment explanations of ghosts as psychological phenomena, he both initiates and resolves his plot with events that are hard to explain by natural means alone, and which thus tap back into earlier, supernatural, paradigms. Indeed, where in Shakespeare the Ghost sets events in motion that end in almost universal slaughter, in his play it is precisely Hamlet's belief in the Ghost that eventually guides him to victory over the forces of self-interested, disbelieving, rationalist cynicism embodied in Claudius.

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Notes on contributor

Joseph Harris is Professor of Early Modern French and Comparative Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London, specialising in early modern theatre. He is the author of Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France (OUP, 2014) and Misanthropy in the Age of Reason: Hating Humanity from Shakespeare to Schiller (OUP, 2022), and several critical editions, notably L.-S. Mercier, Two Shakespeare Adaptations (MHRA, 2022) and J.-F. Ducis, Hamlet (MHRA, forthcoming).

Correspondence to: Joseph Harris joseph.harris@rhul.ac.uk, Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX, UK