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***The Gothic and the Supernatural in Late  
Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century  
English Theatre: A Question of Legitimacy***

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## Table of contents

|  |        |
|--|--------|
| <b>Introduction</b> .....  | p. 3   |
| <b>1. The supernatural Gothic on the legitimate stage</b>                                    |        |
| 1.1 Towards a Gothic theatre.....  | p. 18  |
| 1.2 The contribution of David Garrick.....   | p. 25  |
| 1.3 The origins of Gothic drama.....   | p. 32  |
| 1.4 James Boaden's pioneering phantom.....   | p. 40  |
| 1.5 Matthew Gregory Lewis's spectre of the castle.....                                       | p. 54  |
| 1.6 A 'Land of Apparitions'.....   | p. 69  |
| <b>2. Re-conceptualising Gothic supernaturalism</b>  |        |
| 2.1 Removing the supernatural?.....  | p. 83  |
| 2.2 Joanna Baillie and the 'psychologisation of the supernatural'.....                       | p. 91  |
| 2.3 The phantasmagoria and the techno-supernatural.....                                      | p. 104 |
| 2.4 The techno-supernatural on the legitimate stage.....                                     | p. 117 |
| <b>3. The rise of melodrama and the fantastic mode</b>                                       |        |
| 3.1 Melodrama's Gothic roots.....  | p. 134 |
| 3.2 Melodrama at the legitimate theatres, between Gothic and 'realism'.....                  | p. 141 |
| 3.3 The fairy kind of melodramatic writing.....  | p. 153 |
| 3.4 <i>Valentine and Orson</i> , the first fairy melodrama.....                              | p. 158 |
| 3.5 Beautiful fairies, magical transformations and other Gothic enchantments.....            | p. 168 |
| 3.6 The Gothic and the fairy world.....  | p. 179 |
| 3.7 Matthew Gregory Lewis's fantastic Gothic.....  | p. 188 |
| 3.8 Early forms of the fantastic in melodrama.....   | p. 204 |
| <b>4. The supernatural boom at the minor theatres and the 'end' of theatrical legitimacy</b> |        |
| 4.1 The Gothic on the illegitimate stage.....  | p. 214 |
| 4.2 <i>The Vampire</i> and the emergence of neo-Gothic melodrama.....                        | p. 226 |
| 4.3 Illegitimate Frankensteins.....  | p. 244 |
| 4.4 <i>Der Freischütz</i> and the return of German supernatural horror.....                  | p. 260 |
| 4.5 Edward Fitzball and the collapse of the patent monopoly.....                             | p. 293 |

**Conclusion**.....p. 312

**Bibliography**

Primary sources.....p. 316

Secondary sources.....p. 321

Periodicals.....p. 340

## Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the history of the representation of the supernatural in English drama between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Of course the supernatural, that is, something ‘of or relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe’<sup>1</sup>, has been a fundamental subject matter in the religion, philosophy, science, literature as well as visual and performing arts of all places, ages and societies. Theatre, in particular, has always shown fascination towards staging the supernatural; before the advent of cinema and other modern media, it as the place where mysterious otherworldly forces that live only in people's imagination could ‘come alive’ taking physical form. The English theatre of the period examined here, with its unique socio-cultural characteristics, constitutes an especially relevant case study of how the supernatural embodies and challenges one of the greatest divides of culture, namely that between high or elite culture and low or popular culture, or, in other words, between legitimate and illegitimate culture. The emergence of the Gothic during the eighteenth century in particular, seemed to have captured, as never before, the wide-ranging appeal of the supernatural as a universal source of entertainment.

The eighteenth century was the Age of the Enlightenment, a period dominated by scientific, political and philosophical discourses centred on the idea that reason is the main driving force for mankind, and which rejected literal belief in the supernatural in favour of an understanding of the world as governed by observable laws of nature. The rise of empirical scepticism promoted a ‘disenchantment’ of the world and challenged traditional beliefs in spirits, demons, monsters, witches and other prodigious beings that were part of the medieval cosmology, calling for their dissolution in light of the new rational, scientific episteme. Everything was called into question, even religion. Although religious dogmas and God were not utterly rejected – they were, however, considerably toned down – the supernatural, and especially the possibility that the supernatural might interfere with the human sphere, was increasingly repudiated. Even the Holy Scriptures started to be questioned and accused of containing fanciful stories meant to deceive the uneducated masses; some of the main tenets of orthodox Christianity, such as the divine nature of Christ and his resurrection, were openly rejected by many intellectuals. There were attempts to reconsider the most supernatural aspects of religion: miracles, mystical visions, revelations and the like were either dismissed as ignorant superstitions or tentatively incorporated into the new world-view. Only what was empirically observable and scientifically provable was considered valid knowledge. The

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Supernatural’, *Merriam-Webster.com* (2011), <https://www.merriam-webster.com> [Last accessed: 14 December 2021].

process of the secularisation of faith begun with the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century actually took long time to take hold in significant ways. As Robert F. Geary points out,

from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth century, general belief in supernatural manifestations contracted while churchmen emphasised the more rational and moral, the less mysterious, Christian doctrines [...] The Reformation itself had denounced much of the supernaturalism of the medieval church as superstition. Most of the sacraments, nearly all holy objects, and many rituals along with prayers to saints and the doctrine of Purgatory—all were eliminated as “magical” excrescences.<sup>2</sup>

An attempt was made to mingle religious faith with the new Enlightenment world-view, rejecting the most ‘problematic’ aspects of Christianity and other religions while generally avoiding the promotion of unequivocal atheism, which, nevertheless, won an ever increasing number of adherents and enthusiasts among free-thinking intellectuals. The universe started to be imagined as a clockwork mechanism created by God, in which providence and morality were leading principles, with no room for irrational superstitions. Belief in ghosts and spirits, in particular, was harshly condemned for after the Reformation and the abolishment of the Purgatory the existence of such entities had lost its theological grounding. As Rory Bradley poignantly puts it, ‘belief in ghosts became like a ghost itself—it was the persistent manifestation of a previous age that needed to be dispensed with properly. Its continued presence in human society was evidence that humankind had not yet become fully enlightened’<sup>3</sup>. There was a progressive tendency to explain ghostly apparitions and similar phenomena as delusions of the mind and relocate them within the realm of imagination and human subjectivity through what might be termed proto-psychological explanations<sup>4</sup>. However, there was no easy way to completely eradicate superstition in its various forms because among the overwhelming majority of the population, especially those living in isolated rural places, superstitious and magical beliefs, such as the possibility of being haunted by the spirits of the dead, had lost little of their hold. Despite all rationalisation efforts, the ability of the supernatural to generate ambiguity, produce fascination and suspend the normal conditions of understanding allowed it to survive, especially in folklore and popular culture, where the Enlightenment process proved much less effective. Oral transmission was the main vehicle through which supernatural narratives were handed down from generation to generation, especially thanks to the stories that old

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<sup>2</sup> Geary, Robert F., *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction: Horror, Belief, and Literary Change*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press (1992), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Bradley, Rory, *The Enlightening Supernatural: Ghost Stories in the Late Eighteenth-Century Germany*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Duke University (2016), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Shane McCorristine notes that ‘[i]n confirmation of the gradual psychologisation of the ghostly, from about the middle of the eighteenth century the figure of the ghost became placed under a medical and diagnostic model that considered it a “hallucination”, a term generally used pejoratively to designate a fallacious perception that impinged upon the mind and tricked the experiencing subject into seeing something that was not really there’. McCorristine, Shane, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking About Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750–1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2010), p. 32. The Gothic would absorb these theories for its own aesthetic purposes.

women told children in order to enthrall their imagination and make them more obedient – women and children were commonly regarded as more prone to superstition because of their supposed lack of wit, a prejudice that would survive well into the nineteenth century. At some point the idea took hold that this practice was potentially dangerous and had to be discouraged since long exposure to strange stories of ghosts, witches and fairies could have a negative influence on children, namely, make them unable to distinguish truth from fiction and therefore more susceptible to credulousness as adults<sup>5</sup>.

However, the fascination with the supernatural never really disappeared. In fact, somehow paradoxically, it was precisely during the Enlightenment that people started to feel a great nostalgia for the supernatural and a growing desire to penetrate its mysteries. The absolute epicentre of this trend was England, where debates on the supernatural were not confined to works of philosophy and intellectual speculation but actually reached an unprecedented wide public thanks to periodical press journals such as *The Spectator*, *The Tatler* and *The Gentleman's Magazine*, which frequently published reflections and discussions on the subject, for both instruction and entertainment. Ghosts, in particular, were a surprisingly hot topic that this kind of journals generally addressed in a seemingly impartial way, neither promoting belief nor totally condemning it, but rather trying to instruct people to recognise the authenticity of an apparition. Ghost stories therefore were mainly a pretext for wider reflections on death, the afterlife and the nature of the soul. The topicality of these themes is confirmed by the popularity of the so-called apparition narratives, a market-oriented literary form that emerged in the late seventeenth century as a way to prove the existence of the supernatural by applying the rules of the scientific method (direct observation, data collection, careful documentation, etc.), in an attempt to satisfy both believers and non-believers and combat growing scepticism in religious belief<sup>6</sup>. To an extent, therefore, apparition narratives were forerunners of Gothic fiction in that they exploited the popular interest in the occult for commercial aims: as E. J. Clery and Robert Miles put it, ‘apparition narratives provided a stepping-stone from a largely oral and popular culture of ghost stories to a new literary tradition led by enthusiastic consumer demand’<sup>7</sup>. One of the most relevant contribution to the genre was Daniel Defoe’s *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal* (1706), a poltergeist narrative that can be read retrospectively as an early precursor of the Gothic ghost story. In this ‘true relation’, ghostly apparitions are studied through empirical investigation and the author seems to stand with the

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<sup>5</sup> Handley, Sasha, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England*, London: Pickering and Chatto (2007), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> This approach was inaugurated by Royal Society physician Joseph Glanville in his seminal compendium *Sedduciſmus Triumphatus, or a Full and Plain Evidence concerning Witches and Apparitions* (1681).

<sup>7</sup> Clery, Emma J., and Miles, Robert, ‘Introduction’, in *Gothic Documents 1700–1820: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emma J. Clery and Robert Miles, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2000), p. 5.

believers, although he does acknowledge the exceptionality and incredible nature of the story. Defoe's ambivalent attitude toward the supernatural was later more powerfully expressed in his study *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727), in which he hovers between orthodox traditional belief and faith in the authority of the Scriptures and keen scepticism. These works epitomise the difficulty of reconciling the supernatural with the new rational epistemology of the age. Even Samuel Johnson, one of the most prominent thinkers of the English Enlightenment, was firmly convinced of the existence of ghosts, including the notorious Cock Lane ghost, a supposed haunting case of the 1760s that attracted huge attention in London and split public opinion into two factions before being declared a hoax by an investigating committee. The case was emblematic of the eighteenth-century divided attitude towards supernatural themes.

Literature proved especially receptive to the growing interest in the supernatural in all its forms. In the second half of the eighteenth century, anti-rational impulses grew stronger and the Enlightenment gradually faded into the Romantic period. Although science and philosophy were more and more focused on the explanation of the supernatural as a product of mental delusion, in what was the beginning of a process of 'psychologisation' of paranormal perceptions, literature went in the opposite direction, looking not to the future but to the past, when the boundary between natural and supernatural was less distinct and more porous. The new cultural climate was characterised by several factors, including a new scholarly interest in antiquity – Sasha Handley notes that '[t]he cataloguing and categorization of folk beliefs was the hallmark of antiquarianism<sup>8</sup> – and the national past, a revival of classic authors such as Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton, a re-discovery of Celtic and Scandinavian mythology and a more general taste for ancient tradition and folklore in literature. This was especially evident in poetry thanks to James Macpherson's influential 'Ossian' poems (1760–3) and the works of the so-called Graveyard poets, who anticipated the predilection of Gothic writers for gloomy nocturnal settings, charnel-house horrors and eerie manifestations of the supernatural. Moreover, this native poetic tradition was further enriched by poetic influences from Scotland and, most relevantly, Germany, where balladists and ballad-collectors 'celebrated youth, rebellion, and imaginative genius through the excessive depictions of supernatural events'<sup>9</sup>. As Devendra P. Varma observed,

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<sup>8</sup> Handley, Sasha (2007), p. 197.

<sup>9</sup> Braun, Heather, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910*, Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press (2012), p. 17. One of the most influential pieces of German supernaturalism undoubtedly was Gottfried August Burger's spectral ballad 'Lenore' (1773), whose first English translation (by William Taylor of Norwich) appeared in *The Monthly Magazine* for March 1796. The story, set at the end of the Seven Years' War, revolves around a ghostly knight that claims to be young Lenore's dead lover Wilhelm. He convinces her to embark on a thrilling night ride on horseback to reach their wedding bower. As they ride, harrowing visions and demonic figures appear. Once they arrive at their supposed destination, they enter a gloomy graveyard and the knight reveals himself as Death itself, appearing in the form of a horrible skeleton complete with hour glass and scythe. Lenore dies atop her fiancée's grave as the earth crumbles beneath her feet and demons madly dance and

[t]he supernatural [...] had not lost its power to thrill and alarm, and slowly worked its way into literature. A widespread belief in witches and spirits lived on into the eighteenth century, and there was also a steadily intensifying interest in questions of life, and immortality; angels, demons, vampires; the occult, magic, astrology; dreams, omens, and oracles.<sup>10</sup>

It is in this lively context that the Gothic slowly came into being, originating in the late-eighteenth century desire, or need, to displace Enlightenment reason and surrender to the power of imagination. As a cultural phenomenon that permeated contemporary literature and other forms of cultural production, the Gothic recovered a (largely imaginary) mythic past of prodigious phenomena and events through the medium of literature, making it a convenient imaginative refuge from an all-too-real present of science and progress. This is what it initially did through the novel, the pre-eminent literary genre of the rising middle class, that originally connected the contemporary trend toward realism and scepticism. Novelists such as Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne and Tobias Smollett usually depicted the domestic affairs of the natural world and rejected the illusory marvels of the supernatural as too wild and inappropriate. As Edith Birkhead highlighted, '[i]nto the English novel of the first half of the eighteenth century [...] the ghost dares not venture'<sup>11</sup>. But things changed decidedly on Christmas Day 1764, when Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* and officially launched the Gothic genre, whose evolution still persists in the twenty-first century.

Historically, the term Gothic, derived from the French *gothique*, referred to the Goths, the wild nomadic tribes of Northern Europe who in 410 AD, under the leadership of their young king Alaric, invaded Italy and sacked Rome in what was the event that symbolised the collapse of the glorious Roman Empire. Since its first recorded appearances in the English language during the seventeenth century (King James referred to the *Gothicke tongue* in the preface to his 1611 Bible), the word was used to identify the language of the Goths, and soon became a generalised name for all the Germanic or Teutonic races believed to be the ancestors of the English people. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the adjective 'Gothic' began to have negative connotations, indicating something obsolete, barbarous, wild and awful<sup>12</sup>. Though generally associated with the Middle Ages, from a chronological point of view 'Gothic' was more comprehensive as it referred to a long historical period that actually extended from the end of classical antiquity to the early seventeenth century<sup>13</sup>. As a matter of fact, Enlightenment men thought they lived in a period of intellectual

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howl. The ballad's moral ambiguity, gruesome elements and morbid combination of love and death became a paradigm for horror supernaturalism and had an incalculable impact on Gothic fiction.

<sup>10</sup> Varma, Devendra P., *The Gothic Flame*, London: Arthur Barker (1957), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Birkhead, Edith, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance*, London: Constable (1921), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> As Vahe Samoorian notes, '[t]hat the term emerged in the first instance from the French was perhaps additional reason for them to hold it in contempt'. Samoorian, Vahe, *The Way to Otranto: Gothic Elements in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry, 1717-1762*, PhD dissertation, Bowling Green State University (1970), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Many regarded the end of the Gothic era as coinciding with a significant literary event, namely the publication of

refinement and cultural excellence previously matched only by the Classical era. The Gothic thus became a convenient label to describe a vague feudal past of barbarism, ignorance, tyranny, violence and superstition that invoked a mixture of repulsion and admiration. In particular, the Gothic era was regarded as the heyday of the supernatural:

The world was then little known, and men [...] were ignorant and credulous. Strange sights were expected in strange countries; dragons to be destroyed, giants to be humbled, and enchanted castles to be overthrown. The caverns of the mountain were believed to be inhabited by magicians; and the depth of the forest gave shelter to the holy hermit, who, as the reward of piety, was supposed to have the gift of working miracles. The demon yelled in the storm, the spectre walked in darkness, and even the rushing of water in the night was mistaken for the voice of a goblin.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, from the 1640s the term ‘Gothic’ came also (or principally) to be used in English to denote a style of cathedral building originated in Northern Europe between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, which from the perspective of eighteenth century Neoclassicism was irregular, extravagant and unpleasant, in complete antithesis to Palladian ideals of symmetry and proportion ruling Classical art. Its connection to northern paganism was obvious from the numerous gargoyles, chimeras, dragons and demons that decorated Gothic cathedrals. As Frederick S. Frank explained, the passage from architecture to literature was almost automatic:

When the Gothic novelists transformed the cathedral or medieval abbey into a ruin—that is to say, when dilapidation was added to the decadence and barbaric obscenity already associated with these monstrous monuments of the dark ages—the Gothic novel acquired its central metaphor and most durable prop.<sup>15</sup>

As a matter of fact, the setting of *The Castle of Otranto* was inspired by Walpole's own Strawberry Hill, a country house turned into a medieval-style castle complete with towers, turrets and battlements. In Gothic fiction, Gothic-designed locations (usually ancient castles, dilapidated abbeys, abandoned churchyards and their natural surroundings) are imbued with a lugubrious quality and a deep sense of mystery and danger that made them the ideal settings for emotionally loaded stories of terror and horror. Needless to say, the supernatural is thoroughly pervasive in these stories (which are generally set in distant places and times in order to create the necessary distance from the contemporary enlightened public) and contribute to enhance the typically Gothic atmosphere of dread, horror, suspense and, in some cases, enchantment. Largely influenced by Elizabethan drama, and Shakespeare in particular, the Gothic supernatural manifests itself under the

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Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), a work responsible for ‘banishing the wild dreams of chivalry, and reviving a taste for the simplicity of nature’, Beattie, James, ‘On Fable and Romance’, in *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 2 vols., vol. 2, Dublin: Exshaw, Walker, Beatty, White, Byrne, Cash and McKenzie (1783), p. 306.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

<sup>15</sup> Frank, Frederick S., ‘The Gothic Romance 1762 – 1820’, in *Horror Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, ed. Marshall B. Tynm, New York: R.R. Bowker Company (1981), p. 13.

form of ghosts, demons, skeletons, goblins, monsters as well as magic or animated objects, premonitory dreams, ominous meteorological phenomena or inexplicable paranormal occurrences. Even when the supernatural is removed or openly dismissed as delusion, imagination or fraud, its looming presence is invoked in various ways, for example in the characters' dialogues or in the paratext materials. As Guorong Chen puts it, 'Gothic romance became, concretely, the romance of the supernatural, and "Gothic" identified itself with ghastly'<sup>16</sup>. In this regard, *The Castle of Otranto* set a fundamental blueprint since it features a gigantic ancestral spectre, a bleeding statue, a portrait walking out of its frame and a horrible animated skeleton that still deserves a place among the most terrifying apparitions in Gothic fiction.

In a way, the Gothic embodied a reaction against the Enlightenment's obsessive rationalism, all-encompassing scepticism and banishment of the mysterious and unexplainable aspects of life. According to Varma, it fulfilled the need for new forms of spirituality, representing 'a new recognition of the heart's emotions and a reassertion of the numinous'<sup>17</sup>. As a matter of fact, the Gothic experience of the supernatural is strictly akin to a sort of 'religious possession or mystic possession'<sup>18</sup>, although at the same time it does not seem to have any connection to Christian religion – or at least the Enlightenment concept of it – being essentially godless ('In Gothicism we find that the Deity disappears though the devil remains'<sup>19</sup>) and amoral, if not immoral<sup>20</sup>. Simply put, Gothic supernaturalism became an anti-Enlightenment form of entertainment, an aesthetic 'guilty pleasure' that did not imply any serious reflection on life and death but was rather meant to be pure escapism, a diversion to avoid thinking. Gothic fiction was generally written for nothing more than sheer mindless fun, as far from didacticism or out-and-out moralizing as possible. This commercial and entertainment-driven use of the supernatural, however, was regarded with suspicion and hostility in a period in which literature, and novels in particular, were seen as tools for social education and moral enlightenment. Walpole himself, for example, was accused of 're-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism' as well as adopting 'all the *trash* of Shakespeare, and what that great genius evidently threw out as a necessary sacrifice to that idol the *cæcum vulgus*'<sup>21</sup> – Shakespeare being regarded as the champion of Gothic supernaturalism and immediately taken as a model by Walpole and his followers. An article published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*

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<sup>16</sup> Chen, Guorong, *The Gothic Narrative Structure: A Generic Reading of Four English Novels: The Mystery of Udolpho, The Monk, Frankenstein, and Melmoth the Wanderer*, University of Wisconsin-Madison (1994), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Varma, Devendra P. (1957), p. 211.

<sup>18</sup> Frank, Frederick S., (1981), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Scarborough, Dorothy, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, New York: Putnam (1917), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Riccardo Capoferro observes that Gothic supernaturalism 'tends to be disconnected from the providential framework of orthodox religion, and does not have any intelligible moral purpose'. Capoferro, Riccardo, *Empirical Wonder: Historicizing the Fantastic, 1660–1760*. Bern: Peter Lang (2010), p. 145.

<sup>21</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 32 (May 1765), p. 394.

at the very end of the eighteenth century attacked Gothic novelists by pointing to the alleged negative consequences of representing the supernatural for the mere purpose of producing terror and horror for their own sake:

Whatever objection may be made, in this philosophical age, to *mysteries* in religion, they are acknowledged to be excellences in novels and romances. The wonderful and miraculous is the *forte* of our modern novel-writers, and a most singular revolution has taken place in this department of literature. Instead of pictures sketched from Nature, and portraits drawn from Life, “catching the Manners living as they rise,” we have narrations of haunted towers, old Blue Beards and Red Beards, spectres, sprites, apparitions, black banners waving on the battlements of castles, strange voices, tapers burning one moment and extinguished by some unknown hand the next, clandestine noises, flashing of lightning, and howling of winds. The “Old Wives’ Fables,” and legendary tales of old, are vamped up afresh, and put into a modern dress, so spread terror throughout all the nurseries and boarding-schools of the metropolis. To be serious; we know of no useful purpose novels of such a nature can produce. They can only tend to infuse the most wild and ridiculous ideas into the minds of young people; fill them with groundless fears; make them imagine every dark chamber to be haunted, and even to be startled at their own shadows.<sup>22</sup>

This comment perfectly epitomises the sentiment of the most traditionalist fringe of the English literary establishment and the disparaging attitude it would hold toward all sorts of Gothic works dealing more or less explicitly with supernatural subject matters. In the immediate post-*Otranto* decades there was a rather meagre production of Gothic novels – Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* [1777] and William Beckford’s *Vathek* [1786] being the two most relevant contributions to the genre – and it would be difficult to speak of a proper and coherent trend, but during the 1790s the genre truly blossomed, with an impressive amount of Gothic publications made possible ‘by the expansion of the reading public, and the devising of new methods for distributing and marketing books’<sup>23</sup>. Gothic fiction dominated the English literary market for several decades and became a transnational phenomenon until it began to fade away in the 1820s (although it never really disappeared). The two most pre-eminent figures during the heyday of the Gothic were Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis, who represented two different strains of Gothic fiction, namely the School of Terror and School of Horror, as well as two opposite – and hugely influential – ways of portraying the supernatural. Radcliffe, known as ‘the Shakespeare of Romance writers’, was probably the most respected and admired of the Gothic novelists. Her use of the Gothic mode was, in a way, more conservative and less disruptive: her works do evoke suspense and terror, but these effects are temporary since she often provides her readers with happy endings and the resolution of all mysteries, even supernatural ones. The presence of ghosts and spirits is hinted at to create a Gothic mood, but in the end all paranormal occurrences are rationally explained and

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<sup>22</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 84 (September 1798), p. 786.

<sup>23</sup> Clery, Emma J., *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1995), pp. 6-7.

justified. This device, known as explained supernatural, obtained a very favourable reception and was adopted by all writers ‘who wished to emphasize the psychology of terror rather than the physiology of horror’<sup>24</sup>. Contemporary reviewers generally appreciated this attempt to rationalise and moralise the Gothic genre<sup>25</sup>, although in the long run some commentators began considering it too predictable and potentially disappointing<sup>26</sup>.

Matthew Gregory Lewis chose instead a radically different (and far more controversial) approach, rejecting the lyric and sober quality of Radcliffe's works in favour of fast-paced action, lurid violence, visceral horror and supernatural sensationalism devised to perturb, if not shock, readers, as in his masterpiece *The Monk* (1796), where Lucifer himself appears. The work, a monastic shocker set in Medieval Madrid that displays strong anti-Catholic and anti-clerical feelings by exposing the dark machinations of the Holy Inquisition and, by extension, the perils of corrupt institutions and degenerated traditions, was the manifesto of the so-called ‘high Gothic’, whose principal objective according to Joyce M. S. Tompkins was ‘to wrench a mind suddenly from scepticism to horror-struck belief’<sup>27</sup>. *The Monk* won a stunningly vast readership and went through several editions and redactions (specially in cheap and chapbook formats), being frequently imitated, parodied and – just like Radcliffe's novels – adapted for the stage. Notably, it established a commercial formula that prompted many authors, even untalented and unexperienced ones, to try and cash on it. Critical reactions were of course mostly outraged as reviewers attacked the book's supposed immoral and obscene contents, which were even more deplorable considering that Lewis was a Member of Parliament by the time he wrote the novel. The harshest comment famously came from Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

The horrible and the preternatural have usually seized on the popular taste, at the rise and decline of literature. Most powerful stimulants, they can never be required except by the torpor of an unawakened, or the languor of an exhausted, appetite. The same phænomenon, therefore, which we hail as a favourable omen in the belles lettres of Germany, impresses a degree of gloom in the compositions of our country-men. We trust, however, that satiety will banish what

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<sup>24</sup> Frederick, Frank S. (1981), p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> *The Monthly Review*, for example, praised Radcliffe highly: ‘Without introducing into her narrative any thing [*sic*] really supernatural, Mrs Radcliffe has contrived to produce as powerful an effect as if the invisible world had been obedient to her magic spell; the reader experiences in perfection the strange luxury of artificial terror, without being obliged for a moment to hoodwink reason, or to yield to the weakness of superstitious credulity’. *The Monthly Review*, vol. 15 (November 1794), p. 280.

<sup>26</sup> In a review of *The Italian* (1797), a critic of *The Analytical Review* wrote that ‘[h]er mode, it is true, of accounting in a natural manner for supernatural appearances, now the secret has gotten vent, lessens the effect, and the interest of the story is interrupted by the reader's attention to guard against the delusions of the imagination, which he knows to be glistening bubbles, blown up in air, only to evaporate more conspicuously; leaving the aching fight searching after the splendid nothing’. *The Analytical Review*, vol. 2 (April 1797), p. 516. Similarly, Walter Scott famously criticised the technique of the explained supernatural using an effective metaphor: ‘it as if the machinist, when the pantomime was over, should turn his scenes, “seamy side out”, and expose the mechanical aids by which the delusions were accomplished’. *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 3 (May 1810), p. 344.

<sup>27</sup> Tompkins, Joyce M. S., *The Popular Novel in England, 1770-1800*, London: Methuen (1969), p. 245.

good sense should have prevented; and that, wearied with fiends, incomprehensible characters, with shrieks, murders, and subterraneous dungeons, the public will learn, by the multitude of manufacturers, with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured.” [...] Tales of enchantment and witchcraft can never be *useful*: our author has contrived to make them pernicious, by blending, with an irreverent negligence, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition.<sup>28</sup>

As many other critical interventions of this period, Coleridge noted that the Gothic, especially the supernatural Gothic popularised by Lewis, was not a native product but rather a foreign cultural element. Although Gothic writers strove to evoke the legitimising authority of Shakespeare and other English classic authors, most intellectuals thought that Gothic fiction actually had nothing to do with English culture and with the positive values that scholars and antiquarians were attaching to England's own Gothic ancestry, that is a largely fantastic self-construction of prestigious historical and cultural continuity in which the nation was increasingly taking pride<sup>29</sup>. In fact, the true origins of Gothic fiction were located in Germany, regarded as the homeland of magic, diablerie and all sorts of otherworldly horrors<sup>30</sup>. This claim was not entirely baseless: towards the end of the eighteenth century, German literature attracted wide interest and won an unprecedented large readership in literary circles as well as in the popular marketplace. Lewis himself, for example, was starkly influenced by German literature, of which he became an avid reader, translator and importer. English Gothic novels were frequently labelled ‘German’ to underline the similarity between their themes, tropes and aesthetic forms with those of a certain class of German popular fiction. Actually, during the 1790s the German Gothic novel (in its many incarnations: *Ritterroman*, *Schauerroman*, *Geisterseherroman*, *Räuberroman*, *Illuminatenroman/Gebunds*, etc.) took the English literary market by storm. Works such as Friedrich Schiller's *Der Geisterseher* (1789), Carl Friedrich Kahlert's *Der Geisterbanner* (1792), Veit Weber's *Die Teufelbeschwörung* (1791), Cajetan Tschink's *Geschichte eines Geistersehers* (1790-93), Carl Grosse's *Der Genius* (1791-94) and Benedict Naubert's *Hermann von Unna* (1788) were all translated into English during the decade to satisfy the public's incessant craving for frightening stories full of secret societies, diabolic assassins, mysterious sorcerers, shrieking skeletons, howling ghosts and assorted paranormal or demonic

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<sup>28</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 19 (February 1797), pp. 194; 197.

<sup>29</sup> At the time, England was competing with Germany and, more marginally, with France for the appropriation of a foundational Gothic heritage that was instrumental to the creation of its own myth of origins, even at the cost of forging one. As Stephanie A. Glaser puts it, ‘the search for Gothic origins became an international contest’ that had cultural as well as political implications. Glaser, Stephanie A., “‘Deutsche Baukunst’, ‘Architecture Francaise’: The Use of the Gothic Cathedral in the Creation of National Memory in Nineteenth-Century Germany’, in *Orientalisms: Space/time/image/word*, ed. Claus Clüver, Véronique Plesch and Leo H. Hoek, Amsterdam: Rodopi (2005), p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> As Varma pointed out, ‘Germany has always been a land of superstitions and fairy legends: even in earlier German literature there is a fascination “for superstitions, dreadful events, awful spectacles”. Rhine is the haunted river of the world; its banks are studded with castles as romantic as any in a fairy-tale; in its dark forests one may encounter Demon-Huntsmen, witches, and werewolves; its haunted sacred wells and ancient magic date back to the dim twilight days of medieval times’. Varma, Devendra P. (1957), p. 32.

horrors. This kind of foreign imports spawned a host of English imitations, to the point that translations and original productions were often undistinguishable<sup>31</sup>. The association between Germany and the Gothic, however, assumed a clearly disparaging connotation since this kind of literature was generally regarded as being wild, distasteful, extravagant, unnecessarily sensational and sometimes shocking. But even more importantly, ‘German’ literature represented a larger cultural and political threat in that it was accused of promoting immoral – when not openly blasphemous – contents and, possibly even worse, ambiguous political messages, allegedly encouraging the uneducated masses, in particular young people, to rebellious and violent behaviours. As war with Revolutionary France raged and the fear of invasion grew, there was the suspicion that German/Gothic literature could be a vehicle for subversive Jacobin ideas and even be part of a secret conspiracy against Britain and its culture. This is linked to the increasingly negative conception of Germany that took hold in 1790s Britain, as David Simpson explains:

[a]t the turn of the nineteenth century [...] “Germany” was clearly established as the new evil empire in Europe, even more urgently demonized than France. The French had their Jacobins, but the Germans, it seems, had invented and organized them. Perhaps by this time the French were so thoroughly discredited, thanks largely to the invasion of Switzerland and the beginnings of Bonapartism, that there was less need than before to excoriate them at the expense of other imaginary enemies. By 1800 the British national consensus stood fairly solid against the French. Now it could afford to turn its critique elsewhere, and for other related reasons.<sup>32</sup>

The ‘germanisation’ of the Gothic was, therefore, an act of self-defence: as Emma J. Clery has claimed, ‘as the influx of foreign fictions grew and was joined by rumours of German-based conspiracies intent on world revolution, British wartime xenophobia spread to the sphere of literature and gave rise to outright moral condemnation of foreign imported products’<sup>33</sup>. Unsurprisingly, Lewis’s *The Monk* was considered the most ‘German’ of English Gothic novels and accused of ‘vitiat[ing] juvenile minds, and poison[ing] the fountains of morality’<sup>34</sup>. In particular, its extensive and often outrageous use of ‘the negative numinous, the demonic powers of darkness and the diabolical’<sup>35</sup>, soon copied by many writers, caused concerns because it was perceived as reflecting a more general attitude to go beyond pre-established limits and explore the forbidden.

<sup>31</sup> This ambiguity was certainly encouraged: as Rory E. Bradley explains, ‘[d]uring the 1790s, the English reading public thought of German literature as the source for many of the more gruesome, lurid and frightful stories that were published and avidly consumed. Some publishing houses and authors used this association between German literature and risqué material as a way of excusing and marketing some of their publications: if a book was written “in the German fashion,” or even presented as a translation of a (non-existent) German original, then its English purveyors were not responsible for its content, but benefited from the public’s desire for it’. Bradley, E. Rory (2016), p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Simpson, David, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press (1993), pp. 89-90.

<sup>33</sup> Clery, Emma J. (1995), pp. 141-2.

<sup>34</sup> *The Anti Jacobin-Review and Magazine*, vol. 8 (March 1801), p. 322.

<sup>35</sup> Leigh, David J., ‘Intimations of Ultimacy in British Gothic Novels’, in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, vol. 22, no. 1 (March 1999), p. 35.

Moreover, the representation of mysterious subterranean dungeons, necromantic rituals and demonic apparitions recalled the infamous supernatural world of German Rosicrucians, Freemasons and Illuminati, the secret organizations which many held responsible for the French Revolution and the various social upheavals in Europe. Suspicions increased in the following years as occult societies were known to operate also in Britain, where masonic lodges were secretly propagating their doctrines, as warned by texts such as John Robinson's *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (1797). In particular, secret societies were especially feared because they seemed to 'fill a void left by religious demise in an enlightened age, providing an outlet for mystical and spiritual needs'<sup>36</sup>. In this tense climate, even literary portrayals of the supernatural not only carried religious and philosophical implications, but could also inflict hidden and insidious political effects. Ghosts, in particular, became the subject of heated debates. With its national identity increasingly grounded in religious affiliation, England firmly held on its Protestantism in stark opposition to prevalently Catholic countries like France, simultaneously trying to bury its own Catholic past. The implicitly Catholic spectres of the Gothic were therefore seen very suspiciously because of their theological as well as ideological ambiguity. The Gothic supernatural was destabilising at many levels since it cast doubt on the efficacy of an individual's reason and the power of social, political, religious authorities, giving the lower, uneducated classes the opportunity to access knowledge that could enchant their minds and inflame their passions, leading them astray from rational and moral thinking. From the point of view of traditionalists and purists defending conservative values, therefore, the Gothic was an illegitimate, 'alien' usurping force that threatened to disrupt or dissolve the cultural landscape in which it developed; in fact, the idea that the popularisation of horror and supernatural fiction might produce harmful effects – real or imaginary – on vulnerable sectors of society still persists nowadays.

In eighteenth-century theatre, considered a fundamental tool for the education of citizens, these preoccupations were, if possible, even stronger because the influence of German and Gothic forms became thoroughly pervasive during the 1790s. As Jeffrey N. Cox remarks, there was the increasing suspicion that 'the Gothic/German drama was not entertainment but subversive propaganda'<sup>37</sup> that could corrupt the minds of the uneducated masses and in particular of young people, encouraging them to radicalism and rebellion. More generally, fears developed that a seemingly uncontrollable and seditious popular culture was gradually taking over national theatres, the reign of official state-

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<sup>36</sup> Wilson, Daniel W., 'Eighteenth-Century Germany in its Historical Context', in *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century: The Enlightenment and Sensibility, The Camden House History of German Literature*, vol. 5, ed. Barbara Becker-Cantarino, Rochester: Camden House (2005), p. 272.

<sup>37</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N., 'English Gothic Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2002), p. 139.

sponsored culture, leading to a general deprivation of taste and moral sense. Far from being a minor or frivolous subject matter, at the turn of the nineteenth century onstage depictions of the supernatural became seriously linked to the problem of legitimacy – being it political, social, religious or cultural – and arguably played a pivotal role in the radical developments of English theatre as well as English culture itself, which in this period was struggling to cope with its own ‘Gothicness’ and supernatural heritage. In all its various forms, Gothic theatre undertook the very risky mission of saying the unsaid, showing the unseen and questioning the alleged limits of culture and reality. It spectacularly rehabilitated and reinvigorated a rich supernatural legacy that the Age of Reason had tried to suppress and reconfigured it as a widely appealing source for aesthetic and artistic pleasure; in other words, as a major form of mainstream entertainment. Paula R. Backscheider, for example, regards Gothic theatre as ‘the earliest example of what we call mass culture [...] an artistic configuration that becomes formulaic and has mass appeal, that engages the attention of a very large, very diverse audience, and that stands up to repetition’<sup>38</sup>. The stage gradually witnessed the emergence of what could be defined a ‘pop culture’ supernatural through the creation of characters, themes, tropes, narrative devices and modes of representation that had a powerful hold on the contemporary collective imagination and still persist in our time, their influence over subsequent theatre as well as film, television and new media being truly incalculable. From this point of view, the Gothic set an essential precedent for the way in which it ‘examine[d] the question of whether a world-view based on rationality precludes the possibility of supernatural manifestations and whether it is desirable for mankind to attempt to see beyond the mortal sphere’<sup>39</sup>. The first chapter of this work examines the difficulties concerning stage portrayals of the supernatural within the theatrical context of the eighteenth century, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate drama that came from the Enlightenment, the centrality of the spoken word in this classification and how this affected the rise of Gothic drama at England’s two legitimate theatres – namely Drury Lane and Covent Garden – from the non-supernatural plays of the first decades to the controversial proliferation of dramatic ghosts and spectres during the 1790s, at the peak of the Gothic’s popularity. This chapter sets the method used throughout the entire thesis, as the analysis of the plays goes along with reviews and commentaries that appeared in newspapers, periodical journals and other critical works of the time. These are given as much emphasis as the primary texts since they allow for a more complete and thorough understanding of the growing divide between new audience tastes and old critical logics as well as how the choice to

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<sup>38</sup> Backscheider, Paula R., *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (1993), p. 150. Curiously, the concept of ‘mass culture’ came into being precisely in late eighteenth-century Germany.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, Daniel, *French and German Gothic Fiction in the Late Eighteenth Century*, Oxford: Peter Lang (2005), pp. 252-3.

represent the supernatural on stage, and how to do it, raised important questions at various levels which, together with other subversive aspects that the Gothic introduced, started to challenge the definition of a national, legitimate theatre. The following two chapters examine the ways in which legitimate theatres tried to cope with the sudden popularity of Gothic supernaturalism during the first couple of decades of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there was an attempt to downplay its disrupting potential by openly censoring it or reconfiguring it within a more acceptable rational frame (with the support of recent scientific and technological developments), in imitation of popular Gothic entertainments and spectacles such as phantasmagoria shows. As the second chapter shows, this rational, often technological supernatural mediated between pre-and post-Enlightenment belief systems, acting as a legitimate yet somehow imperfect substitute for the ‘authentic’ supernatural. On the other hand, the third chapter examines the emergence of melodrama in the early 1800s and how this imported foreign form positioned itself somewhere between legitimate and illegitimate theatre, blurring the boundaries between the two worlds. With its openness to imaginative forms of narration and unconventional theatrical codes and devices, melodrama proved the genre in the right place at the right time for the way in which it channelled the Romantic cultural mood and normalised the representation of the supernatural in the legitimate theatre. The supernatural of these early melodramas, however, was different from that of previous Gothic plays since it aimed at provoking wonder and enchantment rather than fear and shock, with authors heavily drawing from fairy tales, myths, popular folklore and popular theatrical forms such as pantomime in order to exploit the spectacular possibilities of the new genre and at the same time make their abundant use of the supernatural more digestible. These texts revealed a different, more multi-faceted kind of Gothicism than that of conventional Gothic fiction and employed a lighter and more whimsical supernatural imagery that was somehow perceived as more ‘English’ – and therefore more legitimate – in spite of the fact that it frequently derived from foreign – especially French – sources and traditions, arguably contributing to the genesis of the modern fantastic genre. Finally, the last chapter is devoted to an extensive analysis of the most important supernatural plays produced in the early nineteenth century in the rich galaxy of illegitimate theatres, which adopted fluid Gothic and melodramatic forms to build their commercial success and overcome the obstacles and difficulties derived from their precarious legal and cultural status. Special attention has been devoted to the productions of the 1820s, the decade in which these minor theatres rose their ambition and, for the first time, became leaders rather than followers of the legitimate national theatres, also (or especially) thanks to a series of spectacular and influential melodramas that revived and updated Gothic formulas, to an extent completing the process of transformation of the supernatural into an endlessly reproducible, mass commercial theatrical commodity. It will also be

argued that the extraordinary success of these plays decisively contributed to the dissolution of the legitimate/illegitimate classification in English theatre, helping unauthorised popular culture to score a signal victory against the official, state-sponsored national culture imposed by conservative elites.

In analysing more or less known plays and their critical reception, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive account of the most significant examples of Gothic supernatural theatre in the decades immediately preceding and following the turn of the nineteenth century and fill critical gaps in the assessment and evaluation of its impact. The delineation of the theatrical trajectory of the supernatural in this period is regarded as a crucial aspect in the development of a commodified culture of supernatural entertainment that reflected larger changes not only in English theatre but in Western culture itself. In doing so, this dissertation aspires to shed new light on an often understudied and underappreciated type of theatre and contradict the prejudice-ridden opinions of those that regard it as tasteless, mediocre and, therefore, unworthy of extensive analysis. In fact, supernatural plays constituted one of the primary ideological battlegrounds in the clash between those who regarded theatre as a faithful mirror of society with a specific moral and cultural agenda and those who were instead driven by the demands of the market-place and the desire to represent the tastes of a new mass public, a clash that heightened the tension between legitimate and illegitimate forms of culture and, ultimately, redefined them in ways that are still profoundly resonant today.

# 1. The supernatural Gothic on the legitimate stage<sup>40</sup>

## 1.1 *Towards a Gothic theatre*

In the late eighteenth century, when the Gothic emerged as a powerfully subversive literary phenomenon, English theatre was organised according to long-standing and well-defined principles that could be tracked back to the 1660 Restoration. Soon after he came back to the throne, Charles II re-opened the theatres and inaugurated a system that, in its basic conception, would last nearly two centuries. In 1662 he granted special licences to two courtiers, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, who thus obtained the monopoly for theatrical performances in London. Killigrew and Davenant soon founded two companies, respectively The King's Servants at Drury Lane and The Duke of York's Servants at Lincoln's Inn Fields (later moving to Dorset Garden and eventually to Covent Garden), which became the only two venues authorised to perform spoken-word drama (tragedy, comedy, opera and other forms of legitimate theatrical entertainment), a right that was inherited – not without controversy – by successive owners. As Gillian Russell points out, '[a]ny challenge to the patent theatres was interpreted by their owners as a threat to the security of property rights in general and as an attack on the authority of the monarch'<sup>41</sup>, leading to serious legal consequences. The emphasis on spoken word as a distinctive mark of legitimacy is especially meaningful, given that unauthorised theatres were literally deprived of their voice.

Drury Lane and Covent Garden initially held shows during the whole year, then toward the end of the century a distinction was established between winter season and summer season. Soon Londoners' increasing passion for the theatre led to the rise of several other unlicensed playhouses, prompting the government to tighten up the system of regulation. The 1737 Licensing Act promoted by Prime Minister Robert Walpole (father of Horace Walpole) warranted only the theatres in the Westminster area – therefore Drury Lane and Covent Garden, the so-called Royal theatres or patent theatres – to stage plays in the metropolis during the winter<sup>42</sup>; later on, in 1776, entrepreneur Samuel Foote obtained an exclusive royal patent to run his Little Theatre at the Haymarket as a regular summer theatre. Moreover, every play had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office (whose authority was later extended to any theatre in England) two weeks before the intended

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<sup>40</sup> A condensed version of this chapter appeared in Bazzano, Fabio, ““Madam, I Die, If I Give up The Ghost”: Staging (Il)legitimate Ghosts in Gothic Drama”, *Il Confronto Letterario*, no. 74 (December 2020), pp. 213-34.

<sup>41</sup> Russell, Gillian, ‘Theatre’, in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776–1832*, ed. Ian McCalman, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2001), p. 224.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Exceptions were made for the provincial Theatres Royal, such as those in Edinburgh, Bath, Norwich and York, which were smaller imitations of the two London patent theatres, though they lacked space and resources for grand spectacles’. Mitchley, Jack, and Spalding, Peter, *Five Thousands Years of Theatre*, Michigan: Batsford Academic and Educational (1982), p. 107.

performance and could be censored by the Examiner of Plays on political, religious and moral grounds. These truly draconian restrictions limited free speech and prevented companies from staging anything that could excite controversy, provoking larger and enduring consequences. This was perfectly in tune with the Enlightenment attitude towards theatre, seen less as a place for amusement than one for didactic and moral instruction. Legitimate drama was to all intents and purposes the voice of official, state-sponsored culture, and all other voices were legally silenced: as Jane Moody observes, ‘this legislation implicitly proceeded under the complacent illusion that a theater without spoken dialogue was a theater without power; since such theaters had no speech, censorship must be superfluous’<sup>43</sup>. This also reflected larger concerns over the manipulating power of the spoken word and the make-believe world of the stage, where truth and fiction meet in often complicated ways.

Furthermore, in this period, ‘proper’ drama – especially tragedy, the highest and noblest of genres – was expected to strictly adhere to the rules of logic, rationality and clarity set by French Neoclassical drama (Corneille, Racine, Molière). The supernatural was one of those ‘irregularities’ that were viewed negatively because it violated the principles of verisimilitude and plausibility; it risked to harm the credibility of a performance as well as raise controversial scientific, religious, theological and ultimately ontological issues that were better kept off the stage. By contrast, the canonical drama had to be polite and true to nature. As David J. Buch remarks, ‘the theater reflected the social and intellectual characteristics of Enlightenment thinkers, whose notion of the natural carried a scientific and ideological association that excluded superstition, magic, and religion’<sup>44</sup>. If the few occurrences of the supernatural in Restoration drama were a ‘meaningless survival from a better time, with no real relation to the new age, and with no merit in its treatment’<sup>45</sup>, in the eighteenth century hostility toward these subjects grew more intense. Ghosts, in particular, were utterly rejected by the theatre of the time, although, as Diego Saglia notes, ‘prominent, critical dismissals of the spectral never resulted in its successful regulation or suppression’<sup>46</sup>. The only acceptable apparitions were fake or openly ridiculous ones, like that in Joseph Addison's *The Drummer* (1716)<sup>47</sup>, or those told at second hand. The general idea, perfectly expressed by Henry

<sup>43</sup> Moody, Jane, “‘Fine Word, Legitimate!’: Toward a Theatrical History of Romanticism”, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 38, nos. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1996), p. 225.

<sup>44</sup> Buch, David J., *Magic Flutes and Enchanted Forests: The Supernatural in Eighteenth-Century Musical Theatre*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2008), p. x.

<sup>45</sup> Whitmore, Charles, *The Supernatural in Tragedy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1915), p. 298. Examples of Restoration ghosts can be found in the plays of Nathaniel Lee, John Crowe, Thomas Shadwell and Thomas Otway, although most of the time they are conventional or merely decorative devices.

<sup>46</sup> Saglia, Diego, “‘The Frightened Stage’: The Sensational Proliferation of Ghost Melodrama in the 1820s”, *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2015), p. 271.

<sup>47</sup> Emma J. Clery has noted that ‘post-Restoration playwrights generally adhered to the rulings of the “real supernatural”; that is to say, the insistence that the supernatural be represented only in terms of truth, not as fiction or entertainment. Thus the only allowable ghost in modern drama was a pretended ghost, a ghost that was

Fielding in *Tom Jones* (1749), was that ghosts were ‘like arsenic, and other dangerous drugs in physic, to be used with the utmost caution’<sup>48</sup>. As it happened in literature, therefore, also in theatre the supernatural was tolerated only when its fantastical, absurd or farcical nature was well clear to the audience, so that it could not be taken seriously or, even worse, trigger superstitious thoughts. In short, the boundary between natural and supernatural, truth and fiction, had to be thoroughly solid. Ghosts – but also witches, devils, hobgoblins and other unorthodox supernatural beings – were therefore more likely relegated to pantomimes, ballad operas, interludes, preludes, farces and other light forms of musical entertainment which were relatively free from traditional critical rules. Pantomimes, in particular, often drew their subjects from classical myths and popular tales replete with magical scenes (transformations, spells, conjurations) that were much appreciated by the audience of the patent theatres<sup>49</sup>. Colourful supernatural elements were especially common in the so-called Harlequinade, the part of the pantomime that introduced the typical characters of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon and the Clown), usually through a ‘magical’ transformation. In the 1720s and 1730s, Harlequin pantomimes became ‘the most popular form of urban entertainment’<sup>50</sup> especially thanks to Lincoln's Inn Fields manager John Rich, himself a renowned Harlequin actor under the stage name of Lud, who did a great deal to develop the genre. Rich introduced the device of the wonder-working wand (actually a slapstick), with which he ‘transformed’ scenery, objects and characters by striking them<sup>51</sup>. The supernatural element was especially pronounced in the two rivalling productions *Harlequin Doctor Faustus* (Drury Lane, 1723), by John Thurmond, and *The Necromancer; or, Harlequin Doctor* (Lincoln's Inn Fields, 1723), by Rich himself, which fused classic pantomime tropes with diabolic compacts and dead-rising trickery from the famous Faustus legend, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds. Rich was the first to publish the libretto of his pantomime, prompting other authors to do the same. Suffice it to read the stage directions of the final scene of *The Necromancer* to notice how these productions

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unmistakably unreal, as in Addison's *The Drummer*, where the audience is alerted to the ruse in the Prologue, forestalling any danger of awakening superstitious passions’. Clery, Emma J., ‘Laying the Ground for Gothic: The Passage of the Supernatural from Truth to Spectacle’, in *Exhibited by Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*, ed. Valeria Tinkler Villani, Peter Davidson and Jane Stevenson, Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, (1995), p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Crawford, Joseph, *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Fear in the Age of the Reign of Terror*, London: Bloomsbury Academic (2013), p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas K. Hervey called pantomime ‘the legitimate drama of Christmas’ given that at the patent theatres it was a genre usually performed during the holidays, and from the end of the eighteenth century onwards specifically as Christmas entertainment (opening on Boxing Day). Hervey, Thomas K., *The Book of Christmas*, London: William Spooner (1836), p. 239.

<sup>50</sup> O' Brien, John, *Harlequin Britain: Pantomime and Entertainment, 1690–1760*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press (2004), p. 150

<sup>51</sup> As John O'Brien explains, ‘[t]he chief agent of transformation [...] was harlequin himself, whose magic wand or bat served as the instrument through which all transformations took place. [...] a typical set piece of English harlequinade was the scene where Harlequin receives the bat from a devil, wizard, or sorcerer, and thereby gains his power to transform himself as his surroundings as needed’. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

constituted a sort of early premonition of the grotesque diablerie of many future Gothic extravaganzas:

*The Doctor waves his Wand, and the Scene is converted to a Wood; a monstrous Dragon appears, and from each Claw drops a Dæmon, representing divers Grotesque Figures; several female Spirits rise in Character to each Figure, and join in Antick Dance. As they are performing, a Clock strikes, the Doctor seized, hurried away by Spirits, and devoured by the Monster, which immediately takes Flight; and while it is disappearing, Spirits vanish, and other Dæmons rejoice in the following words:*

Now triumph Hell, and Fiends be gay,  
The Sorc'rer is become our Prey.<sup>52</sup>

Such scenes, however, were not designed to frighten or unsettle the audience, like Shakespeare's ghosts, but rather to display the newest improvements in stage machinery and trickery, including flying dragons, talking animals and regenerating body parts, whose effect was chiefly humorous. As Emma J. Clery points out, '[t]he prototypical spirits of the age were not the elder Hamlet and the other solemn revenants of revenge tragedy, but the devils of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, with their fireworks and grisly practical jokes'<sup>53</sup>. Pantomimes' confection of slapstick comedy, spectacular set pieces and magical tricks served as a perfect counterpart to the artificial rationality and morality of plot-driven regular drama, providing the audience with a form of mindless entertainment that attracted the hatred of intellectuals (such as Alexander Pope) but proved highly profitable<sup>54</sup>. It was in this kind of productions that the supernatural slowly began to be rehabilitated, gaining an increasingly prominent role while the Enlightenment was still in full force: 'While the fantastic was being challenged in the religious and political life of the period, it came to be reconstructed in the theater'<sup>55</sup>.

The situation, however, was much more intricate than that. A problem was raised concerning the performance of those old plays that extensively deployed supernatural features as a result of the historical period in which they were composed. As a matter of fact, until well into the sixteenth century belief in the supernatural was widespread and nobody seriously questioned its existence. Of course the most glaring case was that of Shakespeare's plays, whose renowned disregard for classical principles (notably his carelessness in the Aristotelian unities and tendency to mix high and low) and frequent inclusions of fantastic incidents and characters made the Enlightenment intellectual world feel quite uncomfortable. As a consequence, from the second half of the

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<sup>52</sup> Anonymous, *The Necromancer; or, Harlequin Doctor Faustus*, ninth ed., London: T. Wood (1731), p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Clery, Emma J., *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction* (1995), p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> 'Neither theater could maintain its patent by producing only pantomimes, but neither theater could stay in business by producing only regular plays'. Toepfer, Karl, *Pantomime: The History and Metamorphosis of a Theatrical Ideology*, San Francisco: Vosuri Media (2019), p. 442.

<sup>55</sup> Buch, David J. (2008), p. xvii.

seventeenth century his works began to be altered, re-written and adapted in the attempt to make them suitable to the current theatrical spirit. If highly imaginative plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* were turned into farcical and operatic versions with a certain ease, the treatment of pure tragedies like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* proved much more knotty, packed as they are with unexplained supernatural occurrences. Some attempts to make them more tolerable were nevertheless made. For example, William Davenant's 1664 operatic adaptation of *Macbeth*, which held the stage until the late eighteenth century, considerably downplayed the threatening character of the witches by turning them into comical and highly entertaining figures, with extravagant costumes and an elaborated mechanical contrivance used to produce the illusion of their flight during a musical interlude that was not too dissimilar to certain scenes shown in contemporary pantomimes and afterpieces. Such an operation, however, could not be applied to a play like *Hamlet*, whose famous ghost, far from being an object of fear, came to be mocked by the educated elite, no longer willing to tolerate this kind of implausibilities<sup>56</sup>. A common solution was that of minimising the effectiveness of the apparitions and reduce them to ineffective frills, as in Colley Cibber's revision of *Richard III* (1700)<sup>57</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, discussions over the presence of the supernatural in Shakespeare dominated criticism throughout the Enlightenment and originated lively debates in England and all over Europe. The harshest reactions came from abroad and in particular from France, although, as Samuel Coleridge later observed, 'the French [...] were but the echoes of our own critics'<sup>58</sup>. French Neoclassicists condemned Shakespeare's ghosts, and the one in *Hamlet* more than any other<sup>59</sup>, as

<sup>56</sup> It should nevertheless be noted that opposition against stage supernaturalism was not unanimous. Joseph Addison, for instance, had Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (a Restoration tragedy whose last act features the appearance of two silent ghosts, the gory shades of Jaffeir and Pierre, omitted by David Garrick in the middle of the eighteenth century) in mind when he declared that 'there is nothing which delights and terrifies our *English* Theatre so much as a Ghost, especially when he appears in a bloody shirt. A spectre has very often saved a Play, though he has done nothing but stalked across the stage, or rose through a cleft of it, and sunk again without speaking one word. There may be a proper reason for these several terrors; and when they only come in as aids and assistances to the Poet, they are not only to be excused, but to be applauded'. *The Spectator* n. 44 (20 April 1711). On another occasion he gave high praise to Shakespeare's treatment of the subject: 'Among the *English*, *Shakespeare* has incomparably excelled all others. [...] There is something so wild and yet so solemn in the Speeches of his Ghosts, Fairies, Witches and the like Imaginary Persons, that we cannot forbear thinking them natural, tho' we have no Rule by which to judge of them, and must confess, if there are such Beings in the World, it looks highly probable they should talk and act as he has represented them'. *The Spectator* (1 July 1712).

<sup>57</sup> Whitmore, Charles (1915), p. 300.

<sup>58</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, London: G. Bell and Sons (1891), p. 277.

<sup>59</sup> As Michael Chemers puts it, '[t]he stage ghost was off the table for [...] French neoclassicists—far too bombastic, cheap, and silly, but also potentially seditious, to be tolerated'. Chemers, Michael, 'Later Classicism in the Drama: How Shakespeare's Ghosts Came to Haunt the Eighteenth Century', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Shakespeare and Classical Literature*, ed. Sean Keilen and Nick Moschovakis, New York: Routledge (2017), p. 247. Indeed, the whole play did not enjoy much consideration in France at the time: 'To the Age of Enlightenment, the dark doubts that trouble Shakespeare's melancholy prince were meaningless, Hamlet, as it appeared to eighteenth-century France, was the chaotic invention of a deranged mind, produced by a barbaric genius to amuse barbarians. Its power to awaken terror and pity might be conceded, but it could hardly be considered heroic; it was therefore not

incompatible with the Neoclassical aesthetics and rules of literary decorum. For example, Jean-François Ducis's 1769 adaptation of *Hamlet* for the Comédie Française, the first staged French version of the play, had several alterations and omissions, among which that of the ghost, completely excluded from the *dramatis personae*. In performance, the ghost was physically replaced by a funeral urn containing the ashes of the murdered king, while its visitations to Hamlet were clearly presented as hallucinations (invisible to the audience) conjured up by the prince's feverish imagination<sup>60</sup>. Ducis's changes, praised by contemporary commentators, reflected the Enlightenment's assessment of the play, famously described by Voltaire as one of Shakespeare's 'monstrous farces', typical of the rude taste that had formerly dominated English theatre (he obviously preferred the contemporary tragedies of Addison) yet not devoid of some sublime stroke of genius<sup>61</sup>. A great philosopher and himself a playwright, Voltaire spent some years in exile in England during the 1720s and, thanks to his extensive translation and commentary work, was instrumental in first introducing Shakespeare to France (and indeed to the whole of continental Europe). Despite being a staunch supporter of Neoclassicism, with the passing years he became less rigid regarding its ideals and developed a sort of infatuation with the English stage's freer forms of expression. He considered Shakespeare a barbarous writer, though one capable of creating extraordinary dramatic moments. With respect to the supernatural, Voltaire's position was rather fluctuating, not entirely in tune with that of die-hard Neoclassicists who advocated a rigid application of Aristotelian and Horatian principles. He in fact admired the aesthetic power of the ghost device in *Hamlet*, which he attempted to emulate in two of his own plays, *Éryphile* (1732) and *Sémiramis* (1748). Unfortunately, his ghosts, too artificial and clumsy, had none of the sublime effect of Shakespeare's and were booed by the French public, while many accused Voltaire of having cheaply copied the English author. Disappointed, Voltaire replied criticising the over-rationalistic attitude of his contemporaries in *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* (*Dissertation on Ancient and Modern Tragedy*, 1748), even pointing to its incompatibility with Catholicism, then France's official state religion:

They spoke and wrote on all sides that we no longer believe in ghosts, and that the apparitions of the dead cannot be anything but childish to the eyes of an enlightened nation. What? All antiquity believed in such miracles, and yet it will not be permitted to conform to antiquity? What? Our religion consecrated these acts of Providence, and yet it would be ridiculous to renew them?<sup>62</sup>

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a proper tragedy at all'. Bailey, Helen Phelps, *Hamlet in France: From Voltaire to Laforgue*, Geneva: Droz (1964), p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Golder, J. D., "'Hamlet' in France 200 Years Ago', in *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 24 (1971), p. 84.

<sup>61</sup> Willems, Michèle, 'Voltaire', in *Voltaire, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge: Great Shakespearians: Volume III*, London and New York: Bloomsbury (2015), p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Chemers, Michael (2017), p. 249.

Then, in the final part of his life, as an overwhelming vogue for Shakespeare erupted in France thanks to the acclaimed translations of Pierre-Antoine de La Place and Pierre Letourneur as well as successful stage adaptations such as that of Ducis, Voltaire began to feel the need to re-affirm the supremacy of French theatre, totally rejecting Shakespeare as a model. His critical comments on Shakespeare, believed to exert an increasingly corruptive influence on the national culture, became more vehement and trenchant than ever. That Voltaire now felt a deeply personal resentment was obvious from the markedly military language he adopted to describe the difference between the coarse Gothicism of Shakespeare and the polite Neoclassicism of authors like Racine and Corneille, in tune with the escalating mood of tension generated by the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) between England and France<sup>63</sup>. He even turned against *Hamlet's* ghost, one of the few aspects of the play he had previously praised. In fact, the philosopher regretted the fact that he had contributed to the success of Shakespeare and theatrical supernaturalism among his countrymen:

The spectres are going to become the fashion. I have opened the course modestly; they are now going to run at full speed. I have wished to enliven the stage somewhat by more action; and everything has become absolutely action and pantomime. Nothing is so sacred that it is not abused.<sup>64</sup>

This aggressive and at times contradictory attitude triggered contrary reactions by the English cultural establishment, with many authoritative voices patriotically standing up in defence of Shakespeare. This contributed to solidify Shakespeare's position as an undisputed national (and soon international) icon, a process that necessarily implied a full acceptance of the supernaturalism present in many of his works. In the pamphlet *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* (1745), for example, Samuel Johnson justified the characters of the Weird Sisters observing that in Elizabethan England ‘the goblins of witchcraft still continued to hover in the twilight’<sup>65</sup> and people really believed in the existence of such unearthly beings. Similarly, years later, critic Elizabeth Montagu recognised Shakespeare's supernaturalism as an invaluable testimony of ‘a native English literary tradition that, for all its residual traces of pre-enlightenment barbarity, is nonetheless worthy of protection, preservation and celebration’<sup>66</sup>. In the *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1769), she wrote:

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<sup>63</sup> Wright, Angela, *Britain, France, and the Gothic, 1764-1820: The Import of Terror*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2013), p. 22.

<sup>64</sup> Voltaire, letter to (the Marquis) D'Argental (13 October 1769), quoted in Townshend, Dale, ‘Gothic and the ghost of “Hamlet”’, in *Gothic Shakespeares*, ed John Drakakis and Dale Townshend, New York: Routledge (2008), p. 65.

<sup>65</sup> Johnson, Samuel, *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*, in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL. D.*, ed. Arthur Murphy, 2 vols., vol. 2, New York, George Dearborn (1837), p. 456.

<sup>66</sup> Townshend, Dale (2008), p. 68.

Shakespear, in the dark shades of Gothic barbarism, had no resources but in the very phantoms that walked the night of ignorance and superstition: or in touching the latent passions of civil rage and discord; sure to please best his fierce and barbarous audience, when he raised the bloody ghost, or reared the warlike standard. His choice of these subjects was judicious if we consider the times in which he lived; his management of them so masterly, that he will be admired in all times.<sup>67</sup>

Statements such as those of Johnson and Montagu thus provided a valid historicising justification which came to be adopted by defenders of Shakespeare as well as authors willing to use the supernatural in their works of fiction. As the late Enlightenment witnessed an intensifying interest in the legends, folk mythology and fantastic narratives of Britain's Gothic past, Shakespeare was increasingly seen as the literary champion of those popular supernatural beliefs and superstitions that, willingly or unwillingly, were an integral part of the nation's own cultural identity. Shakespeare's supernatural elements thus passed from being considered an embarrassing flaw to being praised as 'the highest efforts and the most pregnant proofs of truly ORIGINAL GENIUS'<sup>68</sup>. This also marked the first step toward the resuscitation and recovery of a long-thwarted transcendent belief system carried out by the Gothic fiction and specifically by Gothic drama, which, with its multifaceted approaches toward the supernatural, endow it with a new dignity, making the stage a place where the rational and the irrational 'were viewed as equal options for the audience to accept, with belief a question of the individual's own preference'<sup>69</sup>. No wonder that Shakespeare's dramas constituted the starting point of this process.

### 1.2 *The contribution of David Garrick*

On stage, the man who, more than any other, understood the strong appeal that Shakespeare's supernaturalism had in England (and also elsewhere) was, unquestionably, the histrionic David Garrick. An extraordinary actor and a talented playwright, Garrick directed the Theatre Royal Drury Lane from 1747 to 1776 and christened it 'the house of William Shakespeare' to highlight its prestige in clear opposition to unlicensed theatres. Actually, Garrick dedicated his whole life to the diffusion and enhancement of Shakespeare's dramas<sup>70</sup>, which he was proud to present in their

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<sup>67</sup> Montagu, Elizabeth, *An Essay on the Writing and Genius of Shakespear*, in *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook, 1700-1820*, ed. Emma J. Clery and Robert Miles, Manchester, Manchester University Press (2000), p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> Duff, William, *An Essay on Original Genius*, London: Edward and Charles Dilly (1767), p. 143.

<sup>69</sup> Hoeveler, Diane Long, 'Gothic and Romantic Ghosts', in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston, New York and London: Routledge (2017), p. 22.

<sup>70</sup> In September 1769 he even organised the so-called Shakespeare Jubilee, a spectacular (and much disputed) festival meant to commemorate the memory of England's greatest literary pride. Despite several organisational problems (especially because of the tempestuous weather), the manifestation gathered hundreds of visitors at Stratford-Upon-Avon for three unforgettable days of celebrations, races, processions, fireworks, banquets, orations and of course performances of Shakespearean plays. Though his adoration for Shakespeare was certainly genuine, Garrick was

‘original’ version, although his numerous deletions and alterations (made on the scripts already available: he used neither the First Folio nor other more recent editions) render this claim to authenticity controversial to say the least. Nevertheless, his grand productions of *Richard III*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, among others, gave a major boost to the process of re-assessment and re-evaluation of Shakespeare during the eighteenth century (even in France, thanks to the influential visits he made to Paris in 1751, 1763 and 1765), also with regard to his treatment of the supernatural. In this respect, Garrick introduced important changes that would decidedly contribute to feed the then emerging Gothic imagination<sup>71</sup>. In his *Macbeth*, for example, the three apparitions (the severed head, the bloody child and the royal child with a tree in his hand) encountered by Macbeth in the witches' cave, absent in Davenant's version, were restored, and the portrayal of the Weird Sisters themselves became less extravagant, with the elimination of the flying machinery. As Dennis Bartholomeusz explains, however, the times were not yet ripe for further changes:

The witches retained something of their comic character primarily because the convention established by Davenant still retained its hold on the popular imagination, though Garrick seems to have controlled the comedy. Garrick himself seems to have favoured the proposition that the witches should be creatures of an exclusively tragic world, but did not carry out the idea because he felt the audiences at Drury Lane were not ready for it.<sup>72</sup>

A particular striking scene was that of Macbeth's ‘dagger soliloquy’, in which Garrick conveyed all the overwhelmingly unnatural tension of the moment by following the imaginary weapon with the movement of his eyes and hands, ‘like one not quite awak'd from some disordering Dream’<sup>73</sup>. Years later, a writer of *The Monthly Mirror* described the unparalleled effectiveness of the scene with these words:

What he is able to effect without speaking, I lately witnessed in Macbeth; when he with the satanic look of a man resolved on murder, fancies he sees a dagger and (as if snatching the crown itself) grasps the handle; a foreigner, in the same box with myself, who was totally ignorant of the piece, for he did not understand a word of English, sunk, overpowered with horror, at my feet.<sup>74</sup>

Something similar occurred during the apparition of Banquo's ghost, in which Garrick famously

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also a very smart entrepreneur, who aimed at winning eternal fame by having his name associated with that of the ever-rising figure of Shakespeare. On this occasion he did not miss the opportunity to poke fun of Voltaire (and by extension of French Neoclassicists) by having a comic actor impersonating him during the event. This of course did nothing but embitter the French writer. Chemers, Michael (2017), p. 249.

<sup>71</sup> Hoever, Diane Long, ‘Drama’, in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell (2013), p. 201.

<sup>72</sup> Bartholomeusz, Dennis, *Macbeth and the Players*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1969), p. 40.

<sup>73</sup> Davies, Thomas, *Dramatic Miscellanies*, 3 vols, vol. 2, Dublin (1784), p. 82. Quoted in Burnim, Kalman A., *David Garrick, Director*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh (1961), p. 105.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Account of Garrick, In a Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Germany, dated London, 1768, communicated by B. Thompson, Jun., Esq.’ in *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 7 (February 1799), p. 104.

emphasised Macbeth's frenzied terror by violently throwing the cup of wine upon the ground, shifting the focus from the spoken word to the physical gesture and giving an air of life to the scene. The most curious innovation, however, occurred in Garrick's *Hamlet*, the most famous and possibly the best of his Shakespearean interpretations. In order to enhance the emotional impact of the scene of Hamlet's first meeting with the ghost, Garrick used an ingenious mechanical 'fright wig' (devised by one Perkins, his wig-maker) to simulate the hair-raising effect caused by the apparition, apparently seeking to replicate the same feeling associated with the first Gothic novels that began to appear in those years. Although later commentators laughed at this anecdote, it should be considered that Garrick was in all likelihood very serious about it. This is why E. J. Clery has seen this as 'a cultural moment which predict[ed] the popular demand for fictions of supernatural terror from the 1790s onwards'<sup>75</sup>, stating that Garrick was the first to understand that the 'significance of a spectre is to be determined by the quality and intensity of the feeling it arouses'<sup>76</sup> and that a credible representation of fear is the key to emotionally engage spectators in the theatrical experience of the supernatural. The Enlightenment's rational detachment, therefore, slowly gave way to what Coleridge would appropriately come to define as 'willing suspension of disbelief'<sup>77</sup>. At the same time, this experience is by no means to be interpreted as a revival of ancient superstitions but as 'a new form of enchantment, which casts its spell on the audience's feelings'<sup>78</sup>. In a way, Garrick's late career performances as Hamlet marked a turning point in the history of acting itself for how the supernatural was used as a vehicle to convey 'the increasingly sensational exaltation of the passions'<sup>79</sup> which became a trademark of the late eighteenth-century acting style, in turn an important blueprint for Gothic fiction and its obsession for excessive, theatricalised emotions. As George Alexander Stevens, a friend of Garrick's, wrote in a 1772 piece for the *St. James's Chronicle*: 'As no Writer in any Age *penned* a Ghost like Shakespeare, so, in our Time, no Actor ever *saw* a Ghost like Garrick'<sup>80</sup>.

Echoes of Garrick's extraordinary performances in *Hamlet* also spread to Germany, where the *Sturm und Drang* movement, with its peculiar interest in supernatural themes, was taking its first steps. German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a staunch defender of stage apparitions,

<sup>75</sup> Clery, Emma J., and Miles, Robert (ed.) (2000), p. 107.

<sup>76</sup> Clery, Emma J., (1995), p. 46.

<sup>77</sup> Garrick notably managed to banish spectators from their seats on the stage (in 1762) and from behind the scenes (in 1747) and introduced various adjustments in order to favour the theatrical illusion, re-establishing 'an ontological and physical barrier between spectators and the stage. Saggini, Francesca, *The Gothic Novel and the Stage: Romantic Appropriations*, London: Pickering & Chatto (2015), p. 14. Meticulously painted scenes and new methods for scene changes as well as characters' or props' entrances and exits – notably the use of moving platforms – concurred to the immersive effect.

<sup>78</sup> Spera, Silvia, "'Odi et Amo": Shakespearean Supernatural Dimensions on the Eighteenth-Century Stage', *Textus*, vol. 32, no. 3 (2019), p. 108.

<sup>79</sup> Saggini, Francesca (2015), p. 25

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Burnim, Kalman A. (1973), p. 159.

probably had Garrick's interpretation in mind<sup>81</sup> when he drew a comparison in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767-69) between the ghost in *Hamlet* and the ghost in Voltaire's *Sémiramis*, which was staged in April 1767 at the Hamburg National Theatre:

Shakespeare's ghost appears truly to come from that other world; so it seems to us. For it appears at the sacred hour, in the harrowing stillness of the night, fully accompanied by all the sepulchral, mysterious indicators that, from the time we nursed mother's milk, lead us to expect ghosts and with which we are accustomed to thinking of them. But Voltaire's ghost is not even as good as a bogeyman designed to scare children; he is simply a disguised comedian, who has nothing, says nothing, does nothing that he actually could do, if he were what he claimed to be. Moreover, all of the circumstances in which he appears destroy the illusion and reveal him as the creation of a cold playwright who hopes to trick and scare us, without knowing how he should go about it. Consider just this one point: in broad daylight, in the middle of the gathering of nobles of the kingdom, announced by a thunderclap, the Voltairian ghost strides out of his crypt. Where did Voltaire hear that ghosts are so brazen? Could not any old woman have told him that ghosts avoid sunlight and certainly do not tend to visit large gatherings? Of course, Voltaire surely knew this, but he was too fearful, too dainty, to make use of common circumstances. He wanted to show us a ghost, but it had to be a ghost of a nobler sort, and through this attempt at nobility he ruined everything. The ghost that presumes to do things contrary to all tradition, contrary to all good manners among ghosts, strikes me as no proper ghost, and everything here that does not support the illusion destroys the illusion.<sup>82</sup>

In anti-Neoclassical fashion Lessing ridicules Voltaire's idea of having a ghost appearing in broad daylight among a large crowd (also with a clearly excessive number of spectators sitting on stage and obstructing the performance<sup>83</sup>) and instead praised the evocative power of King Hamlet's late-night apparition, which relies on common notions about ghosts and, therefore, succeeds exactly where Voltaire's spectre fails, namely in creating total empathy between the audience and the stage action. According to Lessing, a supernatural scene should be able to emotionally deceive both believers and sceptics (the former still being the silent majority), but in order to achieve this effect it could not have 'the frosty symmetry of a ballet'<sup>84</sup>. The circumstances of a ghost's apparition and the characters' reaction to it need instead to be as genuine and compelling as possible:

All of our attention [...] focuses upon Hamlet, and the more we see symptoms of a temperament shattered by horror and terror, the more willing we are to accept the apparition – that which caused this shattering in him – for what he takes it to be. The ghost affects us more through him than it does by itself. The impression that it makes upon him is transferred to us, and the effect is too apparent and too strong for us to doubt the extraordinary cause. How little Voltaire understood this artistic device!<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> As Simon Williams points out, 'Hamlet was a role which the Germans closely associated with Garrick'. Williams, Simon, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: Volume 1, 1586-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1990), p. 74.

<sup>82</sup> Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, *The Hamburg Dramaturgy by G. E. Lessing. A New and Complete Annotated English Translation*, ed. Natalya Baldyga, transl. by Wendy Arons and Sara Figal. London and New York: Routledge (2018), p. 66.

<sup>83</sup> Fazio, Mara, *Voltaire contro Shakespeare*, Roma and Bari: Laterza (2020), pp. 58-9.

<sup>84</sup> Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim (2018), p. 66.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

Some years later, in 1776, the German scientist and philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg published a detailed account of Garrick's performance as Hamlet in the Hamburgian periodical *Der deutsche Museum* recalling how the Drury Lane audience – possibly the most refined and intellectual audience in Europe – was completely terror-stricken during the ghost scenes. The darkened stage and the stony silence created a tense atmosphere which certainly was something of a rarity in a period in which spectators were noisy, unruly and frequently indifferent to the happenings on stage. Lichtenberg also provided interesting insight into Garrick's innovative conception of the spectre (played by the corpulent Astley Bransby), described as being ‘clad from head to foot in armour, for which a suit of steel-blue satin did duty; even his face is hidden, except for his pallid nose, and a little to either side of it’<sup>86</sup>. The ghost therefore did not wear a real armour, as had always been customary. Although this choice was probably mainly due to some technical difficulties in drawing the actor through the trap-door (this is why Garrick soon contrived to make the ghost silently enter and exit from the wings, as if it were able to pass through the castle's walls<sup>87</sup>), the change contributed to make the ghost a more impalpable figure – ‘the shadow of a shade’, as *The Theatrical Review* defined it in 1772<sup>88</sup> – and heighten the aura of mystery surrounding its sudden appearance:

The Ghost looked very good; the colour of his armour was practically indistinguishable from the colour of the scene, and he was already standing there quite quiet and motionless, before I, who probably like every other spectator had my eyes riveted on Hamlet, noticed him.<sup>89</sup>

Significantly, in September of the same year the Ackermann company under the direction of actor-manager Friedrich Ludwig Schröder staged *Hamlet* for the first time in Hamburg<sup>90</sup>, showing a clear debt to Garrick. His influence in a country where Gothic literature would flourish and establish a

<sup>86</sup> Mare, Margaret L. and Quarrell, W. H. (eds.), *Lichtenberg's Visits to England as described in his Letters and Diaries*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1938), pp. 9-11.

<sup>87</sup> The modality of a ghost's appearance (and disappearance) would be a much-debated issue in Gothic drama's criticism. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, trap-doors were gradually abandoned in favour of other systems: ‘it is [...] ridiculous to behold the actors making their *entrées* and *exits* through plastered walls and wainscot panels; the way by double doors in the bottom scene would be more natural. It might suit indeed the ghosts and aerial spirits thus to enter, better than through the gaping mouths of noisy trap-doors, as if spectres resided always in the bowels of the earth. Were the living actors confined to pass the way abovementioned, that apparitions might enter and disappear through the side-scenes of walls and rocks very conveniently, with propriety, according to the vulgar notion of spirits; or otherwise they may descend from the clouds, if practicable’. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 55 (May 1789), p. 408.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in ‘Astley Bransby’, in Burnim, Kalman A., Highfill, Philip H., and Langhans, Edward A. (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, vol. 2: Belfort to Byzand, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press (1973), p. 312.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Oakley, Warren L., *A Culture of Mimicry: Laurence Sterne, His Readers and the Art of Bodysnatching*, London: Maney for the Modern Humanities Research Association (2010), p. 41.

<sup>90</sup> The first ever German production of Hamlet took place only six years before in Altona, probably using a translation by Christoph Martin Wieland as a basis. Williams, Simon, ‘The “Great Guest” Arrives: Early German “Hamlets”’, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 38, no. 3, The Johns Hopkins University Press (October 1986), p. 295.

close link with its English counterpart was, therefore, significant and enduring.

Moreover, Garrick deserves great credit also for the introduction of new scenographic effects and technical improvements aimed at heightening the level of spectacularity of his productions, notably controlled blackouts, footlights, invisible side-wing lights and transparencies (with oil lamps replacing chandeliers). These changes affected not only regular dramas but also pantomimes, musical extravaganzas and other miscellaneous entertainments, which often demanded much more money and labour in terms of decorations, machinery and scenic pieces. The decisive stimulus came during Garrick's tour on the Continent and especially his visit to Paris in 1763-64, where he was impressed by the scenographic splendour of the Comédie Française<sup>91</sup>. Several of Garrick's productions between 1765 and his retirement in 1776 clearly betrayed a new approach almost fully focused on visual spectacle. Actually, Garrick undoubtedly was one of the first to sense the ongoing change in the public's preferences, more and more directed toward scenery, machinery, music and everything calculated to provide a visceral rather than intellectual amusement. His 1770 adaptation of John Dryden's opera *King Arthur; or, the British Worthy*, for example, was a lavish musical masque including a beautifully back-lit Gothic stained-glass window, which Horace Walpole himself described as 'a perfect Cathedral' where 'the devil officiates at a kind of high mass'<sup>92</sup>.

Then, before the beginning of the season 1772-73, Garrick appointed Paris Opera painter Philippe James de Loutherbourg, an artist of excellent reputation, as Drury Lane's chief stage designer, with the task of managing everything concerned with the scenery and machinery. De Loutherbourg introduced several improvements in stage lighting, such as the use of back-lit gauze or silk veils (rendered transparent by dye) in order to colour light and reproduce mist and other particular atmospheric phenomena. The best results of this collaboration arguably were those irregular pieces where fantasy was given free rein, such as *A Christmas Tale* (Drury Lane, 1774), a visionary 'Dramatic Entertainment' with scenery provided by De Loutherbourg (who skilfully used his multi-coloured silk screens to create 'a sudden transition in a garden scene, where the foliage varie[d] from green to blood colour'<sup>93</sup>) and songs composed by Charles Dibdin the Elder. The piece had a tremendous success, although critics thought that such talents should have been employed in productions of a more serious calibre. But Garrick was not interested in their judgement, as can be seen in the prologue, a true manifesto of his spectacle-driven approach:

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<sup>91</sup> Burnim, Kalman A. (1973), p. 70.

<sup>92</sup> Walpole, Horace, *The Letters of Horace Walpole Earl of Orford*, ed. Peter Cunningham, 9 vols., vol. 5, London: Bentley & Son (1891), p. 273.

<sup>93</sup> Burnim, Kalman A. (1973), p. 81. According to David Worrall, the play's scenic effects 'pursue a narrative redolent of magical imagery drawn from Freemasonry', at a time when the hysteria about the alleged Illuminati and Masonic conspiracies to rule the world had not yet exploded. Worrall, David, *Theatrical Revolution: Drama, Censorship, and Romantic Subcultures 1773-1832*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (2006), p. 137.

My food is meant for honest hearty grinners!  
 For you—your spirits with good stomachs bring;  
 O make the neighb'ring roof with rapture ring;  
 Open your mouths, pray swallow every thing!  
 Criticks beware, how you our pranks despise;  
 Hear well my tale, or you shan't touch my pies;  
 The proverb change—be merry, but not wise.<sup>94</sup>

The piece, divided into five parts (in mock imitation of regular dramas?) and partially inspired by Charles-Simon Favart's comic opera *La Fée Urgèle, ou, Ce qui plait aux dames* (1765), displayed 'the highest extravagancies of knighterrantry and necromancy; with all their train of evil spirits, enchanted castles, and monsters'<sup>95</sup>. As in pantomimes, the confrontation between good and evil also involves Manichean supernatural figures, in this case the beneficent magician Bonoro (who descends in a cloud) and the demonic magician Nigromant (who emerges from a fiery lake). As Michael V. Pisani puts it, *A Christmas Tale* 'seemed like a new genre, a spectacle of sound and vision aimed at popular audiences', prefiguring in many ways the generic hybridness of melodrama (although its alternation of spoken dialogues and songs made it surprisingly akin to contemporary ballad opera, a short-lived musical genre that combined pre-existing ballad tunes and new words). Horace Walpole, who once again was in the audience, probably recognised something of his own *Castle of Otranto* in such a whimsical pseudo-medieval extravaganza and came to assert that he 'could certainly have written' it himself<sup>96</sup>.

The culmination of this period of intense experimentation was De Louthorborgh's own *Eidophusikon; or, Various Imitations of Natural Phenomena* (which opened on 26 February 1781 at his house on Lisle Street, Leicester Square, and later moved to the Strand), a sort of proto-cinematic theatrical entertainment in which a series of paintings of various subjects were animated through the use of Argand oil lamps, coloured filters of silk and painted transparencies combined with incidental instrumental music and mechanical devices (such as automata) in order to produce a variety of ingenious audiovisual effects<sup>97</sup>. These techniques also came to be frequently employed for

<sup>94</sup> Garrick, David, Prologue to *A New Dramatic Entertainment, called A Christmas Tale. In Five Parts*, 2nd edition, London: T. Becket (1774), page unnumbered.

<sup>95</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 50 (January 1774), p. 73.

<sup>96</sup> Walpole, Horace, *The Letters of Horace Walpole Earl of Orford*, ed. Peter Cunningham, 9 vols., vol. 4, London: Bickers & Son (1880), p. 44.

<sup>97</sup> In 1782, its second season, the show, curiously divided into five 'acts', concluded with an arresting supernatural scene drawn from book one of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and entitled "Satan Arraying his Troops on the Banks of a Fiery Lake, with the Raising of the Palace of Pandemonium". *The European Magazine* described it thus: 'It is a view of the Miltonic Hell, clothed in all its terrors. The artist hath given shape and body to the imagination of the immortal bard, and presents to the wrapt and astonished sense, the fiery lake bounded by burning hills. He follows closely the description of the poet. Belzebug and Moloch, rise from the horrid lake, and Pandemonium appears gradually to rise, illuminated with all the grandeur bestowed by Milton, and even with additional properties, for serpents twine around the doric pillars, and the intense red changes to a transparent white, expressing thereby the effect of fire upon metal. Thousands of Demons are then seen to rise, and the whole brightens into a scene of magnificent horror. The lightning exhibits all the varied and vivid flashes of the natural phenomenon, and the

the representation of ‘floating’ ghosts and other otherworldly Gothic effects not only in drama but also in popular magic lantern shows and phantasmagorias (see chapter 3)<sup>98</sup>. More generally, De Louthembourg's masterful and deceiving use of light, shadow and other optical effects contributed to create a spectacular realism (even with regard to the portrayal of the supernatural) that accustomed spectators to immersive experiences of visual engagement, where the boundary between truth and fiction became dangerously blurred.

### 1.3 *The origins of Gothic drama*

Being Horace Walpole a keen theatregoer, it seems perfectly plausible that Garrick's Shakespearean productions played a significant role in the shaping of *The Castle of Otranto*, thus establishing a direct link between Shakespeare – and by extension Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre – and Gothic literature, a long-recognised connection that especially in recent years has received considerable critical attention<sup>99</sup>. Actually, as Clara F. McIntyre suggested as early as 1921, most Gothic novels ‘are not an expression of the life and spirit of the Middle Ages, if this is what the term [Gothic] means. They are, rather, an expression of the life and spirit of the Renaissance, as Elizabethan England has interpreted the Renaissance’<sup>100</sup>. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term ‘Gothic’ – first used in Shakespearean criticism by Alexander Pope, who compared his plays to ‘an ancient majestick piece of Gothick architecture’<sup>101</sup> – and the name of Shakespeare could basically be aligned as synonyms of ‘anti-classical’. By the standards of Neoclassicism, Shakespeare was Gothic in the sense of irregular, uneven, rude, and occasionally gloomy and bizarre. In his works one can find all the distinctive tropes that would define the Gothic genre, the supernatural in the first place:

Shakespeare's plays provide good examples of the supernatural and weird atmosphere: Hamlet, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, and Richard III have ghosts; Macbeth and Julius Caesar use prophecies and supernatural portents; King Lear has a desolate heath and nature at her wildest in thunder, lightning, and rain; Romeo and Juliet has a whole gamut of horrors: tombs, vaults, sepulchres,

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thunder includes every vibration of air, and shock of element which so often in its prototype, strikes terror and admiration on the mind’. *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 1 (March 1782), pp. 180-1. Francesca Saggini has fascinatingly recognised this infernal imagery as a possible source of inspiration for the diabolic ending scene of Lewis's *The Monk*. Saggini, Francesca (2015), p. 195.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>99</sup> See, among others, John Drakakis and Dale Townshend (eds.) (2008); Desmet, Christy, and Williams, Anne (eds.), *Shakespearean Gothic*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press (2009); Townshend, Dale, ‘Gothic Shakespeare’, in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, Chichester: Wiley- Blackwell (2012), pp. 38-63; Bronfen, Elisabeth, and Neumeier, Beate (eds.), *Gothic Renaissance: A Reassessment*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2014).

<sup>100</sup> McIntyre, Clara, ‘Were the “Gothic” novels Gothic?’, *Modern Language Association*, vol. 36, no. 4 (Dec 1921), p. 646.

<sup>101</sup> Pope, Alexander, Preface to *The Works of Shakespear*, 6 vols., London: Jacob Tonson (1723-5), p. xxiii.

bones, and fumes; Hamlet has stark battlements in the dead of night; several other plays set their scenes in old castles; Macbeth has a variety of apparitions, a signal bell, a forest, thunder and lightning, a cavern, a castle, and a midnight murder done to the accompaniment of supernatural sounds. Banquo's spectre "with twenty trench'd gashes on his head", is a distant precursor of the Schauer-Romantik method.<sup>102</sup>

As a matter of fact, *The Castle of Otranto* itself might be interpreted as a Shakespearean tragedy in disguise, its inherent theatricality being obvious also from the five-act structure, the mixture of comic and tragic and general respect to the three dramatic unities (although this last feature actually is not very Shakespearean). The novel's greatest invention, the gigantic armoured ghost which brings about the defeat of the usurping villain and the re-establishment of the rightful royal and genealogical line, seems a clear nod to *Hamlet*<sup>103</sup>, which, along with *Macbeth*, represents the main points of reference for early Gothic literature (and drama)<sup>104</sup>. As a matter of fact, in the famous preface to *Otranto*'s second edition Walpole declared '[t]hat great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied'<sup>105</sup>, a statement of intent that responded to the need of legitimising his work by grounding it on a well-established English tradition, with important cultural as well as political meanings<sup>106</sup>. The seamless use of the supernatural was therefore justifiable by the fact that also a high-profile author like Shakespeare had used it galore. Basically all subsequent Gothic writers, including the two masters of the 1790s, Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, followed the path traced by Walpole and appealed to the prestigious authority of Shakespeare through quotations, references, allusions meant to elevate the prestige of their works. This strategy was adopted also by Gothic playwrights, who, however, had to cope with an almost insurmountable obstacle, namely, the eighteenth-century stage's notorious dislike of the supernatural, especially that designed to be taken seriously.

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<sup>102</sup> Varma, Devendra P. (1957), p. 30.

<sup>103</sup> Linda Charnes sees the apparition of the ghost's gigantic body parts as a 'dismemberment of Shakespeare's most overbearing Ghost', Charnes, Linda, 'Shakespeare and the Gothic Strain', in *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 38, ed. Susan Zimmerman and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press (2010), p. 196. Walpole's appropriation of Shakespeare should also be contextualised in a period in which English authors felt the duty to immortalise his status as an unmatched genius and defend it against external attacks: 'By making Shakespeare [...] central to a story about lines of descent, Walpole contributes to the eighteenth-century consolidation of Shakespeare's reputation, a process that was also marked by acts of physical memorialisation such as the establishment of David Garrick's Shakespeare Temple near Richmond in 1756, as well as the placing of a statue of the dramatist in Poet's Corner in 1740. Given that a memorial effigy is integral to *Otranto*'s plot, and given that grave memorials are intrinsically concerned with lineage and origins, the correspondence between *Otranto*'s plot and Walpole's broader interest in cultural transmission seems clear'. Quinn, Vincent, 'Graveyard Writing and the Rise of the Gothic', in *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2016), p. 41.

<sup>104</sup> 'Many Gothic novels appear to originate on Macbeth's blasted heath or atop the battlements of Elsinore Castle'. Frank, Frederick S., (1981), p. 48.

<sup>105</sup> Walpole, Horace, *The Castle of Otranto. Three Gothic Novels*, ed. Peter Fairclough, Harmondsworth: Penguin Book (1968), p. 44.

<sup>106</sup> The explicit addressee was none other than Voltaire, considered 'a genius — but not of Shakespeare's magnitude'. On the dialectic battle between Voltaire and Walpole see Wright, Angela (2013), pp. 21-32.

Curiously, the father of the Gothic novel is also conventionally recognised as the father of Gothic drama. A few years after the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole wrote *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), a brooding blank verse tragedy about double incest loaded with ominous locations, dark passions, morally ambiguous characters and of course Shakespearean resonances ('Theatric genius lay dormant after *Shakspeare*', the author confirmed in his postscript to the play<sup>107</sup>). Just as he did in the preface to *Otranto*, in the (posthumously published) prologue to *The Mysterious Mother* Walpole calls upon Shakespeare as an inspiring model as well as the perfect antidote against French Neoclassicism (and Voltaire's anglophobic criticism):

From no French model breathes the muse to-night;  
The scene she draws is horrid, not polite.  
She dips her pen in terror. Will ye shrink?  
Shall foreign critics teach you how to think?  
Had Shakespeare's magic dignified the stage,  
If timid laws had schooled th'insipid age?  
Had Hamlet's spectre trod the midnight round?  
Or Banquo's issue been in vision crowned?  
Free as your country, Britons, be your scene!  
BE Nature now, and now Invention, queen!<sup>108</sup>

Unlike in *Otranto*, however, in *The Mysterious Mother* the supernatural does not make any visible appearance. Its presence is rather confined to the superstitious thoughts of the characters, who frequently evoke phantoms and demons in their speeches, or to mere *ex post* suggestions (the first appearance of the Countess of Narbonne silently passing across the stage '*in weeds, with a crucifix in her hand*'<sup>109</sup> bears a similarity to certain ghostly nuns of later Gothic works). Act 3, Scene 1 ends with the two friars Benedict and Martin being scared by a deep-toned voice whose provenance is uncertain, leading one of them to ask 'Comes it from heav'n or hell?'<sup>110</sup>. However, the first lines of the following scene reveal that the origin of the voice was a procession of friars singing a funeral anthem. The Countess herself believes that she sees the spirit of her defunct husband (feared also by the orphan children of Narbonne, who think he has the habit of sitting on the church-porch '[w]ith clotted locks, and eyes like burning stars'<sup>111</sup>) when he meets her son Edmund after a long time:

Distraction!  
What means this complicated scene of horrors?  
Why thus assail my splitting brain?—be quick—  
Art thou my husband wing'd from other orbs

<sup>107</sup> Walpole, Horace, *The Mysterious Mother. A Tragedy*, London (1791), p. 92.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Walpole, Horace, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story, and, The Mysterious Mother: A Tragedy*, ed. Frederick S. Frank, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview (2011), pp. 175-6.

<sup>109</sup> Walpole, Horace (1791), p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26. Later on, a violent storm breaks out, the church's cross mysteriously falls and the children say the prayers against spectres that the friars have taught them.

To taunt my soul? What is this dubious form,  
Impress'd with ev'ry feature I adore,  
And every lineament I dread to look on!<sup>112</sup>

Nonetheless, it is difficult to evaluate *The Mysterious Mother's* impact on successive Gothic productions, especially considering the fact that the play had been conceived to be read privately and was not performed until 2001 (although an adaptation of it was staged at the illegitimate Surrey Theatre in 1824<sup>113</sup>). The tragedy's subject was in fact deemed too inappropriate to be represented in front of an audience, to the point that Walpole himself tried to prevent its publication for many years. It was only in the century's last decade that it began to circulate more extensively thanks to pirated editions issued in Dublin and London in 1791.

By this time, the Gothic mode had taken roots in regular tragedy, as attested by works such as Hannah Cowley's *Albina*, *Countess Raimond* (Haymarket, 1779), Robert Jephson's *The Count of Narbonne* (Covent Garden, 1781), Richard Cumberland's *The Carmelite* (Drury Lane, 1784), Andrew McDonald's *Vimonda* (Haymarket, 1787) and Bertie Greatheed's *The Regent* (Drury Lane, 1788), among others. All of these plays, however, attentively avoided including the supernatural – even *The Count of Narbonne*, an adaptation of Walpole's *Otranto* (but the plot also betrays a debt to *The Mysterious Mother*) that changed the setting from Italy to France and took care to completely remove all the fantastic incidents of the novel ‘for the obvious purpose of making the whole of the representation more probable, and consequently more interesting’<sup>114</sup>. *The Critical Review* applauded the choice because ‘nodding helmets, waving plumes, and walking pictures, would have made but a ridiculous figure on an English stage’<sup>115</sup>, while *The English Review* lamented that the element of the prophetic curse was maintained in the plot, calling it a ‘radical error’<sup>116</sup>.

A supernatural element was instead seemingly introduced in the para-Shakespearean Scottish tragedy *Vimonda*, in which the eponymous heroine lives in a palace reportedly haunted by the armoured spirit of her supposed dead father, Earl Rothsay. Rothsay, however, soon turns out to be alive and well during an encounter with Alfreda, *Vimonda's* attendant. It is revealed that he had been nearly murdered by the perfidious Dundore, who subsequently wanted to blame *Vimonda's* lover Melville for the crime in order to marry the girl and get his hand on her estate. While the

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>113</sup> Worrall, David, ‘Undiscovered 1821 Surrey Theatre Performances of Horace Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother*’ (1768), *Gothic Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2014), pp. 1-19.

<sup>114</sup> *The Universal Magazine*, vol. 69 (November 1781), p. 264. The only traces of the original story's supernaturalism survive in these evocative lines pronounced by the Countess in Act 1, Scene 4: ‘The owl mistakes his season, in broad day / Screaming his hideous omens; spectres glide, / Gibbering and pointing as we pass along; While the deep earth's unorganized caves / Send forth wild sounds, and clamours, terrible; / These towers shake round us, though the untroubled air / Stagnates to lethargy:—our children perish, / And new disasters blacken every hour’. Jephson, Robert, *The Count of Narbonne*, second ed., corrected, London: T. Cadell (1787), p. 15.

<sup>115</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 59 (December 1781), p. 456.

<sup>116</sup> *The English Review*, vol. 1 (January 1783), p. 74.

mystery is unravelled to the audience quite soon, the tragedy dedicates ample room to the depiction of Vimonda's anguish and terror at the idea that her father has returned from the grave, showing how her addled mind leads her to take wrong decisions. The epilogue, written by the Scottish novelist Henry McKenzie (the author of *The Man of Feeling*) and spoken by Mrs Kemble (who played the titular protagonist), appears as a defence of the playwrights' right to represent ghosts on the basis of the current harmlessness of such beliefs, in what can be read as an initial step toward the acceptance of Gothic supernaturalism in serious drama:

Methinks our heroine was wond'rous weak  
 To let a goblin tale her marriage break.  
 Now, thank our stars! the childish creed is lost,  
 That gave such mighty influence to a ghost;  
 Nor ever, as in these old-fashion'd times,  
 "Perturbed spirits" witness secret crimes,  
 Except when rais'd by some shrewd swindling brain,  
 They thump, and scratch, and vanish in Cock-lane. [...]  
 But here, within our mimic kingdom's bound,  
 Still antique ghost may walk their nightly round;  
 Still truncheon'd Hamlet glide, or Banquo's shade,  
 Drive Scotland's tyrant from his seat dismay'd.  
 Could but our magic spells contrive to bind  
 Spirits before the curtain as behind;  
 Poets no more shall dread the fatal sound  
 Of harsh and angry goblin's rising round,  
 Of those who howl above, or hiss below the ground.  
 May milder pow'rs now breathe their influence here,  
 And join the muse's smile, the muse's tear;  
 In his warm soil may foster'd genius spring,  
 And here young fancy stretched a bolder wing.  
 If such kind spirits hither make resort,  
 Weak as we are, we'll not be frighten'd for't.  
 Let them walk here, we'll use no charms to cure it,  
 And tho' our house be haunted—we'll endure it.<sup>117</sup>

Such assertion was perhaps too far ahead of its time, as confirmed by the fact that *Vimonda* obtained a rather modest reception: *The English Review* commented that 'there is something so peculiarly ludicrous in the idea of a real man playing the part of a ghost, as defeats, in some degree, the pathetic of Mr. McDonald's tragedy'<sup>118</sup>, while *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* thought that this trick had been badly copied from Addison's *The Drummer*<sup>119</sup>. However, while they ostensibly disowned any belief in the supernatural, this kind of pseudo-historical tragedies began to display a new attitude in the way they made the Gothic past spectrally alive on stage, embedding this ghostly metaphor in their plots.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in *The Thespian Oracle; or, a New Key to Theatrical Amusements* (1791), pp. 51-2.

<sup>118</sup> *The English Review*, vol. 12 (October 1788), p. 287.

<sup>119</sup> *The General Magazine and Impartial Review*, vol. 2 (November 1788), p. 586.

If tragedians were initially thoroughly reluctant to deal directly with the most uncomfortable aspects of the Gothic, these were instead eagerly embraced by authors of minor genres, traditionally more open to unconventional devices like the supernatural. Comic opera (a kind of musical play of a light or humorous nature, in which the dialogue is spoken rather than sung), for example, proved especially receptive to the influence of the Gothic. Starting with John O' Keeffe's *The Castle of Andalusia* (Covent Garden, 1782), late-century comic operas frequently poked fun of typical Gothic conventions by incorporating 'elements of tragedy, horror, and terror in addition to comedy and frivolity', in what was a 'complete confusion and violation of the dramatic unities that still prevailed on the serious stage'<sup>120</sup>. Supernatural – or rather mock-supernatural – motifs became commonplace, although they were mellowed down by the comic overtones of the plots as well as by the light melodies conceived by the composers to lessen the impact of the gloomy and horrific happenings shown on stage. The best example of this type of play is the tremendously successful three-act opera *The Haunted Tower* (Drury Lane, 1789), an adaptation of the Marquis De Sade's *La Tour Enchantée* (submitted to Parisian theatres in 1788 but never performed) with libretto by James Cobb and musical score by Stephen Storace. The titular tower, however, turns out to be inhabited by none other than a bunch of vivacious servants with the habit of gathering at night in one of its chamber to drink wine and sing merrily. This gave rise to the superstition (promoted by the servants themselves) of the 'spirit playing his illumination tricks'<sup>121</sup>, which had kept everyone from entering the supposedly ominous chamber. As in *Vimonda*, a ghost does show up but it is only a living flesh and blood man, namely, the hero of the story Lord William, who in the final act 'walks with great solemnity'<sup>122</sup> in his dead father's armour (*Hamlet* is again the main visual point of reference) and scares the illegitimate Baron of Oakland and the clandestine revellers away. The frightening potential of the scene is obviously mitigated by the fact that the audience knows that the spectre is not a genuine one (shortly before Lord William was shown finding the armour), the plot being designed to mock the idiosyncrasies of the Gothic rather than enhance them. As Bertrand Evans argued, 'this piece looks suspiciously like burlesque. O'Keeffe had composed a recipe for comic treatment of Gothic machinery [*The Castle of Andalusia*], and Cobb seems to have exaggerated all ingredients of the formula'<sup>123</sup>. Moreover, the title seems to be a mere bait, given that the tower is not really haunted, nor does it play a relevant role in the story. But the fact that *The Haunted Tower* was acted 84 times in the first two seasons and many more in the following years<sup>124</sup> constitutes clear

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<sup>120</sup> Garlington Jr., Aubrey S., "'Gothic' Literature and Dramatic Music in England, 1781-1802', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1962), p. 51.

<sup>121</sup> Cobb, James, *The Haunted Tower*, Philadelphia (1828), p. 41.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>123</sup> Bertrand, Evans, *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1947), p. 68.

<sup>124</sup> Burwick, Frederick, *Romantic Drama: Acting and Reading*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2009), p. 179.

evidence that by the 1780s the Gothic, especially the supernatural Gothic, already furnished an attractive commercial formula.

Another minor genre that had come under the influence of the Gothic was pantomime. Miles Peter Andrews's pioneering *The Enchanted Castle* (Covent Garden, 1786) was possibly the first to fully delve into the supernatural terrors of the Gothic showing a remarkable theoretical awareness of the operation. After a failed attempt to adapt *The Castle of Otranto*, Andrews – ‘unquestionably one of the worst playwrights of any period’<sup>125</sup> – chose pantomime to create a Gothic fantasy crammed with supernatural figures, notably the Necromancer, the Genius of the Wood, the god Neptune, magicians, spectres, giants and nymphs. The opening epigraph, taken from John Milton's *Il Penseroso* (1645) is a declaration of poetics in itself: ‘Of Forests and Enchantments drear / Where more is meant than meets the ear’. The author's intentions are then extensively expressed in the preface, which opens with a reflection on the increasing hybridness of regular drama as opposed to the conservatism of pantomime:

IN this Age of Theatric change, when TRAGEDIES have found themselves to be COMEDIES, and COMEDIES have bordered upon PANTOMIME; nothing has changed so little as Pantomime itself. But one Jest cannot unfortunately live for ever. In the East Indies, the same Joke lasts only a Twelvemonth, and is terminated by the Arrival of the next Ships. For this Reason, the Author of the Pantomime, in which the following Songs bear a Part, has attempted to stray from the beaten Road; but it is requested the Audience will not be alarmed.<sup>126</sup>

Then, Andrews goes on illustrating the nature of his innovative undertaking:

The Novelty attempted to be dramatised To-night, takes its Rise from the Writings of MISS AIKIN, and the HON. HORACE WALPOLE. The Castle of Otranto, and the Fragment of Sir Bertrand, form the Basis of an Endeavour to bring upon the Stage somewhat of the Effects which may be produced by Midnight Horror, and Agency supernatural. What may be the Result of this Experiment, To-night must determine, for hitherto the Experiment has not been made.<sup>127</sup>

If this was actually not the first attempt to bring the Gothic on stage, it was probably the first to present the Gothic supernatural as such, therefore with the stated purpose of scaring spectators, of making them *believe*, even if only for a moment. Andrews observes how this kind of supernaturalism is considerably different, for example, from the one found in Shakespeare's plays, which was ‘simple and not combined’<sup>128</sup>. In the Gothic genre, by contrast, the supernatural is accompanied by ‘[t]he Clank of Chains, the Whistling of hollow Winds, the Clapping of Doors,

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<sup>125</sup> Bertrand, Evans (1947), p. 67.

<sup>126</sup> Andrews, Miles Peter, *The Songs, Recitatives, Airs, Duets, Trios and Chorusses introduced in the pantomime entertainment of The Enchanted Castle. As performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. The words by Miles Peter Andrews, Esq., and the music by Mr Shields*, London: J. Bell (1786), p. iv. The pantomime is also preserved in the Hungtinton's Larpent collection under the title *The Castle of Wonders*.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v..

Gigantic Forms, and visionary Gleams of Light'<sup>129</sup>, all elements that in 1786 were totally new to the stage. In *The Enchanted Castle* these appear mainly in the first act, when Harlequin enters the enchanted castle where Columbine is held prisoner by a cruel necromancer. Here he encounters 'many intimidating horrors' in a 'succession of scenes [...] calculated to inspire an awful terror'<sup>130</sup>. In line with the style of pantomime, however, the Gothic elements are counterbalanced by the amusing devices typical of the harlequinade, including the traditional happy ending. And yet, the audience's positive response did not save the work from critical condemnation: *The Critical Review* demolished it by writing that '[t]he man who could collect such wretched balderdash as this, deserves to be consigned to eternal oblivion'<sup>131</sup>; in the same vein, *The English Review* dismissed it as 'a collection of absurdity and nonsense, which a mind, capable of the most grovelling intellectual drudgery, could only condescend to produce'<sup>132</sup>.

Not all pantomimes adopted such light-hearted tones: although hardly categorisable as Gothic, the anonymous 'Grand Pantomimical Ballet' *Don Juan; or, the Libertine Destroyed* (Drury Lane, 1790) put particular emphasis on the supernatural components of the Don Juan myth, thus trying to meet the new tastes of the audience. As matter of fact, the ending scene in the cemetery unmistakably evokes Gothic shivers and deserves to be fully quoted:

Don Juan, with the most hardened intrepidity, enters the repository of the dead, in which mansion, to add to the awfulness of the scene, again appears the spirit of the assassinated Duke. Scaramouch uses every diswasive to induce him to forego his intention; but, finding his efforts vain, receives from the Libertine his hat and sword, and reluctantly leaves his master. Don Juan approaches the apparition unappalled, saying, "Antonio, who I detested when living, and equally despise now thou art numbered with the dead, behold me, faithful to my appointment! Have you prepared the banquet?" The shadow pointing to his bones lying upon a pedestal, seems to reply: "Hardened wretch, are not the objects in this cave of death sufficient to awaken remorse; then thou art lost indeed." Don Juan, with frantick obduracy, seizes the mouldering bones of the murdered father; fractures them and casts them at the feet of the Phantom, and in a paroxism of wickedness, tramples on his skull! Horrid thunders roll! The vision vanishes! The earth yawns! The ministers of vengeance arrayed in flaming sulphur ascend from the charm!— The Libertine, in all the agony of guilt, casts himself upon the ground to avoid the terrors which encompass him, but in vain! His momentary slumber is awakened by the demons which surround him; and, [...] HELL, with all its HORRORS, bursts open to receive him!!!<sup>133</sup>

As is evident, from the 1780s onwards the Gothic emerged as a chameleonic mode capable of successfully adapting to different dramatic forms. Anticipating the apex of its literary success, on stage the Gothic slowly affirmed itself as a recognisable trademark and, problematically, a unifying force able to bring different forms of drama closer together (if only at a merely visual level). Surely

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 10 (December 1786), p. 473.

<sup>131</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 64 (July 1787), p. 73.

<sup>132</sup> *The English Review*, vol. 9 (May 1787), p. 389.

<sup>133</sup> Anonymous, *Don Juan; or, the Libertine Destroyed*, London: J. Wrihten (1790), p. 16.

it provided a timely innovation for playwrights and managers who, following Garrick's example, became more and more interested in the development of sophisticated set designs, sumptuous costumes, atmospheric lightning techniques and innovative sound effects – therefore everything Neoclassicism had attempted to curtail – in order to impress a public that was growing tired of old theatrical formulas. In this respect, pantomime, ballet and other similar minor genres, with their sundry special effects and spectacular stage machines, played a key role in accustoming spectators to the Gothic aesthetic of the imagination. Only one barrier remained, the most important in the century of Enlightenment: the ‘real’ supernatural was still banned from serious spoken drama, where Shakespeare continued to be an inimitable model and sometimes a barely tolerated exception. Such invisible boundary, however, was finally crossed in 1794, when a courageous author decided to break this taboo, formally inaugurating a new phase in English theatre's history.

#### 1.4 James Boaden's pioneering phantom

James Boaden was not only the first playwright to introduce a well-authenticated ghost in a tragedy since time immemorial but also, somewhat ironically, the first to take up the challenging task of dramatising a novel by Ann Radcliffe, a Gothic author who during the 1790s became renowned for her rejection of straightforward supernaturalism. This groundbreaking dramatic spectre appeared, therefore, where least expected. Boaden was a young writer whose first play, the ‘musical romance’ *Ozmyr and Daraxa* (Haymarket, 1793), had obtained a remarkably positive reception. In 1794 he decided to adapt Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) into a regular five-act tragedy entitled *Fontainville Forest*. Boaden had an enthusiastic opinion of the book, which he had read ‘with great pleasure, and thought that he saw there the ground-work of a drama of more than usual effect’<sup>134</sup>. He therefore undertook to condense Radcliffe's three-decker by making all necessary alterations and simplifications in order to render the plot suitable for the stage. The play premiered at Covent Garden on 25 March 1794 and, predictably, caused a great sensation.

In typical Radcliffian fashion, the protagonist is a young orphan, Adeline, who at the beginning of the story (set in fifteenth-century France) is saved from the clutches of a ruffian by Lamotte, a disgraced nobleman turned into an outlaw. Despite some initial perplexities, Lamotte and his wife Hortensia welcome the unknown girl in the dilapidated abbey in which they have taken refuge after fleeing from Paris because of Lamotte's gambling debts. She soon attracts the attention of Louis, the

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<sup>134</sup> Boaden, James, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, Esq. Including a History of the Stage, from the Time of Garrick to the Present Period*, 2 vols, vol. 2, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green (1825), pp. 96-7.

couple's son, and of the wicked Marquis of Montault, whom Lamotte had unsuccessfully attempted to rob. As soon as he arrives at the abbey, the Marquis blackmails Lamotte and tells him that he can fix the wrong only by helping him win Adeline's heart. Meanwhile, Adeline, tormented by visions of a 'dying Cavalier, weltering in blood', discovers a '*melancholy Apartment*' adjacent to her chamber where she finds a blood-encrusted dagger and a mouldy, quasi-illegible scroll that promises to reveal something about the obscure past of the place. The young lady, frightened yet somehow fascinated by the secret room, revisits it at midnight and begins to read the crumbling manuscript aloud. She soon realises that it had been written by the late Philip, the former Marquis of Montault, and that it relates the story of how he had been abducted, imprisoned and doomed to perish within the confines of the ruined abbey by his own brother, the current Marquis, who thus usurped his title. As Adeline keeps reading, however, a hollow voice is suddenly heard responding to her. She initially tries to explain it in rational terms, attributing it first to the rumble of thunder and then to her own overheated imagination, until she realises that she is actually experiencing a paranormal visitation when the 'Phantom', as it is called in the stage directions, briefly 'glides across the dark part of the Chamber'<sup>135</sup>. This sudden apparition causes the girl to scream and faint, leaving the audience in speechless amazement as the curtain falls on the third act.

The decision to introduce a spectre in *Fountainville Forest* must have been well pondered, the culmination of a long series of more general reflections on how to convincingly convey Radcliffe's poetic and highly descriptive prose. In particular, Radcliffe's renowned use of the explained supernatural seems to have been a cause of concern to Boaden. This literary device had been approved by both reading public and reviewers since it offered a satisfactorily rational justification for the supernatural without necessarily renouncing the poetical possibilities it unleashed: in *The Romance of the Forest*, for example, Adeline's continuous nightmares about the Phantom are caused by her own turbulent state of mind, and the spectral figure she sees in her chamber turns out to be a servant. Boaden appreciated this technique, but was rather wary of the possibility of translating it onto the stage since he firmly believed that dramatic writing needed to resolve the ambiguity of prose in one way or the other:

He admired, as every one else did, the singular address by which Mrs. Radcliffe contrived to impress the mind with all the terrors of the ideal world; and the sportive resolution of all that had excited terror into very common natural appearances; indebted for their false aspect to circumstances, and the overstrained feelings of the characters. [...] However this may be in respect of romance, when the doubtful of the narrative is to be exhibited in the drama, the decision is a matter of necessity. While description only fixes the inconclusive dreams of the fancy, she may partake the dubious character of her inspirer; but the pen of the dramatic poet

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<sup>135</sup> Boaden. James, *Fontainville Forest*, in *The Plays of James Boaden*, ed. Steven Cohan, New York-London: Garland (1980), pp. 38-40.

must turn everything into shape, and bestow on these “airy nothings a local habitation and a name”.<sup>136</sup>

In short, Boaden wanted an ‘authentic’ ghost to appear on stage. Of course he perceived the risk of taking a path ‘which none but Shakespeare had hitherto trodden with success’<sup>137</sup>: indeed, his Phantom owes an obvious debt to *Hamlet*, but at the same time it reveals a clear willingness to break from that tradition. Boaden actually thought that ‘nothing ever was more tasteless than the stage exhibition of the Ghost in Hamlet’, specifically lamenting the ‘heavy, bulky, creaking substantiality’ that characterised it<sup>138</sup>. As a matter of fact, King Hamlet's ghost, clad in full armour, had often been an overwhelmingly physical presence on stage, whereas Boaden wished to ‘remove the too corporeal effect of a “live actor,” and convert the moving substance into a gliding essence’<sup>139</sup>. His chief visual point of reference was the ghost in Heinrich Füssli's lost canvas *Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and the Ghost*, originally painted for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery (which had opened in London in 1789). In this work, four Michelangelesque figures stand in the spotlight surrounded by complete darkness as if in an unspecified theatrical space, crystallized in wild expressions and monumental gestures that seem to replicate the typically grandiloquent late-eighteenth century acting style<sup>140</sup>. Boaden had been especially struck by Füssli's way of portraying the ghost:

It has what seems person, invested in what seems to be armour; it bears the regal sceptre; its countenance is human in its lineaments, though it inspires more awe than mere humanity can excite. How is all this produced? By recollecting some of the known principles of the sublime. By the artifices of the pallet; by keeping down all too positive indication of substance; by the choice of a cold slaty prevalent colour, touched slightly with the pale silvery tone of moonlight; by a step gigantic in its extent, and action of the most venerable dignity and command.<sup>141</sup>

Known as the ‘wild Swiss’, throughout his career Füssli dedicated several works to macabre and

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<sup>136</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 97. The final quotation is from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act 5, Scene 1). Boaden later came to criticise also Robert Jephson's removal of the marvellous in *The Count of Narbonne*: ‘The features of the Gothic romance never bend to modern philosophy without losing much of their picture power, and all their sublimity. It is true that the stage may be unable to exhibit its terrors adequately; but if a catastrophe be mere matter of narration, a credence of the marvellous is never refused to the seeming earnestness and conviction of the relater. As far, too, as the human passions are concerned, the superstitions of a dark age extenuate in a degree the peculiar atrocities to which they sometimes conduct. All the accompaniments should bear the impress of the century in which we lay the action. The modern spectator, for his own enjoyment, will surrender his knowledge to his imagination, and, with the excellent Collins, “Hold each strange tale devoutly true”’. Boaden, James, *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: Henry Colburn (1827), p. 254.

<sup>137</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol.2, pp. 97-8. Of course Boaden had a very ill opinion of Voltaire's ghosts. He deemed the scene of *Semiramis* in which the ghost of Ninus appears an ‘extravagant, useless, unintelligible piece of mystification’. Boaden, James (1827), vol. 1, p. 88.

<sup>138</sup> Boaden, James (1825), p. 98.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>140</sup> Saggini, Francesca, ‘Contextual Hauntings: Shakespearean Ghosts on the Gothic Stage’, in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Romanticism*, ed. Joseph Ortiz, Burlington: Ashgate (2013), p. 176.

<sup>141</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, pp. 98-9.

fantastic subjects drawn from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, among others, significantly fuelling the rising Gothic imagination. Boaden had been particularly impressed by how Füssli represented the supernatural and especially ghosts, as confirmed also by the remark he made upon his *Queen Katherine's Dream* (1781), inspired by a scene from Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII*:

Look at the effect of this circling and ascending spirits in Mr. Fuseli's picture of that scene, (where he has used Rembrandt with great skill) — I say boldly, that the stage is competent to all HIS effect, and *more*.<sup>142</sup>

The reproduction of that effect, the effect of the sublime, is precisely what drove Boaden to insert the Phantom in *Fontainville Forest* in the attempt to transfer the terror evoked by Füssli's paintings into a flesh-and-blood theatrical context. In his view, choosing the correct actors, costumes and lighting was essential to the believability of the scene: as Steven Cohan puts it, the ghost 'symbolized for him, not so much the shadowy depths of the psyche, as it did for Radcliffe in *Romance of the Forest*, but the dramatic mastery of stagecraft'<sup>143</sup>. Boaden was well aware of the risk of making the ghost ridiculous, but during a nocturnal rehearsal of the play done under the watchful eye of Covent Garden manager Thomas Harris he apparently found the right formula:

I recommended a dark blue grey stuff, made in the shape of armour, and sitting close to the person; and when Follet (of course unknown) was thus drest, and faintly visible behind the gauze or crape spread before the scene, the whisper of the house, as he was about to enter, — the breathless silence, while he floated along like a shadow, — proved to me, that I had achieved the great desideratum; and the often-renewed plaudits, when the curtain fell, told me that the audience had enjoyed "that sacred terror, that severe delight," for which alone it is excusable to overpass the ordinary limits of nature.<sup>144</sup>

In order to legitimise the introduction of the Phantom, Boaden, like Garrick, considered the audience's emotional response to it a crucial factor. Garrick himself might have been a source of inspiration for the replacement of the real armour with a tight-shaped costume as well as for the idea of making the ghost emerge from the darkness rather than through a noisy trap-door. Moreover, adopting a technique already employed by de Louthembourg at Drury Lane, Boaden had a tissue or sheet of blueish-grey gauze placed between the ghost and the audience and illuminated from behind by the Argand lamps<sup>145</sup>, thus giving the illusion of a sort of spectral haze. The phantom was

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>143</sup> Cohan, Steven, *Introduction*, in *The Plays of James Boaden*, ed. Steven Cohan, New York-London: Garland (1980), pp. lviii-lix.

<sup>144</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 119. 'That sacred terror, that severe delight' is a quotation from James Thomson's poem *Summer* (1727).

<sup>145</sup> The Argand oil lamp was invented in 1784 by Francois Pierre Ami Argand, a Genevan physician and chemist residing in London. This kind of lamp had a hollow tubular wick that allowed more oxygen to reach the flame (thus creating a brighter light) and a glass cylindrical chimney that enabled the air to flow through and around, simultaneously protecting the flame. It was a very important innovation since it 'contributed towards the reduction of make-up and the introduction of new styles of costume, and encouraged another step towards more naturalistic

impersonated by the slender pantomime actor John Follet, who only moved his lips as his lines were uttered by another actor off-stage (James Thompson, in an uncredited role) because if the audience had recognised him, the scene would have been totally spoiled:

The ghost had but two words to utter, “PERISH'D HERE:” — now “that will be exactly the case with the author,” said Follet, “If *I* speak them.” The fable had taught every body, that though the animal might be concealed, the *voice* would betray him. We therefore settled it, that, in imitation of the ancients, he should be only the MIME, to make the action on the stage, and that poor Thompson, disencumbered from the pitch of the Majesty of Denmark, should yet at the wing, with hollow voice, pronounce the two important words; to which the extended arm of Follet might give the consentaneous action.<sup>146</sup>

All these technical arrangements, including the disembodied voice, were conceived to achieve the impression of an insubstantial entity, an evanescent spirit made only of thin air. Furthermore, it has also to be considered that the idea of having the ghost make a fleeting, barely visible appearance – a specific request by Harris – was probably due to the fact that nobody really knew how the audience would have reacted to the apparition. Nevertheless, the gamble paid off and *Fontainville Forest* was performed several times in the next three months, drawing large crowds.

By contrast, the critical reception of the play ranged from lukewarm to completely negative. One of the few positive reviews came from an unorthodox publication like the *The Freemason's Magazine*, which asserted that ‘[t]he introduction of the Ghost is by far the boldest attempt of the modern drama. But it has been conducted with such address by the Author, and the whole scene is so well performed, that it forms one of the best instances of terror, excited by mystery, which the stage can boast’<sup>147</sup>. But most commentators on *Fontainville Forest* totally condemned the addition of the Phantom and dismissed it as ludicrous and potentially detrimental to the audience. *The Monthly Review*, for example, wrote that the author ‘has introduced a ghost; a Being at present very improper for tragedy, for it is rather calculated to excite laughter and contempt than terror’<sup>148</sup>, while according to *The Analytical Review*, ‘[t]he introduction of a phantom is a bold violation of probability, which, in the present state of knowledge, instead of exciting those “grateful terrors” which Shakespeare's ghosts formerly produced can now be expected only to raise a laugh’<sup>149</sup>. Others even came to accuse Boaden of immorality and blasphemy since the representation of the ghost was perceived to ‘support exploded superstitions forbidden by the Church of England’<sup>150</sup>. Furthermore, and this is

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acting’. Banham, Martin and Stanton, Sarah, *The Cambridge Paperback Guide to Theatre*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press (1996), p. 350.

<sup>146</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, pp. 118-9.

<sup>147</sup> *Freemason's Magazine*, vol. 2 (April 1794), p. 311.

<sup>148</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 14, July 1794, p. 351.

<sup>149</sup> *The Analytical Review*, vol. 19, June 1794, p. 187.

<sup>150</sup> Gamer, Michael, ‘National Supernaturalism: Joanna Baillie, Germany, and the Gothic Drama’, *Theatre Survey*, vol. 38, no. 2 (1997), p. 52. Gamer illustrates how ‘[r]esponses to Boaden's ghost quickly organized themselves into two distinct, though associated, claims: Anglican critics condemning representations of spirits as a blasphemous turn to

perhaps what enraged reviewers the most, Boaden appears to have summoned the Phantom for no particular purpose but to excite pure terror in his heroine and the public. As a matter of fact, the Phantom does not seem to have any active part in the plot's resolution, namely, it does not have a *rational* justification to exist in the world of the story (the undisputable point of reference here was Horace's maxim '[n]ec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus incidit', meaning '[a]nd let no god intervene, unless a knot come worthy of such a deliverer'<sup>151</sup>). The third act opens with the Marquis '*wild and dishevell'd*', apparently tormented by visions of the Phantom (which this time is not visible to the audience):

AWAY! Pursue me not! Thou Phantom, hence!  
 For while thy form thus haunts me, all my powers  
 Are wither'd as the parchment by the flame,  
 And my joints frail as nerveless infancy.  
(*Light'ning.*)

See, he unclasps his mangled breast, and points  
 The deadly dagger.—O, in pity strike  
 Deep in my heart, and search thy expiation;  
 Have mercy, mercy! (*falls upon his knee.*) Gone! 'tis all illusion!

This is also the last time in which the Phantom is mentioned. Adeline avoids making explicit reference to her shocking encounter, although towards the end of the fourth act she understands that the spirit she met was that of her father, and that the Marquis is actually her uncle and the man who murdered him. The Marquis is eventually defeated through very natural means when Louis brings to the abbey a lawyer and a witness of his criminal deeds. This denouement of course raised further questions about the ultimate utility of the Phantom. Boaden, however, always defended its inclusion and the audience's approbation helped him resist pressure from those who wanted him to eliminate or at least rationalise the apparition. Somehow anticipating critical reactions to the play, in the epilogue Boaden had Elizabeth Pope, the actress playing Adeline, utter a light-hearted defence of the Phantom in the form of an imaginary dialogue with the author himself:

WELL, heav'n be prais'd, I have escap'd at last,  
 All all my woman's doubts and fears are past.  
 Before this awful crisis of our play,  
 Our vent'rous bard has often heard me say—  
 Think you, our friends one modern ghost will see,  
 Unless, indeed, of Hamlet's pedigree:  
 Know you not, Shakespeare's petrifying pow'r  
 Commands alone the horror-giving hour?  
 "Madam," said he, "with mingled awe and love,

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the idolatries of the popery, and rationalist critics dismissing them as invading, unenlightening barbarism'. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

<sup>151</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, lines 191-2, in *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge, Harvard University Press (1929), pp. 466-7.

“I think of Him, the brightest spirit above,  
“Who triumphs over time and sickle forms,  
“The changes of caprice, and passion's storms;  
“Whose mighty Muse the subject world must bind,  
“While sense and nature charm the willing mind.”

Here Adeline expresses doubts about using pseudo-Shakespearean ghosts, but Boaden, a true Gothicism, replies that Shakespeare is to be seen as an inspiring model as well as a legitimising authority, declaring unconditioned love for his ghostly creation:

“But, Sir, I cry'd, your eulogy apart,  
“Which flows from mine, indeed from every heart;  
“You mean to sanction then your own pale sprite,  
“By his “that did usurp this time of night:”  
“I do,” he answered, “and I beg you'll spare  
“My injur'd phantom ev'ry *red-sea* pray'r:  
“Why should your terror *lay* my proudest boast?  
“Madam, I die, if I give up the ghost.”  
The jest which bursted from his motly mind,  
Anxious as it must be, has made me kind;  
I come his advocate, if there be need,  
And give him *absolution* for the deed.<sup>152</sup>

*Fontainville Forest's* success inevitably produced very practical consequences in the following months. Two plays can indeed be considered as a sort of direct reaction to Boaden's tragedy and its Phantom. One, John Philip Kemble's grand production of *Macbeth*, can actually be taken as a pivotal moment for the theatre of the 1790s. Along with his sister Sarah Siddons, actor-manager John Philip Kemble ideally carried on Garrick's legacy and had his name inextricably linked with memorable productions and performances of Shakespearean plays. Kemble had special regard to the ‘historical accuracy’ (with all the ambiguity that such concept carried in this period) of settings and costumes and in 1794 engaged the antiquarian scene designer William Capon, who introduced the features of the Gothic architectural style to the London stage (including a ‘magnificent and sublime’<sup>153</sup> chapel complete with illuminated stained-glass windows used for Kemble's oratorios). But as Paul Ranger remarked, ‘[t]he result of this accurate visual portrayal should have been to root the plays in an historical truth, but this eluded most of the audience. Applause was for the spectacular nature of Capon's settings, not their veracity’<sup>154</sup>.

The first result of their successful artistic partnership was a spectacular revival of *Macbeth* (with Kemble and his sister in the title roles) that premiered on 21 April 1794, the day in which the new Drury Lane was inaugurated. The play fared well but sparked discussions because of one notable

<sup>152</sup> Boaden, James, ‘Epilogue’ to *Fontainville Forest*, in Cohan, Steven (ed.) (1980), p. 69.

<sup>153</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 116.

<sup>154</sup> Ranger, Paul, “*Terror and Pity Reign in Every Breast*”: *Gothic Drama in the London Patent Theatres*, London: The Society for Theatre Research (1991), p. 5.

omission: the ghost of Banquo was completely deleted from the banquet scene. The prompt-book included no stage direction for the ghost's entrance and Kemble performed the scene speaking to an empty chair (probably following Lady Macbeth's line 'You look but on a stool'), thus making clear that the apparition was only a figment of Macbeth's guilty conscience and disturbed psyche. Indeed, the idea of making the ghost an unsubstantial presence dated back to as early as 1752, when poet Bonnell Thornton suggested its removal to increase the effectiveness of the scene:

There is a circumstance in this play of Macbeth, which I always thought might be manag'd to more advantage. I would willingly confine all dumb ghosts beneath the trap-doors: the ghost in HAMLET is a particular exception, as he is an interesting character, and not only speaks, but is a principal engine in carrying on the fable: — otherwise, their mealy faces, white shirts, and red rags stuck on in imitation of blood, are rather the objects of ridicule than terror. I cannot help imagining that if the audience were not coldly let into the cause by the rising of the mangled MACDUFF, our surprise would be much greater, and our terror more alarming, while the imagination of MACBETH conjur'd up an airy form before him, though he were really looking only at a chair.<sup>155</sup>

Interestingly enough, Banquo's ghost was considered dispensable by many Enlightenment commentators also because, unlike King Hamlet's spectre, it did not speak any line and was considered less a real character than an abstract idea. As Robert P. Reno noted, this attitude reflected 'an uncertain distinction between silent and speaking ghosts whereby [only] phantoms with lines to recite were to be permitted appearances on stage'<sup>156</sup>. This was intriguingly linked to the absolutely central role assigned to spoken word in the patent system: the distinction between silent and loquacious ghosts somehow mirrored that between legitimate and illegitimate drama (this also explains why the presence of ghosts in pantomime and other dumb genres was unproblematically accepted), and everything that could challenge this legally sanctioned distinction was fiercely contrasted. Following in the footsteps of Thornton, years later another poet, Robert Lloyd, wrote that

in Stage-Costumes what offends me most  
Is the Slip-door, and slowly-rising Ghost.  
Tell me, not count the Question too severe,  
Why need the dismal powder'd Forms appear?

When chilling Horrors shake th'affrighted King,  
And guilt torments him with her Scorpion Sting;  
When keenest Feelings at his Bosom pull,  
And Fancy tells him that the Seat is full,  
Why need the Ghost usurp the Monarch's Place,

<sup>155</sup> Thornton, Bonnell, 'Some Reflections on the Theatres', *Have at You All; or, The Drury-Lane Journal* (19 March 1752), p. 229. The reference to the 'mealy faces' is probably due to the fact that meal was used to whiten the faces of the actors who played ghosts.

<sup>156</sup> Reno, Robert P., 'James Boaden's Fontainville Forest and Matthew G. Lewis' *The Castle Spectre: Challenges of the Supernatural Ghost on the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage*', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 9 (1984), p. 98.

To frighten Children with mealy Face?  
The King alone should form the Phantom there,  
And talk and tremble at the vacant Chair.<sup>157</sup>

However, it seems difficult to believe that Kemble withheld the apparition only out of neoclassical concerns over the supposed unworthiness of stage ghosts. The play itself, far from adopting a sober approach, features a wide range of visually arresting fantastic wonders (which ‘would have done justice to a pantomime’, as Ralph G. Allen noted<sup>158</sup>) that fully exploits the machinery of the renovated Drury Lane, even introducing new supernatural figures on stage:

[The witches] were represented as preternatural beings, adopting no human garb, and distinguished only by the fellness of their purposes, and the fatality of their delusions. Hecate's companion spirit descends on the cloud, and rises again with him. In the Cauldron Scene, new groups are introduced to personify the black spirits and white, blue spirits and grey; and here one would have imagined that the Muse of Fuseli had been the director of the scene. The evil spirits hid serpents writhing round them, which had a striking effect; and they would be more so if they were elastic. On the whole, the play has been prepared with so much care and taste, that is a magnificent spectacle.<sup>159</sup>

It should also be noted that Kemble wanted a clear break with the past by making the play's supernatural personae, in particular witches, less comical than ever before, avoiding ‘all buffoonery in those parts, that *Macbeth* might no longer be deemed a *Tragi-Comedy*’<sup>160</sup>. Moreover, things were further complicated by the fact that Banquo's ghost itself was featured in the scene of the spectral procession of the eight kings in the witches' cave, where it appeared shrouded by eerie vapours behind a transparent screen<sup>161</sup> devised by Thomas Greenwood, one of the seven scene painters that worked on the production (although here its appearance was easily explainable as the product of the Weird Sisters' incantations). The reason behind Kemble's experiment is therefore unclear: it might be possible that, by reducing the dumb ghost of Banquo to a mere hallucination, he simply wanted to please those critics who wished to suppress all apparitions that were not strictly indispensable for the purposes of the plot, especially considering that Banquo's spectral return had often been ‘a ludicrous source of amusement to spectators’<sup>162</sup>. A choice like this could somehow counterbalance the play's numerous concessions to visual spectacle and music, regarded by many as a betrayal of the purity of legitimate drama. But another and certainly more fascinating reason might be Kemble's willingness to distinguish his work from Covent Garden's *Fontainville Forest*, whose Phantom had

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<sup>157</sup> Lloyd, Robert, *The Actor. A Poetical Epistle to Bonnell Thornton*, London: R. and J. Dodsley (1760), pp. 15-6.

<sup>158</sup> Allen, Ralph G., ‘Kemble and Capon at Drury Lane, 1794-1802’, *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 23 no. 1 (March 1971), p. 28.

<sup>159</sup> *Freemason's Magazine*, vol. 2 (April 1794), p. 313.

<sup>160</sup> Oulton, William C., *The History of the Theatres of London*, 2 vols, vol. 2, London: Martin and Bain (1796), p. 140.

<sup>161</sup> Saggini, Francesca (2013), p. 177.

<sup>162</sup> Donohue, Joseph W., Jr., *Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1970), p. 264.

triggered considerable controversy<sup>163</sup>. Actually, it is known that Kemble and Boaden were friends and that Kemble had the opportunity to read his tragedy in advance, although he refused to produce it himself because

at Drury Lane Theatre “they did not want plays; the treasures of our ancient authors were inexhaustible. Shewy after-pieces and laughable farces might be necessary; but what could be expected now in the way of the regular drama, that previously had not been better done?”<sup>164</sup>

Whatever the true reason, the ghostless scene undoubtedly gave Kemble the opportunity to display a piece of acting bravura, letting the audience imagine that Macbeth had seen someone that was not actually there. But this choice partially backfired: his violently exaggerated reaction to the spectre, modelled on that of Garrick, raised eyebrows among the audience, which of course did not see the object of Macbeth's terror<sup>165</sup>.

Many critics warmly applauded the fact that ‘[t]he Ghost of Banquo (like a man turned out of a meal sack) no longer offend[ed] the eye’<sup>166</sup>. Also spectators, probably appeased by the jaw-dropping supernatural grandeur of the rest of the play, initially seemed to accept the alteration willingly. The ghost's exclusion continued when Kemble moved to Covent Garden in late 1803, but there the audience's increasingly loud discontent eventually forced him to restore it<sup>167</sup>. Among those who did not appreciate Kemble's innovation there was James Boaden himself, who did not have a particularly high opinion of his *Macbeth* and ‘preferred the *proper* presentment of Banquo's spirit to his banishment’<sup>168</sup>. Intriguingly, the epigraph to the printed text of *Fontainville Forest* was a particularly telling passage from *Macbeth*: ‘It will have blood, they say, blood will have blood. / Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak’. Almost a reminder that ghosts do exist in *Macbeth*'s world and cannot be removed (at least not without removing also all other supernatural elements of the play). As a reviewer of the 1803 *Macbeth* asserted, ‘that Shakspeare [*sic*] meant the ghost *actually* to appear, there is no question; and this authority should be deemed decisive’, especially because he ‘wrote his play in conformity to the popular *belief* in ghosts, and in the

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<sup>163</sup> Michael Gamer has argued that ‘Kemble's decision to bar the ghost of Banquo in the most elaborate and spectacular *Macbeth* of the century smacks at least as much of marketing and business rivalry as it does of frustration with the taste of late eighteenth-century audiences’. Gamer, Michael (1997), p. 54.

<sup>164</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 100.

<sup>165</sup> Bartholomeusz, Dennis (1969), p. 134.

<sup>166</sup> *The London Pocket* (21-23 April 1794). A reviewer of *The Monthly Mirror* even claimed that the appearance of the ghost might wrongly induce spectators to think that Banquo had been resurrected ‘by the art of medicine and magic’ and thus its omission was a perfectly appropriate choice in an age ‘when spectres are universally scouted as the mere chimeras of a disordered imagination’. In his opinion, its absence would even enhance the frightening effect of the scene: ‘A chilling horror pervades our senses when we behold him contending with an invisible being, and we can observe, without confusing objects, the consternation of the guests. On the contrary, if a lump of flesh and blood (differing with no respect from the rest of the personages on the stage) enter and take its seat, we feel a coldness, an uneasiness, and cannot possibly participate in the interest of the piece’. *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 5, pp. 170-1.

<sup>167</sup> Bartholomeusz, Dennis (1969), p. 133.

<sup>168</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 120.

efficacy of witchcraft'<sup>169</sup>.

Another interesting play written and performed in the immediate aftermath of *Fontainville Forest's* debut was Henry Siddons's three-act opera *The Sicilian Romance; or, The Apparition of the Cliffs*, a very loose adaptation of Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790)<sup>170</sup> that opened on 28 May 1794. The idea of bringing to the stage another of Radcliffe's novels was certainly a direct consequence of Boaden's tragedy's success. The play was a strange hybrid (one of the many bastard productions that became more and more common during these years) that blended elements of the tragic and the comic in imitation of Shakespeare's – and Gothic fiction's – typical mingling of the two modes. But in spite of the numerous liberties he took, the young Siddons (son to Sarah Siddons) did not dare to subvert Radcliffe's rationalism with the insertion of a ghost. The apparition referred to in the title is nothing more than a woman falsely supposed to be dead, in fact only confined in an isolated tower by her cruel husband Ferrand, Marquis of Otranto. This tower, situated among the rocks, has a '*blue Light burning in the Window*'<sup>171</sup> that keeps credulous servants distant. Only Ferrand, '*muffled in a red cloak, with a dark lanthorn in one hand and a sword in the other*', visits it every night at one o'clock in order to bring food to his wife, which has led many to believe that a ghost actually walks along the rocks at that hour. Ferrand's daughter Julia, however, has no fear of ghosts and wants to go there and see it herself (thus proving much bolder than *Fontainville Forest's* Adeline):

Now if this ghost should be my mother, I'm sure she'd speak to me—I should know her directly by this picture which she gave me, which I wash with my tears every night and morning—I've a great curiosity to go and walk up to that tower—A ghost! a ghost can't harm me—Or, if it should be a spirit, I would have it take care—for I'll say my prayers as loud as ever I can, and frighten it away—Yes, yes; I'll go and [...] all the neighbours shall see, that though not quite so *old*, or so *tall*—I have as much *courage* and *curiosity* as the *biggest* of them.

Eventually, Julia finds her imprisoned mother and the tyrant is defeated when the troops led by Don Lope (the lady's uncle) burst into his castle. At one point there is also a highly comic scene in which the servant Martin, '*pale, and in white*' (a subtle nod to Banquo's ghost?), emerges from behind a tomb and involuntarily scares Ferrand. In light of these scenes, it is not so far-fetched to consider *The Sicilian Romance* an attempt to downplay the frightful impact of Boaden's Phantom, or to somehow comment upon it. Actually, for a few nights *Fontainville Forest* and *The Sicilian Romance* were performed back to back, with Siddons's play as the afterpiece to Boaden's (they also probably shared part of the same scenery). As Nathalie Wolfram puts it,

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<sup>169</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 16 (December 1803), pp. 413-4.

<sup>170</sup> According to Frederick S. Frank, 'the use of a Radcliffian title was simply a ploy to attract Gothic viewers', Frank, Frederick S., (1981), p. 154.

<sup>171</sup> All quotations from the text are from Siddons, Henry, *The Sicilian Romance; or, The Apparition of the Cliffs*, London: J. Barker (1794).

The parallel ghost scenes in the concurrent productions reflect the range of dramatic interpretations that Radcliffe's novels allowed and encouraged; indeed, far from conflicting with one another, Boaden and Siddons's competing plays seem to have been deliberately coupled, the first horrifying the audience with the effect of the supernatural, and the other comically flattering the same playgoers with the suggestion that they are aware and discriminating enough to judge [ghost beliefs] ridiculous.<sup>172</sup>

This was actually nothing new: throughout its run, *Fontainville Forest* was also frequently coupled with William Pearce's operatic farce *Netley Abbey* (1794) and James Wild's pantomime *Harlequin and Faustus; or, The Devil will have his Own* (1793), two other plays that made fun of Gothic and supernatural conventions. As Francesca Saggini has argued, for Covent Garden it was not easy to compete with Drury Lane's prestigious Shakespearean productions and *The Sicilian Romance* might be regarded as the theatre's 'end-of-the-season answer to the economic success of Drury Lane's *Macbeth*'<sup>173</sup>. As a matter of fact, *Fontainville Forest* had been commercially outclassed by *Macbeth*, and it cannot be totally excluded that their ostensibly opposite approach towards the ghost problem was recognised as one of the causes of the latter play's superior success, with *The Apparition of the Cliffs* thus serving as a sort of counter-narrative remedy. What is sure is that the controversies surrounding Boaden's tragedy and the various responses it triggered revealed an ambivalent (if not confused) attitude toward the supernatural that reflected the broader changes the English theatre was undergoing. In particular, this situation highlighted, perhaps as never before, how the boundaries were fading between regular and irregular drama:

The inclusion of a supernatural figure would play a significant part in erasing the ever more flimsy dividing line separating legitimate drama from the drama of sensorial stimulation and spectacle. [...] This cultural phenomenon helped create a widening rift between critical respectability and public popularity, dramatic theory and theatrical practice, contributing to the inexorable backsliding of contemporary theater from "words" towards striking gestures, lavish images, and special effects.<sup>174</sup>

The meticulous attention Boaden paid to every aspect of the Phantom's appearance goes precisely in this direction. It is significant that he specifically requested John Follet, a clown 'so royally known for the eating of *carrots* in the pantomimes'<sup>175</sup>, to play this crucial role: the choice is as intriguing as it is emblematic of how the supernatural became an ideal vehicle through which popular entertainments could burst into serious drama and 'contaminate' it. In this way, even a comic actor could 'freeze the spectator with horror'<sup>176</sup>. Furthermore, on one occasion *Fontainville Forest* was even staged in condensed form as a four-act piece, further complicating its status in the eyes of

<sup>172</sup> Wolfram, Nathalie, 'Gothic Adaptation and the Stage Ghost', in *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin, Basingstoke: Palgrave (2014), pp. 58-9.

<sup>173</sup> Saggini, Francesca (2015), p. 156.

<sup>174</sup> Saggini, Francesca (2013), p. 167.

<sup>175</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 118.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

public and critics: was it to be considered a regular piece or not? Was it a prestigious work worthy of being performed on a patent stage or was it of the same league as the 'German' Gothic trash provided by circulating libraries? As Francesca Saggini has explained, the Phantom physically embodied this contradiction since, on the one hand, it betrayed Boaden's formal and aesthetic fidelity to a noble dramatic tradition (Shakespeare), while, on the other, it 'actualize[d] a traffic with the unpatented stage'<sup>177</sup>, therefore with disreputable, highly commercialised forms of mass spectacle.

Actually, the increasingly marked spuriousness of Gothic productions was bound to have an impact on the very status of the patent theatres: starting from the 1790s, the legitimate drama became growingly influenced by the spectacular and highly imaginative entertainments staged at London's illegitimate theatres (the minor playhouses which were not legally allowed to perform spoken drama), such as Sadler's Wells, Astley's Amphitheatre and the Royal Circus. Thanks to their inventive dramaturgical approaches and technical innovations, these unsanctioned venues began to attract large crowds, compelling their more prestigious competitors to respond to 'the changing patterns of taste of a growing middle-and working-class audience that favored escapist fantasy as an antidote to the increasing drabness of industrial life'<sup>178</sup>. And while the patent houses betrayed their nature by subjecting the power of language to a new rhetoric of physical movement, visual spectacle and emotional excesses (facing harsh criticism for this change of course), the unpatented felt encouraged to challenge their authority with more vehemence, adopting subterfuges in order to circumvent the ban that prevented them from inserting spoken dialogue in their productions. Sometimes, this behaviour triggered fierce reactions from the patent managers, as when the actor John Palmer, who had dared to speak in prose on stage during a performance of John Dent's *The Bastille* at the Royal Circus in 1789, was committed to Surrey gaol as a vagrant. Nonetheless, boundaries between patent and unpatented theatres became more and more porous, with actors, authors, plays and ideas passing to and fro between the two worlds. It was the beginning of a true revolution.

Gothic drama's heavy dependence on illegitimate theatrical codes and devices was a decisive accelerating factor and unsurprisingly came to be regarded with suspicion and concern by the most conservative fringe of English intellectuals. In both its literary and theatrical incarnations, the Gothic was a genre that quite naturally exceeded limits and perforated borders, the very opposite of the Enlightenment's fixation on rigid rules. Robert Miles wrote that 'after 1794 the Gothic [...] became a way of speaking the unspeakable'<sup>179</sup>, and the metaphor of speaking is particularly apt

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<sup>177</sup> Saggini, Francesca (2015), p. 174.

<sup>178</sup> Gamer, Michael (1997), p. 55.

<sup>179</sup> Miles, Robert, 'The 1790s: the Effulgence of Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold

considering the theatrical regulation of the time. Stage supernaturalism was thus linked not only with the ever-increasing and ill-reputed market of Gothic romances and chapbooks but also with minor unpatented theatres, where there were no particular restrictions and inhibitions about the representation of this sort of subjects. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, Boaden initially did not find immediate followers and his tragic ghost remained a one-time thing. *Fontainville Forest* was revived only one more time after its initial run (in January 1796) and new Gothic productions such as Miles Peter Andrews's *The Mysteries of the Castle* (Covent Garden, 1795), a pseudo-Radcliffean 'Dramatic Tale' which 'show[ed] Andrew's irrepressible wit in its odd mixture of terror and buffoonery'<sup>180</sup>, and George Colman the Younger's *The Iron Chest* (Drury Lane, 1796), probably best remembered for the diatribe between the author and John Philip Kemble about how the latter's poor performance as the protagonist (due to opium abuse) had ruined the play, carefully avoided including supernatural elements<sup>181</sup>. This absence was noticed: a reviewer of *The Kentish Register*, for instance, observed that *The Mysteries of the Castle* displays 'a superabundance of the pomp and circumstance of the ancient Romance, without any of its magic effects'<sup>182</sup>. Boaden himself did not repeat his courageous experiment either in *The Secret Tribunal*, an adaptation of Benedikte Naubert's *Hermann von Unna* (one of the most appreciated German novels of the period), or in *The Italian Monk* (Haymarket, 1797), another stage rendition of a novel by Radcliffe, namely *The Italian*, though with a more reassuring ending. Both productions did very poorly: deprived of even the slightest reference to the supernatural, the theatrical Gothic was much less effective than its novelistic counterpart.

Conversely, minor genres became more and more receptive to the influence of Gothic fiction, which in the middle of the 1790s was approaching the zenith of its popularity. Drury Lane's pantomime *Harlequin's Captive; or, the Magic Fire* (1796), for example, was 'pregnant with Gothic incident, enchantments, and the like'<sup>183</sup>. The plot follows Harlequin in his mission to free Columbine from the dungeon in which she has been incarcerated by Ormandine, an evil sorcerer protected by some sort of 'magic fire'. In the end the two lovers are united by the Greek goddess Minerva, which led *The Monthly Mirror*, a journal that 'was often the rational nemesis of Gothic hocuspocus'<sup>184</sup>, to

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E. Hogle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2002), p. 55.

<sup>180</sup> Frank, Frederick S. (1981), p. 36.

<sup>181</sup> This type of works nevertheless continued the process of bastardisation of serious drama, their genre being utterly indecipherable. One reviewer, for example, called *The Mysteries of the Castle* a 'dramatic monster' and noted how 'our dramatic audiences cannot digest the plain food of pure tragedy, or pure comedy, but require to have their appetites sharpened by such made-up dishes as tragic-comic-pantomimic-operas'. *The Analytical Review* vol. 2 (June 1795), pp. 628-9. Jeffrey N. Cox himself has defined the Gothic drama of the period as 'an impure generic hybrid, a kind of monstrous form oddly appropriate to the chamber of horrors it displayed on stage'. Cox, Jeffrey N. (2002), p. 128.

<sup>182</sup> *The Kentish Register, and Monthly Miscellany*, vol. 3 (February 1795), p. 55.

<sup>183</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 1 (January 1796), p. 188.

<sup>184</sup> Frank, S. Frederick (1981), p. 153.

ironically ask ‘what *Minerva* has to do with Gothic entertainments?’<sup>185</sup>. In November 1797 Covent Garden once again attracted controversy by presenting *The Round Tower; or, the Chieftains of Ireland*, a serious ballet written by James C. Cross, a pantomime-maker and actor who had recently become the house dramatist of the Royal Circus, an illegitimate theatre which, thanks to his productions, was gaining more prominence<sup>186</sup>. One of his last works for Covent Garden, *The Round Tower* constitutes an interesting example of the kind of shows he put up at the Royal Circus (it would indeed be staged there in 1803). It is a suggestive Irish-themed Gothic piece featuring a chilling supernatural apparition in a ruined cemetery that seems to derive directly from a lurid shilling shocker. In Scene XIII, the hero of the story Maon is about to be murdered when the ghost of his father crosses the stage ‘in transparent armour’, leaps into a chasm and then re-emerges as an animated skeleton to scare the villain away, all while horrible groans are heard and the cemetery ‘appears of a fiery hue’<sup>187</sup>. Of course, when such scenes were offered in this type of shows they were generally not meant to be taken seriously. Critics did not miss the chance to further mock the armoured ghost:

The *apparition* of Laughaire, of which so much has been said, is a tall figure, illuminated with blue lamps, with the belly of a Falstaff. Some say it is the ghost of a lamplighter—some that of a tallow-chandler—others, that of a knight of the pestle, enclosed in one of his own large blue chemical bottles. Which-ever of these suppositions may be right, its effect is very ludicrous.<sup>188</sup>

However, the Gothic continued to grow in popularity and Boaden's precedent loomed heavily as patent theatres were increasingly becoming the province of the imaginative excesses of the genre. Sensing the commercial potential of the Gothic formula, playwrights became more audacious and managers more permissive. It was, therefore, only a matter of time before someone decided to again defy orthodoxy and conjure up another ghost in a regular spoken drama. Uncoincidentally, this was eventually done by a young author who would go down as the undisputed master of Gothic supernaturalism: Matthew Gregory Lewis.

### 1.5 Matthew Gregory Lewis's *spectre of the castle*

There is no doubt that the author who more than any other sensed (and influenced) the ongoing shift

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<sup>185</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 1 (January 1796), p. 188.

<sup>186</sup> One of Cross's first productions at the Royal Circus was *Julia of Louvain; or, Monkish Cruelty*, a Gothic ‘Dramatic Spectacle’ staged in May 1797.

<sup>187</sup> Cross, James Cartwright, *Circusiana; Or a Collection of the Most Favorite Ballets, Spectacles; Melodrames, etc. Performed at the Royal Circus, St George's Fields*, 2 vols, vol. 1, London: Lackington, Allen & Co. Crossley (1809), pp. 16-7.

<sup>188</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 4 (December 1797), p. 366.

in taste and the public's ravenous appetite for stage supernaturalism was Matthew Gregory Lewis. Of course theatres had noted the huge market success of his *The Monk*, a supernatural horror novel that shocked critics with its lurid and morbid contents. Adaptations of it started to be produced especially in France, where *The Monk* was wildly popular. Predictably, London's patent theatres were much more cautious with such a problematic work and avoided direct adaptations. The most important play that stemmed from the book was Charles Farley's *Raymond and Agnes; or, The Castle of Lindenberg* (Covent Garden, 1797), a 'Grand Pantomime-Ballet of Action' with music by William Reeve that adapted one of the most famous and frequently printed episodes of the novel. Much of its notoriety was due to the sinister ghost of the Bleeding Nun, a character based on a popular German legend<sup>189</sup> and generally considered an emblem of the horrific supernaturalism of the 1790s. Intriguingly, the tale soon took on a life of its own, inspiring a host of dramatisations throughout the nineteenth century and making the Bleeding Nun 'an avatar of supernaturalized melodrama'<sup>190</sup>. As a matter of fact, the character's iconography – a veiled woman dressed with blood-stained white robes and holding a dagger, a lamp and a rosary – established a template that would be exploited in countless theatrical and cinematographic works. A visionary stage manager, Farley did not miss the opportunity to be the first to take full advantage of the inherent theatrical potential of this extraordinary figure and the appeal it enjoyed with the public. Notably, Farley introduced one crucial novelty that will prove highly influential: the ghost is not, as in the novel, a malevolent ancestral entity that stands in the way of Raymond and Agnes, but the benign, protective spirit of Agnes's mother, willing to help the two thwarted lovers. This is revealed in an especially effective scene – roughly adapted from the novel – in which Agnes disguises herself as the Bleeding Nun in order to escape from Lindenberg Castle undisturbed, but things do not go as planned and Raymond actually elopes with the ghost itself:

*A dreary wood*—Raymond following the spectre (still supposing it Agnes) attempts to embrace it when suddenly vanishing, a cloud rises from the earth bearing the following inscription:—"PROTECT the CHILD of the MURDER'D AGNES."<sup>191</sup>

<sup>189</sup> Rory E. Bradley summarised the history of the legend thus: 'Beginning in the Middle Ages, in castles and aristocratic households all across the German-speaking region from Berlin to Bohemia, people recurrently reported sightings of the *Weisse Frau*, a female apparition clad all in white. Though she would appear in disparate locations, the public understood her as a single ghost and believed that her appearance always foretold the same imminent misfortune—the death of a male member of that household. Perhaps because she dramatically heralded death or perhaps because she was seen by so many people, the *Weisse Frau* became one of the most famous European ghosts. Well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both English and German publications continued to reference her and even report new sightings'. Bradley, Rory E. (2016), p. 37.

<sup>190</sup> Inverso, Mary Beth, *The Gothic Impulse in Contemporary Drama*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press (1990), p. 8.

<sup>191</sup> Farley, Charles, *Airs, Glees, and Chorusses in a New Grand Ballet Pantomime of Action, Called Raymond and Agnes; or, the Castle of Lindenberg*, London: T. Woodfall (1797), p. 8.

Farley's ballet was an immediate and long-lasting success<sup>192</sup>, even contributing to raise the sales of *The Monk*<sup>193</sup>. This encouraged Lewis to pursue a career in theatre and bring the horrors of the 'German' Gothic onto England's most important stages. His debut work was *The Castle Spectre*, a tragedy in five acts set in tenth-century Wales that triumphantly opened on 14 December 1797 at Drury Lane. Notwithstanding the fact that the play began its run late in the season, it ran for 47 nights and earned the impressive sum of 18,000 pounds. This extraordinary outcome was due in large part to the breathtaking appearances of the titular spectre, quite probably the most spectacular apparition ever seen on any stage up to that moment. After being announced by *Fontainville Forest*, with *The Castle Spectre* the ghost craze exploded with full force.

The plot of *The Castle Spectre* is quintessentially Gothic: the usual distressed heroine is Angela, an amiable and poor orphaned girl who is wooed incognito by Percy, Earl of Northumberland. However, one night the wicked Earl Osmond gives the order to carry her off to Conway Castle. Unbeknownst to Angela, Osmond is her uncle and the man who accidentally killed her mother Evelina during a violent fight in which she was trying to protect her husband, Earl Reginald, who was also supposedly injured to death. The usurper now wishes to marry Angela to secure his title and hereditary possessions, but Percy and his servant Motley, with the aid of Father Philip, a gluttonous priest, devise a plan to rescue her from the castle, which is also surrounded by eerie ghostly legends. Curiously – and here is Lewis's slyness – the play's first part is full of jokes about ghosts and false ghostly sightings that seem directly borrowed from those comical plays in which such beliefs are derided or rationally downplayed. When the superstitious Alice tells Father Philip that she heard the ghost of Evelina singing a lullaby and playing her guitar in the castle's oratory, he

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<sup>192</sup> In 1809, Farley's piece formed the basis for a two-act melodramatic adaptation performed at Norwich Theatre and other provincial towns and entitled *Raymond and Agnes; or, the Bleeding Nun of Lindenberg*, which concluded with a beautiful tableau featuring the Bleeding Nun blessing the two persecuted lovers at the altar of an illuminated chapel. Another anonymous melodrama on the theme was staged at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket in September 1811 under the title of *The Travellers Benighted; or, The Forest of Rosenwald*, with some minor alterations compared with the Norwich production. Though condemned on the debut night and generally despised by critics, this version totaled 64 performances overall. Some critics have speculated that Lewis himself could be the author, but the most likely candidate for these similar productions seems to be Henry William Grossette (although George Colman The Younger might have had a hand in the Haymarket play). Whoever the real author, both versions seem talentless reworkings of Farley's ballet which probably tried to capitalise on the popularity of Lewis's tale. Other versions continued to appear during the following decades. In 1819, for example, there was a successful revival of Farley's piece at the Lyceum (English Opera House) entitled *Raymond and Agnes; or, The Bleeding Nun*, with the ballet being produced by Thomas Potter Cooke. Composer Edward Loder then resuscitated again the subject in his monumental four-act Romantic opera *Raymond and Agnes* (Manchester, Theatre Royal, 1855), with a libretto by Edward Fitzball. This work incorporated elements from *The Castle Spectre* as well as Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* and, in spite of its poor reception, it testified to the Bleeding Nun's persistent attractiveness as an icon of Gothic supernaturalism on stage. See Parreaux, André, *The Publication of The Monk: A Literary Event 1796-1798*, Paris: M. Didier (1960), p. 66; Burling, William J., *Summer Theatre in London, 1661-1820, and the Rise of the Haymarket Theatre*, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press (2000), p. 204; Chandler, David, "'Ah, trait'ress, me betraying": Edward Loder and his Librettos', *Musicians of Bath and Beyond: Edward Loder (1809-1865) and His Family*, ed. Nicholas Temperly, Woodbridge: Boydell Press (2016), p. 233.

<sup>193</sup> Saggini, Francesca (2015), p. 9.

replies that '[t]he idea of ghosts is a vulgar prejudice; and they who are timid and absurd enough to encourage it, prove themselves the most contemptible'<sup>194</sup>, thus anachronistically giving voice to contemporary English Protestants' position on the matter. The advice that the friar gives Alice is nothing short of hilarious:

the next time that you are afraid of a ghost, remember and make use of the receipt which I shall now give you; instead of calling for a priest to lay the spirits of other people in the red sea, call for a bottle of red wine to raise your own. *Probatum est.*

One scene in Act 2 replicates a scheme already seen many times: during his intrusion in the castle, Percy wears a suit of armour he finds in the armoury. Motley informs him that it belonged to Earl Reginald, whose ghost reportedly haunts Conway Castle in true Hamletian fashion:

You are to know, that since the late Earl's death the Castle is thought to be haunted: the servants are fully persuaded that his ghost wanders every night through the long galleries, and parades the old towers and dreary halls which abound in this melancholy mansion. He is supposed to be drest in compleat armour; and that which you wear at present was formerly his.

Motley denies believing in such stories and ironically lists all the spectres that are said to inhabit the castle:

Had I minded all the strange things related of this Castle, I should have died of fright in the first half-hour. Why, they say that Earl Hubert rides every night round the Castle on a white horse; that the ghost of Lady Bertha haunts the west pinnacle of the Chapel-Tower; and that Lord Hildebrand, who was condemned for treason some sixty years ago, may be seen in the Great Hall, regularly at midnight, playing at foot-ball with his own head! Above all, they say that the spirit of the late Countess sits nightly in her Oratory, and sings her baby to sleep!

Moments later, Percy providentially saves Angela from Osmond's clutches by pretending to be Earl Reginald's ghost, in another half-comic scene that reduces the noble precedent of old Hamlet's ghost to 'the stuff of pantomimic farce'<sup>195</sup>:

OSM. Will you be mine?—Speak! Speak!

ANG. (*After a moment's pause, rises, and pronounces with firmness.*) Never, so help me Heaven!

OSM. (*Seizing her.*) Your fate then is decided!  
*Angela shrieks.*

PERCY. (*In a hollow voice.*)—Hold!

OSM. (*Starts, but still grasps Angela's arm.*)—Ha! What was that?

ANG. (*Struggling to escape.*) Hark! Hark!—Heard you not a voice?

OSM. (*Gazing upon Percy.*)—It came from hence!—From Reginald!—Was it not a delusion—

<sup>194</sup> All quotations from the text are from Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *The Castle Spectre*, in *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, Athens: Ohio University Press (1992), p. 206.

<sup>195</sup> Townshend, Dale (2008), p. 84. Townshend explains how at the beginning of the play the audience is led to think that the titular castle spectre is that of Earl Reginald. The eventual revelation that he is still alive seems to solve the mystery, but the appearance of Evelina's ghost changes the whole game in a play that admits 'many different versions of the supernatural'. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Did indeed his spirit—(*Relapsing into his former passion.*) Well, be it so! Though his ghost should rush between us, thus would I clasp her—Horror! What sight is this!—

*At the moment that he again seizes Angela, Percy extends his truncheon with a menacing gesture, and descends from the pedestal. Osmond releases Angela, who immediately rushes from the chamber, while Percy advances a few steps, and remains gazing on the Earl steadfastly.*

—I know that shield!—that helmet!—Speak to me, dreadful vision!—Tax me with my crimes!—Tell me, that you come—Stay! Speak!—

*Following Percy, who, when he reaches the door, through which Angela escaped, turns, and signs to him with his hand. Osmond starts back in terror.*

—He forbids my following!—He leaves me!—The door closes—(*In a sudden burst of passion, and drawing his sword.*)—Hell, and fiends! I'll follow him, though lightnings blast me!—

*(He rushes distractedly from the chamber.)*

In another extremely funny moment, Father Philip conceals himself under the bedclothes in Angela's chamber and Alice mistakes him for the Devil itself (a witty joke that reveals Lewis's strong anti-clericalism). All these ludicrous scenes and dialogues seem to suggest that the author is promoting a sceptical approach to apparitions, but in fact they subtly pave the way for the introduction of an actual ghost at the end of the fourth act. At this point, Angela has already discovered the tragic truth about her mother as well as that her father is still alive, confined in one of the castle's dungeons. Locked up in her chamber after a violent fight with Osmond, she kneels before her mother's portrait and asks her to come to her aid. When suddenly the clock strikes one, a disembodied voice is heard singing a lullaby to the accompaniment of a guitar, and a magnificent dumb show unfolds before the maiden's incredulous eyes:

*The folding-doors unclose, and the Oratory is seen illuminated. In its centre stands a tall female figure, her white and flowing garments spotted with blood; her veil is thrown back, and discovers a pale and melancholy countenance; her eyes are lifted upwards, her arms extended towards heaven, and a large wound appears upon her bosom. Angela sinks upon her knees, with her eyes riveted upon the figure, which for some moments remains motionless. At length the Spectre advances slowly, to a loft and plaintive strain; she stops opposite to Reginald's picture, and gazes upon it in silence. She then turns, approaches Angela, seems to invoke a blessing upon her, points to the picture, and retires to the Oratory. The music ceases. Angela rises with a wild look, and follows the Vision, extending her arms towards it.*

As Angela tries to stop it, the ghost waves its hand in farewell and

*[i]nstantly the organ's swell is heard; a full chorus of female voices chaunt "Jubilate!" a blaze of light flashes through the Oratory, and the folding doors close with a loud noise.*

As in *Fontainville Forest*, the ghost scene closes with the heroine falling senseless on the floor and the curtain abruptly falling, amplifying the overall effect of shock and amazement. But unlike Boaden's half-hidden phantom, Evelina's ghost appears in full view as spotlights illuminate it from behind and celestial music accompanies its entrance and gestures. It really was an unparalleled synaesthetic spectacle made possible by the joint efforts of the playwright, the actresses Dorothy

Jordan (Angela) and Jane Powell (Evelina), the set designer Thomas Greenwood and the musical director Michael Kelly, a recurrent collaborator of Lewis<sup>196</sup>. James Boaden himself declared, not without claiming his own merits, that ‘[t]he precedent given by [himself] was followed with beautiful effect’<sup>197</sup>, although this time there was no need of a gauzy curtain to conceal the ghost's materiality. In fact, the wound in Evelina’s bosom endowed her with ‘a corporeal quality unusual in a ghost’<sup>198</sup>. Lewis's main point of reference actually seems to be less Boaden's Phantom than his own Bleeding Nun (in turn vaguely reminiscent of the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth) and Farley's portrayal of it in *Raymond and Agnes*. Whereas Boaden used a pantomime actor, Lewis opted for a full-blown pantomimic scene, further contaminating genres. Moreover, Evelina’s apparition was unmistakably endowed with a quasi-religious quality: her bright radiance, white garments, upward look and blessing gesture made her more akin to a sort of Virgin Mary or benign angel come down from heaven, inspiring less Gothic fear than Christian pity<sup>199</sup>. According to various reports, the impact of the scene was so emotionally overwhelming that ‘[t]wo or three ladies, in the boxes, absolutely fell into hysterics’<sup>200</sup> at the sight of the ghost during the premiere night.

Of course the apparition of Evelina's ghost also gives a new meaning to all the other superstitions referenced throughout the text in that it suddenly allows ghosts in the diegetic reality. Evelina's ghost itself, for example, had already appeared in Osmond's premonitory dream, a sort of ‘celestial warning’ – as the servant Saib calls it – that foreshadows the tyrant's eventual downfall (the scene obviously recalls the dream in *Fontainville Forest*, where, however, the vision followed the apparition instead of preceding it<sup>201</sup>). Osmond gives a lengthy account of it to his servants which, in retrospect, assumes new meaning:

“Methought I wandered through the low-browed caverns, where repose the reliques of my ancestors!—“My eye dwelt with awe on their tombs, with disgust on Mortality's surrounding emblems!”—Suddenly a female form glided along the vault: It was Angela!—She smiled upon me, and beckoned me to advance. I flew towards her; my arms were already unclosed to clasp her—when suddenly her figure changed, her face grew pale, a stream of blood gushed from her bosom!—Hassan, 'twas Evelina! [...] Such as when she sank at my feet expiring, while my hand grasped the dagger still crimsoned with her blood”—‘We meet again this night!’ murmured

<sup>196</sup> Paul Ranger reported that ‘[i]n provincial theatres the scene was sometimes contrived by the use of a transparency, a saving on both space and cost’. Ranger, Paul (1991), p. 123.

<sup>197</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 206.

<sup>198</sup> Silvani, Giovanna, ‘Matthew G. Lewis' Theatre: Fear on Stage’, in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Fabio Liberto, Amsterdam: Rodopi (2014), p. 187.

<sup>199</sup> In the play's original manuscript the chorus of female voices was supposed to chant ‘Hallelujah’, but John Larpent, the severe Methodist who rigidly performed the role of Examiner of Plays between 1778 and 1824, changed the word into the less religiously marked ‘Jubilate’. Cox, Jeffrey N., ‘Introduction’, in *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, Athens, Ohio University Press (1992), p. 35.

<sup>200</sup> *The Monthly Visitor*, vol. 2 (December 1797), p. 538.

<sup>201</sup> In a footnote, Lewis mentioned also *Richard III* and especially the dream of Francis in Schiller's *The Robbers* as sources of inspiration. Of course also the visions of the conscience-stricken Macbeth might have been an implicit reference. Cox, Jeffrey N. (1992), p. 199.

her hollow voice! “Now rush to my arms, but first see what you have made me!—Embrace me, my bridegroom! We must never part again”—While speaking, her form withered away: the flesh fell from her bones; her eyes burst from their sockets: a skeleton, loathsome and meagre, clasped me in her mouldering arms!—[...] Her infected breath was mingled with mine; her rotting fingers pressed my hand, and my face was covered with her kisses!—”Oh! Then, how I trembled with disgust!”—And now blue dismal flames gleamed along the walls; “the tombs were rent asunder;” bands of fierce spectres rushed round me in frantic dance!—Furiously they gnashed their teeth while they gazed upon me, and shrieked in loud yell—‘Welcome, thou fratricide! Welcome, thou lost for ever!’—Horror burst the bands of sleep; distracted I flew hither:—But my feelings—words are too weak, too powerless to express them.

Evelina's ghost physically returns then in grand style at the end of the fifth act. Lost in the castle's subterranean passageways and pursued by Osmond, Angela happens to find the dark cell where her father Reginald has been secretly kept for sixteen years. At first Reginald mistakes Angela for the spirit of his wife, then he recognises her as his long-lost daughter. The two are immediately interrupted by the arrival of Osmond and his henchmen, who try to separate them coercively. There follows a violent brawl when, suddenly and unexpectedly, the ghost throws itself between Osmond and Reginald in a dramatic re-staging of the scene of Evelina's murder, allowing Angela to take advantage of her uncle's distraction and stab him mortally with a poniard:

ANG. Die!

*Disengaging herself from Hassan, she springs suddenly forwards, and plunges her dagger into Osmond's bosom, who falls with a loud groan, and faints. The ghost vanishes in a flash of fire, and a loud clap of thunder is heard; Angela and Reginald rush into each other's arms.*

A moment later, Percy bursts into the castle with his soldiers and reunites with his lover, ending the play on a happy note. This rapid conclusion led many to assert that the ghost's appearances were not so necessary for the denouement of the action (the same accusation made against *Fontainville Forest's Phantom*), also considering that the apparition does not speak (she only sings a few lines of a lullaby). For this reason, Lewis's decision to include the character in the play initially met with fierce resistance from managers, actors and friends, who ‘requested [him] to confine [it] to the Green-Room’<sup>202</sup>. However, the thundering success of the first performances proved that Lewis had been right in retaining the ghost. Mrs Powell herself, initially reluctant to assume the role, changed her mind and reportedly became ‘so much enamoured of the part, that it would be no easy matter to prevail on her to give up the Ghost’<sup>203</sup>. A lucky accident came to her aid: her name was by mistake omitted from the bills, casting a veil of mystery over the identity of the ghost's impersonator. The other members of the cast kept the secret and this considerably contributed to increase the public's curiosity<sup>204</sup>. *The Castle Spectre* thus became one of the steadiest money-makers of its day,

<sup>202</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory, ‘To The Reader’, in Cox, Jeffrey N. (1992), p. 224.

<sup>203</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, (23 December 1797).

<sup>204</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 42 (1834), p. 494.

remaining in Drury Lane's repertoire for years and then being regularly revived in various theatres throughout much of the nineteenth century (a version titled *The Spectre of Conway Castle*, for example, was still a stock piece at the Marylebone Theatre during the 1880s). The first ghost scene was so exceedingly popular that the *air parlant* that accompanied it was later published separately under the title *The Favorite Movement, performed . . . during the appearance of the Ghost in the Drama of the Castle Spectre* (1798).

Yet, in spite of the public's fervent acclaim, the play enjoyed a controversial (to say the least) critical reception. The music, scenery and dresses actually received unanimous approval from the press. Also the cast generally drew positive comments: Mrs Jordan's performance was praised as a 'masterpiece of acting'<sup>205</sup> comparable only to Garrick's best interpretations, and also William Barrymore and John Philip Kemble distinguished themselves as Osmond and Percy, respectively. Unfortunately, basically all other aspects of the play were lambasted. Objections were made to the text's alleged lack of originality, flat characters, plot inconsistencies, anachronisms (in particular with respect to Osmond's black servants), vulgar language, ambiguous political allusions and deplorable German influences. Furthermore, commentators rebuked Lewis for having degraded the purity of tragedy through excessive use of comedy and parody. The scene in which Percy throws himself from a window in order to escape from his prison – inspired by a legendary episode in the life of German nobleman Ludwig the Springer<sup>206</sup> – was fiercely criticised as being too improbable and more suitable to pantomime. Boaden himself noted that in this piece Kemble resembled 'a sort of Harlequin hero, who gets into his enemy's castle after his Columbine', ironically adding that '[i]t is only in a barn, that the CATO of a company should be allowed to risk his *neck*'<sup>207</sup>. Another critic observed how such elements made the work an 'incoherent jumble of Tragedy and trumpery, Farce and finery, Puppet-shew and Pantomime'<sup>208</sup>, dangerously akin to illegitimate theatres' shows. However, the main scandal was of course the ghost itself, the play's *coup de gothique*. Especially after the wave of indignation provoked by *The Monk*, Gothic supernaturalism became strictly linked to Lewis's name, further complicating its reception. Critics tried in every way to demonstrate that the spectre's inclusion was an unforgivable mistake and they did so by adopting exasperatingly rational arguments, although they had to recognise its strong hold on the public, almost unprecedented in its extent. In a long review, *The Monthly Mirror* argued that the spectre's interferences do not fulfil any purpose besides that of making night hideous:

To the *Spectre* [...] it may be objected, that there is no necessity for her appearance. The

<sup>205</sup> *Bell's Weekly Messenger* (17 December 1797).

<sup>206</sup> Lewis, Matthew G., (1992), p. 180.

<sup>207</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2 p. 207.

<sup>208</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (18 December 1797).

mischievous that is done, or prevented, would have been done or prevented without her. *Angela* knew of *Osmond's* guilt, and her father's existence, before the first entrance of *Evelina's* ghost—and nothing appears to be expedited or protracted by her visit. [...] Neither in the *last act* is her visit necessary, nor does it effect any important purpose; for *Angela*, who is instrument of vengeance upon the guilty of *Osmond*, would naturally enough stab her uncle, to preserve the life of her father, without the interfering agency of the *Castle Spectre*. [...] This is an awkward excuse for disturbing the repose of *Angela's* mother; and for an apparition to *frighten her daughter* into an act which she might have committed *of her own accord* is surely a round-about method of answering the purport of her mission.<sup>209</sup>

The reviewer, however, concluded on a different note by stating that

if we pass over the *necessity* of the *Spectre* in this play, we must allow the effect produced by its introduction to be stronger than any thing of the sort that has been hitherto attempted. The ingenuity with which a point of so much delicacy is managed, is admirable;—the imagination is hurried away for a moment into the *world of spirits*, and all the fictions of the nursery, and the bugbears of romance become realized;—the *illuminated oratory*, the *aerial music*—magical every note of it,—and the determined *silence* of the præter-natural visitant, which later circumstance indicates the judgment of the author more than all the others together—combine to impress the spectator with an awe, which, to “*such sights*,” is perfectly congenial.<sup>210</sup>

*The European Magazine* expressed a similar concept: ‘This Drama cannot be judged by common rules [...] The introduction of the aerial Being seems unnecessary; but it cannot be denied but [*sic*] the silence and gestures of the Ghost operate very forcibly on the audience’<sup>211</sup>. Also *Bell's Weekly Messenger* admitted that the ghost was well conceived but nevertheless expressed some perplexities about its function in the story:

From the frequent introduction of supernatural machinery in his Novel [*The Monk*], it becomes a doubt whether [Lewis] has introduced the Ghost in conformation to his own taste, or to please the vitiated palate of the Public, which seems at present to relish no food but what is strongly devilled. However this may be, the Ghost is a good ghost.<sup>212</sup>

In similar fashion, another writer sarcastically commented (perhaps also with a hint of preoccupation) on the audience's fondness for Lewis's supernatural trickery, which in his view should not be judged by traditional critical standards:

To call the probability of the fable in question, where a writer avowedly sits down to deal in preternatural agency, as far as that agency is employed, would be idle and absurd, because it is in the production of his *Spectre*, and his management of it, that the Author of the Drama under consideration is best entitled to commendation. [...] Having plainly told us, therefore, that he meant to exhibit a Ghost, it must be owned that he has wielded his magician's wand in a masterly manner; and it would not be to be wondered at, from the success that will in all probability attend his attempt, if he were next season to invite the town to see him raise the Devil himself, as he may be assured before hand, that still greater numbers of persons of all description and all ages, men, women, and children, would crowd to the Theatre, to take a peep

<sup>209</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 4 (December 1797), pp. 355-6.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>211</sup> *The European Magazine and London Review*, vol. 33 (January 1798), p. 42.

<sup>212</sup> *Bell's Weekly Messenger* (17 December 1797).

at the Black Gentleman, and measure his hoofs and his horns.<sup>213</sup>

In early 1798, the debate reached a level of unsurpassed intensity, not to say surreality. Between January and February, the *Oracle and Public Advertiser* published a series of letters in which two critics, signing themselves respectively as 'W.' and 'Dramaticus', commented extensively on Lewis's tragedy, with the role of the ghost being of course the main bone of contention. One specific, apparently trivial aspect was thoroughly debated: the place in which the ghost first manifests itself. In his January 22 intervention, W., convinced that Lewis raised his spirit 'for no earthly purpose but to make an audience stare'<sup>214</sup>, started his invective against the play by giving ample space to this topic:

Let us for a moment examine the use and locality of this Spectre, the Ghost of *Evelina*. Previous to its appearance the audience are surprized, that *Osmond* was not her intentional murderer, but accidentally her destroyer – that she was killed on the public highway. Where does her Spectre appear? Not where she received her death wound, because the Author was too considerate and polite to expose a Lady's Ghost to the cold weather, but in her favourite chamber. He knew he meant to practice on the credulity of women and children, and that even they would not lend their easy faith to a gossip's tale, about Spirits in a long summer's evening, and therefore he determined to raise his Spectre in the dark months, and to house her; but to what purpose? Not to inform her daughter *Angela* of any matter essential to her conduct; not to stimulate her to revenge her murder, which on object of the mission, but to pantomime an adoration of *Hamlet's* Father's Spirit, to a picture of her husband, *Reginald*, who as an ethereal Spirit, she must have known to have been in existence, for I contend that if credulity is so far called upon, as to admit for the purpose of the scene, that Ghosts may appear, it must go further, and grant them omniscience. The first appearance of the Spectre is wholly unnecessary, and its appearance in the dungeon is absolutely absurd as well as useless.<sup>215</sup>

Two days later, Dramaticus wrote a letter of reply in which he asserted that W.'s attempts to degrade the play's merits were 'weak and abortive', defending the presence of the ghost (on the grounds that it gave Angela the strength to resist Osmond's execrable assaults and investigate the truth concerning her family, in addition to 'impress[ing] this moral lesson, that no situation in life can prevent the guilty mind of the villain from being haunted, disturbed, and agonized either in his public walks or his private retirements'<sup>216</sup>) and ridiculing W.'s willingness to outline a set of rules for the representation of such characters:

Your friend W. is in a monstrous passion with the Ghost of *Evelina*, and is determined to convince us, that the Age of Chivalry is gone, as his rage and anger are manifested in an extraordinary degree, because the Apparition of a *fine woman* is suffered to make its appearance in a fine apartment; now, since supernatural agency is admitted by him on the stage, I should thank this *ungallant* Critic to inform me, where those laws are to be found which enforce

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<sup>213</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (18 December 1797).

<sup>214</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (22 January 1798).

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (24 January 1798).

*locality*, and confine an Apparition to any particular spot or place.<sup>217</sup>

Dramaticus notes how Shakespeare himself did not follow any such rule:

In touching on the property of the *locality* of Ghosts, our Critic could mean no serious compliment to Shakespeare. W. certainly might *envy* the Ghost of Banquo being placed at an excellent supper; but he could never mean to compliment the Bard, according to his sentiments, on the introduction of an *incorporeal* guest to a *solid* banquet!<sup>218</sup>

On 27 January W. adamantly reiterated his position without directly refuting Dramaticus's objections, instead taking refuge in resentful irony:

I do not object to the use of Apparitions in a serious Drama, where they are material to the progress of the action of the Piece, as all Shakespeare's are; but I never can bring my mind to receive it as a settled rule of the Drama, that any Author in the Play, merely for the sake of momentary stage effect, may produce a spectre or hobgoblin, without rendering it at all conducive to the interest, or the working of his plot. [...] I laid not great stress on the *locality* of *Evelina's* Ghost, but will honestly confess to him [Dramaticus], that would rather have a *tete-a-tete* with the representative of *Evelina's* apparition in a private chamber, "unseen by human eye," than by the highway side. [...] If he can be gratified by the paltry sneer conveyed in the insinuation that may fairly envy Banquo's Ghost in being placed at an excellent supper, I give him joy of his triumph. His inference from it is too puerile to deserve an answer.<sup>219</sup>

In turn, on 31 January, Dramaticus lamented the inelegance and childishness of his opponent, who 'boldly and manfully declares his concupiscence [...] either without the formality of a divorce or the consent of the Lady [Mrs Powell]'<sup>220</sup>. The two went on for a few more editions exchanging barbs and accusations, and what began as a discussion on *The Castle Spectre* became a more personal (and much less interesting) dispute. Nonetheless, the dialectic battle between the traditionalist, heavily moralising critic writing 'ADVOCATE [...] on behalf of common sense and the legitimate Drama'<sup>221</sup> and his more open-minded and humorous adversary symbolically summarised a decades-long debate, which in the closing years of the eighteenth century had become heated as never before.

Tired of the controversy, in January 1798 Lewis published the first printed edition of the text complete with notes and an address to the reader in which he wittily defended his ghost by turning critics' arguments against themselves:

Against *my Spectre* many objections have been urged: one of them I think rather curious. She ought not to appear, because the belief in Ghosts no longer exists! In my opinion, this is the very reason why she *may* be produced without danger; for there is no fear of increasing the influence of superstition, or strengthening the prejudices of the weak-minded. I confess I cannot see any reason why Apparitions may not be as well permitted to stalk in a tragedy, as Fairies be suffered

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<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (27 January 1798).

<sup>220</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (31 January 1798).

<sup>221</sup> *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (2 February 1798).

to fly in a pantomime, or heathen Gods and Goddesses to put capers in a grand ballet; and I should rather imagine that *Oberon* and *Bacchus* now find as little credit to the full as the *Cock-lane Ghost*, or the Spectre of *Mrs. Veal*.<sup>222</sup>

Significantly, by equating different types of supernaturalism Lewis was also equating dramatic genres as different as tragedy and pantomime, implying that such distinctions no longer made sense. *The Analytical Review* fell into the trap: it recognised that residual ghost fears still lurked in the minds of Enlightenment men and women and thus somehow contradicted the position it had taken four years earlier in the review of *Fontainville Forest*:

If, in truth, the belief in ghosts no longer existed, their appearance, in serious drama, would be altogether as impertinent and intolerable as that of Jupiter or Juno; and we are persuaded, that the laughter and hisses of the audience would soon drive them from the stage. But the belief in the occasional disclosure of the world of departed souls is nearly coeval, perhaps, with the existence of man, and will probably continue till the dissolution of the present system.<sup>223</sup>

If *Fontainville Forest* was something of a wake-up call, *The Castle Spectre* constituted the end-of-the-century recognition that the Enlightenment's mission had failed. This forced commentators to find new critical parameters, as is obvious from the reviewers' obsession in finding a narrative purpose for the portrayal of ghosts, namely, a logical framework for the utterly illogical. The frightening potency of their uncontrollable and incomprehensible nature needed to be somehow dried up. In drama, as in real life, there was, therefore, an urgent need to find a new place for the supernatural, now that any attempt to suppress it entirely had proved ineffective. The illustrious example of Shakespeare – paradoxically hailed as the champion of this ‘rational’ supernatural – was frequently evoked to denigrate Gothic writers, and Lewis more than any other. *The Monthly Mirror*, for instance, published a long article entitled ‘Shakspeare’s Ghosts, and Lewis's Spectre!’, in which Lewis's treatment of Evelina's ghost was scrupulously compared to the apparitions in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, among others. The article was penned by a critic writing under the pseudonym of ‘Charon’ and, as many other critical interventions in this period, aimed to

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<sup>222</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory (1992), p. 223. The critic ‘W.’ did not like this comparison: ‘The cases are not in the smallest degree parallel. The Author cannot have to learn that the machinery of the Poets, founded on Heathen mythology, has ever been held an admissable subject of stage exhibition; and many very splendid stage performances are found on it entirely. Dryden, and others of our best Dramatists, have not disdained to resort to it. Shakespeare alone went farther [...] To talk, therefore of *Oberon* and *Bacchus* in the same sentence which mentions the *Cock-lane Ghost* and the spectre of *Mrs. Veal*, is in the highest degree absurd. The story of the latter, it is well known, was fabricated (by Daniel De Foe, a report says) to quicken the sale of a dull book (*Drelincourt on Death*), and the *Cock-lane Ghost* was a gross imposition practised on the Public about the year 1761, but soon detected’. *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (27 January 1798). Similarly, the *Oracle and Public Advertiser* wrote that ‘[t]he Pantomime Poet has only to fill his plot with the Extravagant, the ludicrous, and the grotesque, in order to set the spectators in a roar; but surely it is not great compliment to the Author of *The Castle Spectre*, whose drama should at least be reconcilable to reason and common sense, to compare his Ghost with the absurdities that have been exhibited in Pantomimes at Covent Garden Theatre, by such rank dealers in buffoonery as Delpini and Co.’. *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (2 February 1798).

<sup>223</sup> *The Analytical Review*, vol. 28 (August 1798), pp. 183-4.

highlight how Shakespeare's ghosts always promote the progress of the plot by disclosing some important truth or contributing decisively to stop or punish a villain, and therefore their introduction is rationally justifiable. As regards *Macbeth*, for example, Charon condemns Kemble's decision to remove Banquo's ghost for Shakespeare 'did not raise his ghost *wantonly*, or for the mere purpose of scaring his auditors, [...] but to carry on the plot of his drama. [...] the connection between the probable and improbable events is so close, that to separate them were like dividing the soul from the body'<sup>224</sup>. By contrast, Evelina's ghost 'is more convenient than needful' since it has 'no positive control over the action of the piece. It neither *necessarily* follows, nor *necessarily* conduces to any event'<sup>225</sup>; in fact, the writer ironically notes that in *The Castle Spectre* this essential function is fulfilled only by a 'SHAM GHOST' when Percy, disguised as Earl Reginald, saves Angela from Osmond's illicit attentions. And yet, in another subsequent article Charon himself took a step back and concluded that 'there is no end to such objections, when applied to a subject of fancy, and not of fact; and till we can prove the existence or non-existence of apparitions, we need not trouble ourselves to prescribe rules for their behaviour within the walls of a theatre'<sup>226</sup>.

At this point, criticism of Gothic drama was an utter mess. Commentators' emphatic attempts to rationally expose the superfluousness of Evelina's ghost (sometimes with rather acrobatic arguments) reveal their sincere uneasiness toward the use of unexplained supernaturalism in works of fiction as well as their willingness to trace a clear dividing line between England's immortal bard and a young, irreverent author whose enormous and sudden fame was seen suspiciously. The fact that the so-called 'German' Gothic was pushing against the boundaries of what was generally deemed allowable became a matter of sincere concern not only for the future of English theatre but also the future of English culture itself. In a time of stark conservatism (related to an increase in nationalist feeling), Gothic drama's tendency to challenge limits was seen as an alarming disturbance factor. *The Monthly Review*, more and more preoccupied with the legitimate theatre's perilous drift toward the seductive transgressions of the Gothic, expressed hope that Lewis would 'retire from the regions of the marvellous' before he could draw a 'train of imitators'<sup>227</sup>, while *The Analytical Review* itself, which only a year before had mostly praised *The Monk's* supernatural content, polemically judged the astonishing popularity of Lewis's play as 'truly humiliating to the pride of our national taste'<sup>228</sup>. However, the harsh and prolonged controversy over *The Castle Spectre* did not prevent the play from continuing to fill theatres with enthusiastic crowds and inspiring a new strain of Gothic dramas that consciously employed and thematised the supernatural

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<sup>224</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 5 (February 1798), p. 112-3.

<sup>225</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 5 (February 1798), p. 110.

<sup>226</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 5 (May 1798), p. 301.

<sup>227</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 26 (May 1798), p. 96.

<sup>228</sup> *The Analytical Review*, vol. 28 (August 1798), p. 180.

as a commercial attraction. The traditional opposition between spoken and unspoken drama, between regular and irregular drama, became basically inapplicable to Gothic theatre.

An emblematic example of *The Castle Spectre's* enormous influence is provided by Harriet Lee's *The Mysterious Marriage; or, The Heirship of Roselva*. This generically ambiguous three-act play (curiously set in Transylvania) featured what actually is Gothic drama's first female ghost, given that Lee wrote the play as early as 1795. In the third act, the spirit of the murdered Costantia silently appears to her killer husband Albert while he is trying to sneak into the chamber where his new bride-to-be (and Costantia's former best friend), the Countess of Roselva, reposes, thus preventing his evil plans:

[*The Ghost of COSTANTIA, shrouded in the lightest white drapery, appears before the door, passing the pallet of RODOLPHUS, who sleeps sweetly.*]

ALB. Ha! have my senses conjured up a phantom?  
Speak, vision, if thou canst!

(*advancing.*)

(*She gazes intently, and motions him from her.*)

Oh horrible!

(*He leans against a pillar.*)

[*Vivid lightning—the Ghost glides into the chamber of the COUNTESS*]

ALB. (*after a pause.*) I am a coward—and my fears have shaped  
The thing that is not.—Yet I saw it plain—  
Most manifest to view.<sup>229</sup>

Lee was initially unable to have the work produced by London managers, but in 1798 she decided to print it in order to capitalise on the new vogue for stage ghosts. In the advertisement prefixed to the text, written in the third person, she expresses regret at not having published it before:

The difficulty that attends producing any piece to advantage upon the stage, has hitherto inclined the author to consign her's to obscurity; but as the theatre will soon probably become “a land of apparitions,” she hastens to put in her claim to originality of idea, though the charm of novelty may be lost. The female spectre she has conjured up, was undoubtedly the offspring of her own imagination; yet by the ill-fortune keeping the play considerably less than “nine years,” she is now obliged to produce it to a disadvantage, or expose herself to the charge of being a servile imitator.<sup>230</sup>

Critics were nevertheless reticent to give her any credit for the creation of this character. *The Analytical Review*, for instance, confirmed its negative opinion on the subject:

We are really sorry, that any merit should be claimed for perverting the simplicity of the drama

<sup>229</sup> Lee, Harriet, *The Mysterious Marriage; or, The Heirship of Roselva. A Play, in Three Acts*, Dublin: Wogan, Byrne, Jones, Rice, Kelly, and Folingsby (1798), p. 45.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, page unnumbered.

by introduction of visionary and phantastic beings: supernatural agency is the taste of a barbarous age, and ought to be banished from our theatres at once. [...] No, no; let ghosts and hobgoblins people the pages of a romance, but never let their forms be seen to glide across the stage.<sup>231</sup>

Similarly, *The British Critic* declared that it ‘would interdict the production of any *new* spectre on the stage’ because ‘[i]n a modern play, ghosts cannot be tolerated: they are generally mere substitutes for good sense and good writing’<sup>232</sup>. The reviewer of *The Monthly Mirror* adopted a more possibilist attitude when he wrote that ‘[w]e will not presume to say what effect *HER spectre* might have produced, had it been permitted to haunt the little theatre in the Hay-market; because the public are so capricious in their opinions, that what they applaud at one time, they condemn and execrate at other’<sup>233</sup>, thus confirming that ghosts were a divisive issue not only for critics but also for the public, and that the spectators of one theatre could react differently from those of another.

Something similar happened with Thomas Sedgwick Whalley's *The Castle of Montval* (Drury Lane, 1799), a Gothic tragedy that had many elements in common with *The Castle Spectre*, notably the motif of the immured man. Whalley was accused of plagiarism and had to explain that he had submitted the text to Drury Lane's managers as early as May 1797, therefore months before the first staging of Lewis's play<sup>234</sup>. In one crucial aspect *The Castle of Montval* differed from *The Castle Spectre*: it did not have a spectre, an absence that frustrated the audience's expectations about the supposedly haunted chamber around which the plot revolves. However, it did feature Mrs Powell, the original interpreter of Evelina, who here played a minor part. This coincidence was wittily exploited in the epilogue, in which Powell ironically commented on her being in both plays:

GHOST—or *no* ghost?—For *both* have stood the test—  
Ghost or *no* ghost?—Pray which has pleas'd you best?  
But need I ask? Or can the *Author* wrestle,  
With the enchanting ghost of Conway Castle?  
Tho' kind applauses hail'd the fancied sprite,  
Transform'd into a poor old man to-night,  
He dares not hope applause so long, so clear,  
As almost stunn'd the spectre of last year. [...]   
For me!—to all the audience be it known—  
I hate, and fear *all spectres*—save *my own*.<sup>235</sup>

Through Powell's words, the author showed he was well aware that there could be no real competition between the two works, given that the audience would surely have preferred a play with a ghost rather than one without. This prediction proved true: in spite of warm reviews, *The*

<sup>231</sup> *The Analytical Review*, vol. 27 (March 1798), p. 296.

<sup>232</sup> *The British Critic*, vol. 12 (July 1798), p. 73.

<sup>233</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 5 (March 1798), p. 166

<sup>234</sup> Whalley, Thomas Sedgwick, *The Castle of Montval*, 2nd edition, London: R. Phillips (1799), pp. vi-vii.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

*Castle of Montval* did not meet the audience's favour and quickly fell into oblivion. At the turn of the century, the supernatural appeared to be an almost indispensable ingredient for a truly successful Gothic show.

### 1.6 A 'Land of Apparitions'

*The Castle Spectre* was something of a watershed in the history of stage ghosts and prompted authors to enter into fierce competition to showcase the most frightening and visually daring apparition. On 16 January 1798, as Lewis's play was still in the middle of its triumphal first run, George Colman The Younger presented at Drury Lane his *Blue-Beard; or, Female Curiosity!*, a 'Dramatic Romance' based on the well-known French folktale by Charles Perrault. Like *The Castle Spectre*, with which it was frequently coupled, *Blue-Beard* relied on a rich supernatural apparatus enhanced by Michael Kelly's spellbinding musical score (in fact, it was Kelly who first came up with the subject after seeing André Gréty's opera *Raoul Barbe-Bleu* in Paris in 1789<sup>236</sup>). The original fairy tale source actually had an intrinsic Gothic quality: as Anne Williams puts it, it was 'a mine waiting to be exploited at the height of the Gothic fashion'<sup>237</sup>. The reason is quite obvious: the story, set in 'the Orient of Beckford rather than the Middle Ages of Walpole and Lewis'<sup>238</sup>, incorporates the most typical stock characters of the Gothic (the greedy father, the insipid hero, the weak heroine with an over-active imagination and the aristocratic and sexually voracious tyrant), and also its principal setting – Blue Beard's palace – is as disquieting and sexually charged as any Gothic castle. As matter of fact, the infamous scenes set inside the mysterious Blue Chamber (the forbidden room where the vicious Bashaw Abomelique keeps the corpses of his former wives) provided occasion for display of an impressively elaborated spectacle that blended the typical machinery of pantomime with the phantasmatic horrors of Gothic dramas (thanks to the ingenious work by machinist Alexander Johnston). The Blue Chamber is first unveiled in Act 1, Scene 3, when Abomelique enters it along with his timorous slave Schacabac:

*SHACABAC puts the Key into the Lock; the Door instantly sinks, with a tremendous crash: and the BLUE CHAMBER appears streaked with vivid streams of Blood. The figures in the Picture, over the door, change their position, and ABOMELIQUE is represented in the action of beheading the Beauty he was, before, supplicating.—The Pictures, and Devices, of Love, change to subjects of Horror and Death. The interior apartment (which the sinking of the door discovers,) exhibits various Tombs, in a sepulchral building;—in the midst of which ghastly and*

<sup>236</sup> There had also been a more recent dramatisation of the story in Germany, namely Ludwig Tieck's *Ritter Blaubart* (1796), a 'Nursery Tale in Four Acts'.

<sup>237</sup> Williams, Anne, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of the Gothic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1995), p. 38.

<sup>238</sup> Taylor, George, *The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789–1805*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), p. 113.

*supernatural forms are seen;—some in motion, some fix'd—In the centre, is a large Skeleton seated on a tomb, (with a Dart in his hand) and, over his head, in characters of Blood, is written*

“THE PUNISHMENT OF CURIOSITY”<sup>239</sup>

Abomelique asks Schacabac to place a charmed dagger beneath the skeleton in order to fulfil a ritual aimed at making the tyrant invulnerable:

*SHACABAC lays the Dagger at the foot of the Skeleton.—It Thunders and Lightens violently. The inscription, over the Skeleton's head, changes to the following—*

“THIS SEPULCHRE SHALL INCLOSE HER WHO MAY ENDANGER THE LIFE OF ABOMELIQUE”—

*The Skeleton raises his arm which holds the Dart; then lets his arm fall again. SHACABAC staggers from the Sepulchre, into the Blue Chamber, and falls on his face; when the Door, instantly rising, closes the interior building.—The streaks of blood vanish from the walls of the Blue Chamber, and ABOMELIQUE's Picture, with other Pictures, and Devices, resume their original appearance.*

Meanwhile, the young peasant Fatima, Abomelique's next bride-to-be, is brought into the castle. The girl is actually in love with the soldier Selim, but her father has obliged her to accept the bashaw's marriage proposal out of the desire to improve the family's economic situation. Abomelique, however, has to briefly leave to carry out some commercial affair and entrusts the castle's keys to Fatima, including that of the Blue Chamber, although she is categorically forbidden to go there. Irene, however, cannot resist curiosity and, along with her sister, decides to take a look inside the room in spite of the horrid sounds she comes from it:

*FATIMA puts the Key in the Door, which sinks, and discovers the interior Apartment, as first represented—The inscription over the Skeleton's head is, now,*

“THE PUNISHMENT OF CURIOSITY.”

*The Blue Chamber undergoes the same change, as in the first stance. The WOMEN shriek, and run to each other, and hide their heads in each others bosoms.—At this moment SHACABAC appears at the top of the Stair-case:—then runs down hastily. As he descends, the Door rises, and the Chamber resumes its original appearance.*

Unfortunately, the magical key is broken in the process and when Abomelique sees it he has no option but to punish Fatima for disobeying orders. As Abomelique is about to execute Fatima, however, Selim arrives to the castle at the head of a troop of horsemen. The tyrant quickly retires into the Blue Chamber (where the inscription over the Skeleton's head now reads ‘THIS SEPULCHRE SHALL INCLOSE HER WHO MAY ENDANGER THE LIFE OF ABOMELIQUE’), dragging the poor girl with him. He tries to behead her with a scymetar when, suddenly, ‘*a near Attack is heard, and a violent crash in the Building:—Part of the wall, in the back of the Sepulchre, towards the roof, is beat down, and SELIM appears in the Aperture*’. There

<sup>239</sup> Colman, George, *The Younger, Blue-Beard, or, Female Curiosity!*, London: Cadell and Davies (1798), p. 17.

follows a violent struggle in which the supernatural powers of the Blue Chamber become instrumental for the villain's destruction and the triumph of good:

*She struggles with ABOMELIQUE, who attempts to kill her;—and, in the struggle, snatches the Dagger from the pedestal of the Skeleton.—The Skeleton rises on his feet—lifts his arm which holds the Dart, and keeps it suspended. At that instant the entire wall of the Sepulchre falls to pieces, and admits SELIM to the ground. [...] SELIM advances towards ABOMELIQUE [...] SELIM and ABOMELIQUE fight with Scymetars—During the Combat, Enter IRENE and SCHACABAC—After a hard contest, Selim overthrows Abomelique at the foot of the Skeleton.—The Skeleton instantly plunges the Dart, which he has held suspended, into the breast of ABOMELIQUE, and sinks with him beneath the earth. (A volume of Flame arises, and the earth closes.) SELIM and FATIMA embrace.*

*Blue-Beard* drew crowded houses for 64 nights during its first run, therefore even surpassing *The Castle Spectre's* record. In the following years it secured its place as the most popular afterpiece of English theatre, and revivals, parodies and pastiches were commonplace throughout the whole of the nineteenth century. As *The British Critic* remarked, to produce a commercially successful play such as this required not only 'some power' and 'some judgement', but also 'some experience of the public taste'<sup>240</sup>, all elements that Colman undeniably possessed. Especially after the failure of his own *The Iron Chest*, he knew that full-blown Gothic supernaturalism was what people wanted to see, even at the risk that it may be excessive and grotesque. During the opening night, the final fight within the Blue Chamber did not go as planned because of some technical problems related to the machinery that regulated the moving Skeleton:

In the *Blue Room*, or Charnel House, where the ashes of *Blue Beard's* Wives are deposited, the whole contrivances were thrown into ridicule by the want of celerity in the intended transitions. KELLY attempted in vain to remove the Spectre of Death. In the height of his indignation he pummelled it several times, thinking to force it to abscond from the public eye. The Spectre remained, however, incorrigible; and shewed uncommon attention to the audience, by the most polite bows we have ever witnessed from a *Spectre!* The spectators could not resist the temptation, and laughed very heartily at this *phenomenon*.<sup>241</sup>

Newspapers such as the *The True Briton* pointed to the 'ludicrous sensations provoked by 'the staggering motion of the Skeleton, who seemed as if, to guard against the *damps* of the place, he had taken a drop too much'<sup>242</sup>, but the audience – especially the youth – nevertheless adored the Blue Chamber scenes. Just like the sliding panels that revealed the oratory where Evelina's ghost appeared, the Blue Chamber's complex machinery epiphanically revealed another world, 'not only showing but actually bringing on stage the fragile and ever-shifting divide between known and unknown, life and death, natural and supernatural, Eros and Thanatos, at the core of the Gothic

<sup>240</sup> *The British Critic*, vol. 11 (June 1798), p. 678.

<sup>241</sup> *The Oracle and Public Advertiser* (17 January 1798).

<sup>242</sup> *The True Briton* (17 January 1798).

discourse'<sup>243</sup>.

This same in-betweenness characterised the play's own unclassifiable generic nature. The fact that the work was originally conceived as a last-minute replacement to the traditional Christmas pantomime somehow puzzled critics, considering that its fear-inducing imagery was quite different from Harlequin's usual frolics. Furthermore, the generic indecipherability of this strange proto-melodrama (spoken dialogues were indeed freely intermingled with pantomimic scenes and sung parts) raised doubts about its place within a legitimate theatre's repertoire. *The Monthly Review*, for example, refused to examine the play's plot because 'we know no rules by which our criticism should be directed'<sup>244</sup>. To avoid misunderstandings, in a note included in the play's first published edition Colman stressed the fact that he 'kept [his] *Enchantment* within the limits where rational minds, without pedantry, have not only long tolerated it, but have found pleasure in unbending with it, after they have been more solidly engaged', thus making clear that he had 'not attempted to make *Magick* usurp the space of the Evening's entertainment much better occupied by Dramas of instruction, and probability'<sup>245</sup>. Nonetheless, ambiguity persisted, and reviewers continued to attack Colman<sup>246</sup>. Also the choice of assigning the role of Abomelique to the famous comedian John Palmer, who in 1789 had been sent to prison after daring to speak prose during a performance of *The Destruction of the Bastille* at the Royal Circus, probably appeared as another problematic link to the illegitimate theatrical world, where similar controversial pieces were commonplace.

James Boaden himself returned to deploy the supernatural in his historical drama *Cambro-Britons*, which premiered on 21 July 1798 at Colman's own Little Theatre in the Haymarket, becoming the most popular play of that summer season<sup>247</sup>. Set in thirteenth-century Wales, at the time of Edward I's Conquest and the infamous extermination of the bards, the plot revolves around the bloody feud between the brave Prince of Wales Llewellyn and his renegade brother David, who sides with the English invaders and illicitly pursues Llewellyn's betrothed Elinor. In Act 2, Scene 2, the two rivals draw their swords and prepare to engage in a mortal duel inside a Gothic chapel, when something

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<sup>243</sup> Saggini, Francesca (2015), p. 119.

<sup>244</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 26 (May 1798), p. 95.

<sup>245</sup> Colman, George, *The Younger* (1798), p. iv.

<sup>246</sup> The harshest review was that of *The Monthly Mirror*: 'The dialogue is beneath contempt; and this will be easily credited when we assure the reader that is in very worst style of Colman's very worst productions. A quibble—a pun—a smile—a metaphor—a conceit—and there is the *dialogue*. It is, from beginning to end, a patchwork of buffoonery and bombast, put together, as it should seem, for the express purpose of retarding the action, and harassing the mind of every unfortunate spectator, whom chance or curiosity might bring into the theatre. [...] all the interest of the fiction is entirely smothered and subdued by the imbecility of the author'. *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 5, (January 1798), p. 45. Also *The Monthly Review* expressed the wish 'to see that gentleman renounce entirely the province of the marvellous incredible legends, and the whole monstrous offspring of extravagant fancy, in which truth and nature are never observed. From some specimens of his genius, we think that we have a right to expect better things from his pen, whenever he shall choose to the verge of human life'. *The Monthly Review*, vol. 26 (May 1798), p. 95.

<sup>247</sup> Burling, William J. (2000), p. 173.

truly miraculous happens:

*Voice (from the tomb.)*

Forbear!—

DAVID.

My feeble arm denies its office,

LLEWELLYN.

Why droops the fratricide? Strike, thou pale villain!

DAVID.

Heard I aright! Did not the silent grave  
Shriek out—'Tis juggling all—But should the dust  
Of her who bore us now cohere again,  
And bursting from its sepulture deter me,  
Thus would I rush undaunted to thy heart!

*(The upper part of the tomb, with a mighty noise, falls to the ground, and from the centre their mother rises in the funeral dress. LLEWELLYN falls upon his knees, with his arms extended towards her. DAVID'S arm is forcibly drawn back, and the sword flies from his grasp.)*

*(After a long pause.)*

DAVID.

Spirit ador'd of her who gave us being,  
Frown not so dreadful on me. Through my heart  
I feel thy grasp, which, like the unsunn'd ice-bolt,  
Freezes the marrow in my stiffening joints!

SPIRIT.

Have I not loved you?—Be peace between you!  
Confirm it at the altar!

*(The brothers, kneeling near each other, embrace, and she bends over them from above.)*

Now, my children,  
My blessing rest upon you!

CHORUS OF SPIRITS.

Dear is the incense that repentance flings,  
And cherubs waft it heavenward with their wings,  
Grateful the voice that bids your hatred cease,  
A mother's mandate of fraternal peace.

*(Here the funeral dress falls off; drapery of a fine cerulean colour gradually itself; her figure seems glorified; and through the opening window she is drawn, as it were, into the air, while music, as of immortal spirits, attends her progress. The brothers gaze silently after the vision, and the curtain drops.)<sup>248</sup>*

This piece was probably the most relevant theatrical contribution to the Celtic revival that

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<sup>248</sup> Boaden, James, *Cambro-Britons*, in *The Plays of James Boaden*, ed. Steven Cohan, New York-London: Garland (1980), pp. 57-8.

characterised the closing decades of the eighteenth century. The third act, highly appreciated, was a sort of adaptation/expansion of Thomas Gary's Pindaric ode *The Bard* (1757), possibly the poem that launched the Celtic revival, whereas the dresses of the bards were drawn from Fuseli's sketch-book<sup>249</sup>. This three-act production – which 'comes under the species of the mixed drama, where the serious and melancholy incidents are well relieved by several of a mirthful cast'<sup>250</sup> was by far above the average level of Haymarket's shows, as obvious from the choice of engaging Drury Lane's prop-maker Johnson to superintend the general arrangement of the drama, whereas celebrated Italian artist Gaetano Marinari – who occasionally collaborated with the Haymarket – executed the scene of Lady Griffith's ascension<sup>251</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the ghost (beautifully played by Maria Gibbs) was the undisputed show-stealer, overshadowing the play's strong political and specifically anti-revolutionary subtext. However, the ghost itself was, to an extent, deeply political: Boaden wittily turned a transgressive element like the supernatural, in this period often associated with the potentially seditious 'German' Gothic, into a symbol of patriotic resistance and nationhood. At the height of England's fear of foreign invasion, this proved an especially smart choice. Furthermore, Boaden took care to give the spectre a precise task to perform: thanks to its intervention, David renounces his malicious purposes and restores poor Elinor to Llewellyn. He also rejoins the Welsh side, helping his brother to stop the progress of Edward I. Boaden thus showed he had learned from the fire-storm of criticism that struck both *Fontainville Forest* and *The Castle Spectre* by taking care 'to produce a sufficient *cause* for an event, which no effort of reason has yet shewn to be impossible'<sup>252</sup>. According to Boaden, the fact that the non-existence of ghosts cannot be proved scientifically is sufficient reason to introduce them freely in drama since '[na]tural possibility is not too wide a boundary for dramatic probability'<sup>253</sup>. He also seized the opportunity to claim the originality of his ghostly creations:

By the introduction of a supernatural agent, I may be by some deemed the plagiarist of THE CASTLE SPECTRE; and by others censured for complying with the public in the rank garb. As to the first, it is an affair of *chronology*, if there be any imitation (which I neither suppose nor charge), they who remember my play of Fontainville Forest, will imagine Mr. LEWIS conceived his phantom from mine.<sup>254</sup>

<sup>249</sup> Boaden, Kemble (1825), vol. 2, p. 219.

<sup>250</sup> *The Universal Magazine*, vol. 103 (July 1798), p. 72.

<sup>251</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 219.

<sup>252</sup> Boaden, James, 'Preface' to *Cambro-Britons*, in Cohan, Steven (ed.) (1980), pp. v-vi.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v-vi.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v-vi. Boaden returned to the subject also in *Life of Mrs. Jordan*, where he once again defended the introduction of Lady Griffith's shade, considering it even superior to the ghost of Evelina: 'I had no intention to give up the *ghost*, of which I had been the modern patron, even to Mr. Lewis's beautiful *Spirit of the Castle*; but I ventured an improvement, with great success, and instead of allowing the maternal shade to walk out, as a sort of ground floor inhabitant, I fairly took her *up*, from the tomb out of which she rose, and carried her through the window of a chapel, while clouds of the loveliest forms rolled at her feet, in the ascent, and gradually enveloped the figure during its progress to a purer region'. Boaden, James, *Life of Mrs. Jordan*, 2 vols., vol. 2, London: Edward

*The Monthly Mirror* coldly deemed this justification ‘sufficient’<sup>255</sup>, but other critics did not seem equally satisfied with this explanation: *The Critical Review*, for example, insisted in accusing Boaden ‘of plagiarism as well as of dullness’, adding that the play had ‘little merit’ and that ‘a ghost throwing off her shroud to discover drapery of a fine cerulean colour, then drawn through the opening window [...] would have been very well for a pantomime’<sup>256</sup>. *The European Magazine* only commented that ‘the introduction of the Ghost was managed with great effect’<sup>257</sup>, while *The Monthly Review* expressed the usual perplexities about its needfulness:

It must be confessed that this maternal ghost is not invoked for nothing, for no sprite could do more in less time: but was it necessary to oblige the tombs to give up their dead, in order to bring a rebellious brother to a sense of his duty? The stage cannot produce its proper moral effect by such a conduct. Are ghosts necessary to frighten the repentance? Is conscience so weak that it must be supernaturally aided before it can do its duty? Miserable erroneous doctrine!<sup>258</sup>

What bothered critics was that an author who had gained fame by writing Gothic plays was now presenting a pretentious historical drama in the style of Shakespeare (*Henry V* being an important point of reference), further confusing boundaries between high and low drama. *The Anti-Jacobin Magazine* distinguished between the ‘legitimate interest’ derived from the love triangle at the centre of the plot and the ‘illegitimate interest’ derived from ‘the stale, though modern, trick of introducing a ghost’<sup>259</sup>. *The Monthly Mirror* even published a humorous ‘Complaint of a Ghost’, purportedly written by a ‘much injured’ Spectre living in the ‘Supernatural Corner’ behind the scenes of the Haymarket Theatre and tired of being tormented by novelists and playwrights – ‘a merciless race of oppressors’ – for the mere amusement of the audience<sup>260</sup>. This ghost is the incarnation of all ghosts that had lately appeared in London's theatres:

In one of their extravaganzas [*The Round Tower*] my innocent carcase was nightly crammed with lighted candles; in another [*The Castle Spectre*], after having piously imparted a dumb blessing to Mrs. Jordan, amid the harmonious strains of a choir of chanting saints and angels in one scene, I was, in a subsequent one, most barbarously constrained to make my exit, amidst a volume of sulphurous flame, like, if I may be allowed the metaphor, a filthy soul sinking into the scouring tub y'clept purgatory!<sup>261</sup>

As regards the ghost of Lady Griffith, the ‘Spectre’ ironically comments on the dangerousness of its

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Bull (1831), p. 6.

<sup>255</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 6 (July 1798), p. 104.

<sup>256</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 24 (September 1798), p. 112.

<sup>257</sup> *The European Magazine and London Review*, vol. 34 (August 1798), p. 113. Similarly, *The Universal Magazine* referred to the ghost scene as ‘an admirable specimen of scenic artifice’. *The Universal Magazine*, vol. 103 (July 1798), p. 72.

<sup>258</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 28 (February 1799), pp. 224-5.

<sup>259</sup> *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, vol. 1 (July 1798), p. 114.

<sup>260</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 6 (August 1798), pp. 107-9.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

mechanical ascension, possibly hinting at Gibbs's genuine fear during the performance of the scene:

At the Haymarket theatre, where I am at present, Mr. Boaden has exalted me above the children of men, to the no small hazard of my neck; although I conceive he thereby intended me a signal honour, I wish to decline so perilous a piece of dignity.<sup>262</sup>

These remonstrations and more or less explicit attacks, however, did not seem to interest the majority of theatre-goers, who continued to favour and demand Gothic plays featuring hyperbolic supernatural scenes, demonstrating it at every opportunity. Towards the end of the same year, Boaden undertook the seemingly impossible mission to write an adaptation of *The Monk* out of the desire to see John Philip Kemble's playing the iconic role of Ambrosio. Thus arose *Aurelio and Miranda*, a tamed, supernatural-free dramatisation of Lewis's novel that opened at Drury Lane on 29 December 1798. Boaden was asked to bowdlerise all the moral atrocities and perverse diabolism of the original source in order to have it approved by the Examiner of Plays (even the change of title goes in that direction), but the choice ultimately proved deleterious: the play failed to key to the audience's expectations and was ferociously lambasted<sup>263</sup>, being retired after only six nights. On the premiere night, the audience loudly booed the fourth and fifth acts, perhaps because, by this point of the performance, they had understood that the play was very different from what they expected<sup>264</sup>. According to Montague Summers, Boaden's omissions gave 'the whole play a completely different turn from the book, [...] leaving a very spiritless and tame performance', although she noted that this was 'very much in the vein of producers who prefer to eliminate the witch-scenes from *Macbeth*, and would no doubt discard the Ghost from *Hamlet*'<sup>265</sup>. Boaden attributed the failure to the 'storm of indignation' excited by the fact that 'so *immoral* a work as the *Monk* should be resorted to for the purposes of an exhibition'<sup>266</sup>, claiming that the lack of the novel's trademark supernatural motifs was not a decisive factor. Years later, however, he expressed wonder at 'how [he] could consent to the feeble arrangement of the plot, which is its vital defect'<sup>267</sup>.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> MacDonald, David Lorne, *Monk Lewis: A Critical Biography*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press (2000), pp. 135-6.

<sup>264</sup> As Stewart Marsh Ellis reported, '[i]t was no sooner found out that *Miranda* was a virtuous woman, instead of a demon, than many in the pit and galleries evinced dissatisfaction'. However, some spectators thought it inappropriate to introduce church imagery on stage and that Kemble, as *Aurelio*, made himself 'look so like a divinity'. Ellis, Stewart Marsh, *The Life of Michael Kelly, Musician, Actor, and Bon Viveur, 1762-1826*, London: Victor Gollancz (1930), p. 259. Michael Kelly, the play's composer, was particularly struck by Kemble's 'unearthly interpretation: 'I never shall forget his attitude immediately after his entrance; his dress—the look—the tout ensemble—struck me to be more than human. He was hailed with the most rapturous applause; but he stood motionless, with uplifted eyes, and apparently regardless of the public tribute'. Kelly, Michael, *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly of the King's Theatre and Theatre Royal Drury Lane*, New York: J. and J. Harper (1826), p. 295.

<sup>265</sup> Summers, Montague, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel*, London: The Fortune Press (1968), p. 229.

<sup>266</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 229.

<sup>267</sup> Boaden, James, (1827), vol. 2, p. 425. These regrets were also due to the fact that Boaden original wrote as three-act piece, but Kemble asked him to turn it into a regular five-act drama. Boaden reports Kemble's exact words: 'But why *three* acts? Why innovate upon established usage?—a play should be in five acts, for this sound reason among

'Monk' Lewis, for his part, continued to be the main promoter of this supernatural trend. For example, in *The East Indian*, a comedy completed in 1792 but staged at Drury Lane only in April 1799, Lewis included a humorous epilogue spoken by Barrymore, dressed as the Ghost of Queen Elizabeth and rising through a trap-door '*in a Flash of Fire*'<sup>268</sup> to give her support to the play. This confirms how his sensational supernaturalism had become so famous a trademark that the author could even satirise himself, knowing that his Gothic formula would have always been marketable. In this sense, the highest – or lowest, depending on the perspective – point of the Lewisian Gothic on the patent stage occurred in 1801, when he presented his 'Romantic drama' *Adelmorn, the Outlaw* (1801) at Drury Lane. This time Lewis abandoned the regular five-act structure in favour of an unorthodox three-act structure, which was establishing itself as the most common form for this kind of productions. The German-themed plot was the usual concoction of more or less acknowledged sources, with the same ingredients that had earned Lewis the reputation of Gothic literature's most notorious horror-monger.

Two years before the beginning of the story, Roderick, Count of Bergen, was assassinated by his power-thirsty nephew Ulric, but the blame was falsely put on another nephew, Adelmorn. As a matter of fact, that same night Adelmorn had repelled an attack on his life by a mysterious hooded man (whom he suspected to be Roderick himself), and when he was found with his sword still dropping blood, he was immediately accused of the Count's murder and imprisoned. He then fled from prison and sought refuge in a forest of Saxony, where he began living as an outlaw in the company of his wife Innogen, daughter to the Duke of Saxony Sigismond. However, in the present Adelmorn keeps being tormented by a spectral voice (also heard by the audience) demanding vengeance and feels guilty about his uncle's death, to the point of believing that he had indeed been his murderer. Ulric and his men eventually discover his hiding place and capture him again. In the dungeon where he has been incarcerated, Adelmorn has a revelatory dream-like vision in which he learns the truth about his uncle's death:

CHORUS OF INVISIBLE SPIRITS.

GUILTLESS sufferer, cease to sorrow;

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others, that it affords *four* pauses; and consequently the RELIEF which is necessary to the attention. In a full piece you *must* occupy the usual three hours, and you create a heaviness by compelling the audience to listen to an uninterrupted business, or act, one hour long. Don't tell me that there may not be matter enough in your subject for *five* acts; because then I ask how you expect to be endured, if you make business only sufficient for three acts occupy the *time* of five?'. Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 228. These words reveal Kemble's typical willingness to eat the cake and have it too: on the one hand, he advocated respect for received rules and Neoclassical principles, while on the other, he was anxious to satisfy the public's appetites with regard to scenery, costumes, visual effects and so on. An ambiguous position that was nevertheless suitable to a particular transitional period such as this, in which theatrical codes were changing along with the audience's tastes.

<sup>268</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *The East Indian*, London: J. Davies & J. Bell (1800), p. 85.

Care from thy sad heart dismiss:  
When thine eyes uncloseto-morrow,  
Wake to life and live to bliss.

*[Part of the wall opens, and discovers (in vision) a blasted Heath by moonlight. The figure of an Old Man, a wound on his bosom, and his garments stained with gore, is seen holding a bloody dagger towards heaven.]*

Clouds around the phantom lour!  
Vengeance, 'tis thy fated hour,  
Pealing thunders speak it near.

*[The Moon turns red; a burst of Thunder is heard, and Ulric appears held by two Dæmons.]*

Lo! 'tis come! the victim's here!

*[The Old Man plunges the dagger in Ulric's bosom, who sinks into the arms of the Dæmons, and is carried off by them.]*

See, he struggles! vain endeavour!  
See, he dies, he's lost for ever!  
Mortals, view his fate, and fear!

*[The Heath vanishes; a Ghost appears into which the Old Man is seen ascending upon brilliant clouds.]*

Now from the earth his flight addressing,  
Upwards see the spirit move:  
Youth, receive his parting blessing,  
Pledge of pardon, pledge of love.  
Sweet his angel-accents swell:  
Adelmorn, farewell, farewell!

*[The wall closes; Adelmorn, who, during the vision, expresses the various emotions produced by it upon his mind, starts suddenly from his couch.]*<sup>269</sup>

Meanwhile, Lodowick, servant to Ulric but still secretly faithful to Adelmorn, has serious suspects about the current Count of Bergen. When Ulric discovers his double-cross, he confines him into a dungeon located in the castle's tower. However, a providential lighting strikes the tower and destroys part of the dungeon's wall, revealing an additional adjacent dungeon. There Lodowick finds the moribund Father Cyprian, imprisoned there by Ulric for being a penitent accomplice of his crimes (he had been the one who attempted on Adelmorn's life on the night of Roderick's murder), and receives from him a letter, written by Ulric's himself, containing clear evidence of Adelmorn's innocence. When Father Cyprian is about to expire, Roderick's ghost appears again (invisible to Lodowick) to grant him forgiveness of his sins:

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<sup>269</sup> All quotations from the text are from Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *Adelmorn the Outlaw. A Romantic Drama, in Three Acts*, London: John Bell (1801).

LODOWICK. Father! father!

FATHER CYPRIAN. Roderic's blood yet staining my hands—Powers of mercy, look where he stands!—[*The Old Man, who appeared in Adelmorn's vision, enters with a slow step and majestic air. Cyprian sinks on his knees before him.*]

LODOWICK. What's the matter?

FATHER CYPRIAN. Look there! look there!

LODOWICK. What? Where?

FATHER CYPRIAN. Thou art fearful, but thine eye looks mild! My heart-strings are yielding.—Ere they break, have mercy! Stretch forth thy hand—bless me—bid me sleep in peace!—[*The Spectre's lips move; he raises his hands to heaven, and sinks to the earth.*]—He forgave me—Heaven, be thou as merciful!—[*He falls back and dies.*]

When Ulric discovers about Lodowick's escape, he is afraid of being exposed and gives the order to proceed immediately to execute Adelmorn. However, Lodowick arrives just in time to accuse Ulric. The usurper angrily dismisses the servant's claims, but the Duke – who is grateful to Adelmorn for saving him in the past – is suspicious and asks him to swear by the cross that he has nothing to do with Roderick's murder. At this point the ghost appears again, seen only by Ulric and the audience:

ULRIC. As I have hopes of happiness hereafter, by all that is holy in Heaven, by all that is fearful in Hell, I swear that...[*as he proceeds, the Ghost rises slowly with a flaming dagger in his hand, and stands opposite to Ulric, who stops and remains gazing upon him for some time without motion.*]

SIGISMOND. Why stop you?

ULRIC [*motionless*]. My Lord!

SIGISMOND. What gaze you at?

ULRIC. My Lord!

SIGISMOND. Proceed.

ULRIC. He cannot be a witness in his own cause.

SIGISMOND. Who?

ULRIC. He!—He!—My uncle—See you not my dagger?—Flames curl round it!—Lo! how he points to his bleeding bosom!—But 'tis false—'tis false!—The wound I gave him was not half so deep!—[*All utter a cry of mingled joy and horror.*] [...]

SIGISMOND. Mark, how passion shakes him.

ULRIC [*frantic*]. Thy grave was deep, why hast thou left it? To save thy darling? To drag me to the block prepared for him? This prevents it!—[*Drawing his dagger, and rushing towards the Ghost, who till now has remained fixed like a statue, but on his approach raises his arm with a terrible look, and motions to stab him. Ulric utters a cry of horror.*] Mercy!—I am guilty, but not fit to die. [*He falls on the ground, while the Ghost sinks.*]

Upon hearing this confession, the Duke orders his guards to capture Ulric and declares Adelmorn the rightful Count of Bergen, providing a typically Gothic happy ending.

Although on paper *Adelmorn the Outlaw* had all to succeed, on stage it proved a complete disaster from beginning to end. The audience hissed several parts, especially in the third act, which included comedy moments that were judged inappropriate to the intensely tragic tone of the story. Moreover, and this might be regarded as a surprise, the abundance of shocking supernatural scenes ended up being totally counter-productive, possibly indicating that limits had been pushed too far, or that the

audience had already grown tired of Lewis's high Gothic recipe. Things were made worse by a grotesque incident that plagued the play's inaugural performance at Drury Lane on 4 May 1801: in the last scene, when Roderick's ghost appears with a flaming dagger in his hand, the actor inadvertently set its drapery on fire and his clumsy attempts to extinguish the flames 'excited the mirth of the audience', who was 'within an ace of being treated with a roasted spectre'<sup>270</sup>. The suspension of disbelief so crucial for the good outcome of the scene was thus destroyed, undermining the whole piece. Reluctantly, Lewis undertook to extensively revise the text before the second performance. He expunged two of the ghost's interventions, keeping only its imaginary appearance in Adelmorn's dream in an attempt to save its work. Yet also this scene proved problematic since many interpreted the ghost's ascension to heaven as an ill-conceived parody of the Virgin Mary's Assumption as well as a sort of re-creation of Raphael's *The Transfiguration*, then on public display at the Louvre (this was probably due to the author's fame as blasphemous writer, given that a very similar expedient had been used in *Cambro-Britons* without raising any such controversy)<sup>271</sup>. Moreover, the audience reportedly mistook the vision as reality and was utterly confused when Ulric re-appeared in the next scene as if nothing had happened<sup>272</sup>. In the preface to the published edition of the play, Lewis defended himself from the accusation of having explicitly represented Heaven and Hell in the play (which at the time was not allowed) and again protested against the fact that the supernatural was seamlessly accepted in minor dramatic genres (paradoxically, even those that adapted his own works) but not in his productions:

in the Vision heaven and hell are not publicly exhibited: my phantoms are only seen upon the road thither; and in showing this to the audience, I have only shown them what they have not merely been accustomed to applaud. *Don Juan's* devils have exhibited their flame-coloured stockings and black periwigs in every theatre throughout the kingdom; and it is no less certain, that at Covent Garden the bleeding Nun in "Raymond and Agnes" has been for many years in the habit of ascending to heaven with great applause in a sort of postchaise made of paste-board. The spectators never failed to bestow their smiles on these supernatural visitants, and angels and devils have been indiscriminately honoured with the same impartial approbation.<sup>273</sup>

The play closed after nine performances amid general dissatisfaction and reviewers jumped at the chance to completely condemn it. *The Monthly Mirror* used particularly harsh words:

Mr. Lewis has presumed too much upon the favourable reception of his *Castle Spectre*. Though there was nothing in the action of that drama to justify the appearance of a supernatural visitant, there was a solemnity and good management in its introduction, which made amends for the breach of the Horatian precept—*Nec Deus intersit, &c.*—but the spectres in *Adelmorn* excite laughter instead of awe. The vision, which Mr. Lewis may have borrowed from the dream of

<sup>270</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory, 'Preface', in Lewis, Matthew Gregory (1801), p. ii.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iv.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p. i-ii.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

Posthumus Leonatus while in prison [in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*], is a very bungling expedient to entrap the public, and the whole business connected with this ridiculous machinery is in the highest degree contemptible.<sup>274</sup>

Other journals were no less brutal: *The Critical Review* uncompromisingly stated that a ‘useless ghost and vision have damned the Outlaw’<sup>275</sup>, while, somehow ironically, *The British Critic* confirmed that Lewis's spectres had become ‘rather ludicrous than terrible’, although observing that ‘some external occurrence, likely to make a sudden impression on the criminal, should [...] have been substituted’ once the ghost's final appearance was discarded, thus involuntarily admitting that it did fulfil an important task in the plot<sup>276</sup>. *The European Magazine* mockingly suggested that the play should have been entitled ‘*More Ghosts*’ and claimed that ‘without the dialogue, which is wretched, *Adelmorn* would make a tolerable Ballet, or Pantomime; but as a Drama it is far below criticism’<sup>277</sup>. Similarly, *The Critical Review* thought the story would have been more suitable to a ‘farce’<sup>278</sup>.

Once again, critics stressed how the sensational and supernatural transgressions of the Gothic were irreconcilable with the nobility of spoken drama, especially when dull and mediocre dialogues such as those of *Adelmorn*, a mere frill to the action and plot twists, emerged as the most visible sign of legitimate drama's derangement, surely more alarming than the reduction in the number of acts. The spoken word, the basis of legitimate theatre, had in these productions completely lost its centrality in favour of the visual and sonic components, and patent theatres' very status was thus thoroughly challenged. This argument was supported, among others, by *The European Magazine*, which directly accused Drury Lane's management:

When we see such a man at the head of the Concern as Mr. Sheridan, and Mr. Kemble as the Acting Manager, both highly distinguished for classical learning and correct judgement, we cannot but wonder how pieces calculated, like the above, to degrade the English stage, and vitiate the public taste, contrive to gain access.<sup>279</sup>

At the same time, critics almost implored Lewis to turn to more traditional dramatic forms in order to save his (and, most importantly, legitimate theatres') reputation:

We beg leave, however, to assure Mr. Lewis, that we by no means look on him as a dull writer. As a mistaken one we certainly regard him. But if he would attend half so much to classical study and chaste drama as he has unfortunately done to German absurdity, instead of a stupid

<sup>274</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 11 (June 1801), pp. 410-11.

<sup>275</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 34 (January 1802), p. 231.

<sup>276</sup> *The British Critic*, vol. 18 (November 1801), p. 545.

<sup>277</sup> *The European Magazine and London Review*, vol. 39 (May 1801), p. 359. Curiously, *More Ghosts!* is the title of a 1798 novel by Irish writer Mrs F. C. Patrick which makes fun of the profusion of supernatural elements in Gothic fiction and drama.

<sup>278</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 34 (January 1802), p. 231.

<sup>279</sup> *The European Magazine and London Review*, vol. 39 (May 1801), p. 359.

fellow (as he words it) there is no doubt of his proving a very clever one. We shall be happy when he gives us occasion to speak of him as a *genuine* English dramatist.<sup>280</sup>

Though conscious of his drama's limits, Lewis did not seem to agree: in the preface to *Adelmorn* he announced that he had 'still in [his] power to deluge the town with such an Inundation of Ghosts and Magicians, as would satisfy the thirst of the most insatiable swallower of wonders', openly deriding 'the splenetic and ludicrous indignation, so ill suited to a subject so trifling, which [his] productions have excited in certain persons'<sup>281</sup>. However, his later productions show that he ended up listening to this advice, and in the next few years neither he nor other authors resorted to Gothic supernaturalism. This was probably due to two main reasons. On the one hand, the fact that *Adelmorn* had been a complete failure (the first real fiasco for a play of this type) scared playwrights as well as managers, and was probably interpreted as an early sign of the deterioration of the formula. Surely it encouraged critics to carry on their campaign against these dramas with even more vehemence, in the attempt to save the repertoires of patent theatres from going fully Gothic. But on the other hand, the audience's passion for fantastic and imaginative pieces was channelled by the official arrival of melodrama onto the English stage during the 1802-03 season. A hybrid dramatic form that defied traditional distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate theatre, melodrama seemed to summarise all the latest theatrical tendencies, acting as a meeting point between serious drama and popular drama and fully embracing the supernatural as one of its defining tropes. For patent theatres it was an inevitable compromise. As a result, two trends can be recognised in the first two decades of the nineteenth century and will be examined in the next chapters: on the one hand, regular drama tried to gradually distance itself from Gothic excesses, openly rejecting the supernatural or presenting it as a sham, a manifestly artificial trick; on the other, melodrama adopted Gothic supernaturalism and took it in a new and to an extent less controversial direction, that of the pure fantastic, officially canonising it within the spoken repertoire. The latter trend will indelibly mark the future of the supernatural on stage and contribute to make melodrama, nineteenth century's most distinctive genre, the symbol of the dissolution of the patent system.

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<sup>280</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 34 (January 1802), p. 232.

<sup>281</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory, 'Postscript', in Lewis, Matthew Gregory (1801), pp. ix-x.

## 2. Re-conceptualising Gothic supernaturalism

### 2.1 *Removing the supernatural?*

The boom of Gothic dramas between the second half of the 1790s and the early 1800s, coinciding with the pinnacle of Gothic literature's diffusion and popularity, had formally closed the Enlightenment and inaugurated the Romantic era, with its characteristic exploration of supernatural and fantastic themes in literature, poetry and theatre. With regard to the latter, however, the transition proved particularly traumatic. The general public had turned its back to a long-established tradition, showing their preference for those visceral and overstimulating Gothic shows packed with bloody ghosts, horrid devils and the like to the polite and classical tragedies and comedies of manners, with all the cultural, social and political preoccupations that this entailed. Never as in this period there was such a widely shared perception of decay and 'barbarisation' with respect to English theatre. Critics had to deal with a generation of dramatists that 'imitated Shakespeare in his transgressions of the rules alone'<sup>282</sup>. Protests against the saturation of supernatural plays – seen as a rapidly spreading epidemic – became increasingly more vocal at the dawn of the new century:

Cannot these inspired writers, 'these fickle pensioners of Morpheus' train', cannot they let the dead be at peace? Must they be ever raking their ashes to conjure up 'shadowy forms' and ideal mockeries, and horrible spectres? And cannot they indulge fancy's fire, without diving into mysteries more sacred than the Eleusinian, or pretending to search beyond the grave? They are the offspring, the undoubted progeny of Cerberus and Midnight; nay more, instead of shooting folly as it flies, they are the warmest patrons and guardians of it; they are either fools, or think every one of their countrymen so. — Are we to have prodigies and monstrous omens, horrid shapes, and the fruits of brooding darkness forced on us at a place to which we resort to be instructed and amused? Are we to expect to meet fiction instead of reality, on the stage?<sup>283</sup>

Although the rage for Gothic fiction (and for German fiction) slowly began to wane, with obvious consequences on the repertoires of theatres, the mark it left proved indelible. The Gothic had broken the monotony of Enlightenment drama, stretching the limits of what was considered natural, realistic and appropriate on stage, and in life as well. It had resurrected a pseudo-historical world where even the most absurd manifestations of the supernatural were conceivable or even likely, materialising fictional fears that were dangerously akin to contemporary real life concerns. The Enlightenment theatre project thus crumbled, and there was no turning back. One could simply not use a Prosperian wand to 'cause the ghostly spirits of dramatic poesy, the terrific, wild, and numerous apparitions that haunt Old Drury and Covent Garden, "to vanish into thin air, and, like the

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<sup>282</sup> *Literary Leisure; or, the Recreations of Solomon Saunter, Esq.*, vol. 1 (January 1800), quoted in Baillie, Joanna, *Plays on the Passions*, ed. Peter Duthie, Peterborough: Broadview Press (2001), p. 425.

<sup>283</sup> Academicus, 'On the Absurdities of the Modern Stage', in *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 10 (September 1800), p. 181.

baseless fabric of a vision, leave not a wreck behind”’, as a critic had hoped<sup>284</sup>. And as the public seemed more and more interested in meeting the supernatural rather than the natural, of seeing rather than hearing, the very future of legitimate theatre was at stake, and with it the patent system itself. Some commentators proposed to start employing the same stage techniques and mechanical devices of Gothic plays also in Shakespearean productions in order to awake audiences from their apathy. *The Mirror of Taste*, for example, called for a change in the representation of Shakespeare's ghosts in an article dedicated to *Hamlet* and ‘Shakspeare as he should be’:

A figure of the very first water and magnitude, now makes his *entré*—the ghost of the late king! and here I must digress awhile, and like a raw notary's clerk, enter my feeble protest against the tame and unimpressive manner in which that supernatural personage is permitted to make his appearance. It should seem that our managers reserve all their decorations for the inexplicable dumb show of the Wood Daemon (that diphthong is my delight), the Castle Spectre, &c. &c. The Bleeding Nun in Raymond and Agnes is ushered in with a pre-*scent*-iment of blue flame and brimstone. Angela's mother advances in a minute step, to soft music, like Goldmith's bear, and is absolutely enveloped in flames—none but a salamander, or Messrs. Shadrach and company can enact the part with safety. But when we are presented with a dead Hamlet, Banquo, or lady Anne, those impressive non-naturals of the poet of Nature, they walk in as quiet and unadorned as at a morning rehearsal; [...] let us in future see Shakspeare's ghosts adorned with the proper paraphernalia (and infernal) of thunder, hautboys, and brimstone.<sup>285</sup>

This comment reflected the rather diffused idea that Shakespearean drama and, more generally, traditional drama might seem too bare and unspectacular if compared to contemporary Gothic productions, this being especially obvious when it came to representations of the supernatural. The years around the start of the nineteenth century were crucial in this respect, for the illegitimate theatres became more and more competitive in terms of visual elaborateness and inventiveness. John Philip Kemble, among others, was well aware of the problem and sometimes made controversial choices in the attempt to find a balance between the supreme authority of verbal rhetoric and the attention to the visual apparatus and special effects. In 1803, Kemble moved to Covent Garden (along with Sarah Siddons and Charles Kemble), becoming its one-sixth shareholder and actor-manager. He decided to inaugurate his first season there with a revival of *Macbeth*, just like he did at Drury Lane in 1794. The ghost of Banquo was still lacking, but the audience of Coven Garden proved decidedly less inclined than Drury Lane's to accept the omission, also because the general attitude towards stage supernaturalism had by this time considerably changed. In reviewing a performance of the play enacted on 12 December 1803, *The Monthly Mirror* reported that the absence of the ghost ‘excited a tumult in the galleries, which totally spoiled the effect of the scene’<sup>286</sup>. Eventually, Kemble restored the ghost in spite of his own contrary

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180. The quotation, drawn from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Act 4, Scene 1) is slightly incorrect.

<sup>285</sup> *The Mirror of Taste, and Dramatic Censor*, vol. 1 (April 1810), p. 309.

<sup>286</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 16 (December 1803), pp. 413-4.

opinion<sup>287</sup> and also introduced some innovations in the cauldron scene in the fourth act with the ostensible purpose of enhancing the level of spectacularity of the tragedy's supernatural components:

In the scene with the *Cauldron* there were also some variations from the established practice, which we conceive to be injurious to the general effect. If our eyes did not deceive us, *one* object was exhibited as the representative of the *eight* kings, the number being declared by so many flashes of light upon this individual object, which continued stationary. We cannot believe that this was done to save the expense of supernumeraries, and it certainly will not be considered as an improvement. To the new mode of making the apparitions rise from the mouth of the cauldron, there can be no particular objection, on the score of propriety; but here again the effect and the interest suffer, since, from the glare of the cauldron, it is not easy to distinguish one apparition from the other.<sup>288</sup>

These efforts betray the intention to keep pace with the recent developments in staging, lighting, traps and special effects, which nevertheless many commentators judged as detrimental to the performance and intellectual enjoyment of Shakespeare's dramas. The idea of 'gothicising' Shakespeare – which was basically what Gothic novelists and playwrights normally did – seemed nothing but another attempt to undermine the respectability of legitimate drama. Moreover, in this period several intellectuals started to speculate about the theatre's ultimate inadequacy to convey Shakespeare's unique blending of high tragedy and supernatural spectacle, his overflowing imagination being thwarted by stage concretisation. To them, Shakespeare's dramas were more akin to poetry, and therefore best enjoyable as private closet readings, whereas the extravagant and visceral imagery of Gothic dramas was best suited to the physical grossness of the stage. The most eloquent remarks on the subject were that of Romantic critic Charles Lamb, who was very sceptical about the possibility for performing Shakespeare's dramas on stage and specifically pointed to the essential unrepresentability of his supernatural characters:

When we read the incantations of those terrible beings, the Witches in *Macbeth*, though some of the ingredients of their hellish composition savor of the grotesque, yet is the effect upon us other than the most serious and appalling that can be imagined? Do we not feel spell-bound as *Macbeth* was? Can any mirth accompany a sense of their presence? We might as well laugh under a consciousness of the principle of Evil himself being truly and really present with us. But attempt to bring these things on to a stage, and you turn them instantly into so many old women, that men and children are to laugh at. Contrary to the old saying, that "seeing is believing," the sight actually destroys the faith; and the mirth in which we indulge at their expense, when we see these creatures upon a stage, seems to be a sort of indemnification which we make to ourselves for the terror which they put us in when reading made them an object of belief—when we surrendered up our reason to the poet, as children to their nurses and their elders; and we laugh at our fears as children, who thought they saw something in the dark, triumph when the bringing in of a candle discovers the vanity of their fears. For this exposure of supernatural agents upon a stage is truly bringing in a candle to expose their own delusiveness. It is the

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<sup>287</sup> Bartholomeusz, Dennis (1969), p. 133.

<sup>288</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 16 (December 1803), p. 414.

solitary taper and the book that generates a faith in these terrors; a ghost by chandelier light, and in good company, deceives no spectators—a ghost that can be measured by the eye, and his human dimensions made out at leisure. The sight of a well-lighted house, and a well-dressed audience, shall arm the most nervous child against any apprehensions [...] Spirits and fairies cannot be represented, they cannot even be painted—they can only be believed.<sup>289</sup>

However radical, these affirmations are clearly rooted in the theatrical and cultural context of the time. The idea that at least Shakespeare need to be somehow protected from the derangements of modern theatre – even at the cost of retiring his plays from the stage altogether (uncoincidentally, the early nineteenth century saw an explosion of the so-called closet drama, which escaped legislative control) – was largely prevalent. The official advent of melodrama – a French genre that usurped spoken word and proved extremely porous to the supernatural mode (see next chapter) – and the sudden proliferation of various types of pseudo-theatrical ghost shows imported from abroad had given rise to a true supernatural ‘invasion’ that came to dominate London's entertainment industry. As a consequence, regular drama began to close in on itself in order to defend its traditional role as preserver of those Enlightenment-driven aesthetic patterns and moral codes aimed at fostering audience cultivation through a realistic representation of life. There was, in many ways, an attempt to promote a return to order within a theatrical environment characterised by utter disorder. If Shakespearean dramas and even indispensable commercial hits like *The Castle Spectre* were still excused, a tendency arose to regulate and limit the use of the supernatural in legitimate drama more thoroughly. The so-called Romantic revival of tragedy – intended as a revival of legitimate drama as well – based itself on the very classical principle of the imitation of nature as promoted by Aristotle and Horace, a principle that Gothic dramas had totally disregarded. As a result, in the first decades of the nineteenth-century serious, non-melodramatic supernaturalism was mainly relegated to the closet, and those authors that attempted to bring it to the stage faced opposition and even censorship.

The most notorious occurrence of suppression of the supernatural was, without any doubt, that of Charles Robert Maturin's tragedy *Bertram; or, The Castle of St. Aldobrand*, the Irish author's first but highly ambitious dramatic effort. Maturin reprised the ‘German’ Gothic of the 1790s in order to chronicle the story of the ruined nobleman Bertram, who, after being usurped of his land and forced into exile, becomes the leader of a gang of bandits. After having miraculously survived a shipwreck (‘a supernatural effect without even a hint of supernatural agency’, according to Coleridge<sup>290</sup>),

<sup>289</sup> Lamb, Charles, ‘On the Tragedies of Shakespeare’ (1811), in *The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Charles Lamb*, ed. R. H. Shepherd, London: Chatto and Windus (1875), pp. 263-4. A similar argument was made as early as 1792 by Henry James Pye, who wrote: ‘What representation can give us such ideas of the ghost of Hamlet as we received from the terrible and pathetic dialogue between that awful phantom and his son. Perhaps the effect is stronger in the closet than on the stage. This is certainly the case with Macbeth’. Pye, Henry James, *A Commentary Illustrating the Poetic of Aristotle*, London: John Stockdale (1792), p. 274.

<sup>290</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1847), p. 283. Coleridge wrote a famous negative review of the play in his *Biographia*

Bertram is transported by some monks to the Gothic convent of St. Anselm (Sicily), which happens to be near his former castle, now ruled by Lord Aldobrand, who married Bertram's old sweetheart Imogene. Blinded by the desire for revenge, Bertram kills Aldobrand, but Imogene goes mad and dies, leading him to commit suicide out of remorse. Written as early as 1813, the tragedy attracted the enthusiasm of authors of the calibre of Lord Byron and Walter Scott, who began to promote it<sup>291</sup>, but both Frederick Jones (manager of Dublin's Theatre Royal) and John Philip Kemble (who was preparing his retirement) declined the offer to produce it. However, thanks to Lord Byron, a very influential member of the Sub-committee of Management of Drury Lane, *Bertram* was eventually accepted at that theatre, where it finally debuted on 9 May 1816. It clocked up 22 performances (an absolutely remarkable result considering that it opened very late in the season) and at least seven printed editions within the year, thus establishing itself as the most successful tragedy of the early nineteenth century in spite of the numerous allegations against its questionable morality (further fuelled by Coleridge). This very favourable and to an extent surprising outcome was mainly due to Edmund Kean's memorable performance as the lead protagonist, possibly the most remarkable stage incarnation of the Byronic/Satanic hero-villain to date (the original prototype being Karl Moor from Schiller's *Die Räuber*)<sup>292</sup>. The choice of the most talented Shakespearean actor of the time was in perfect alignment with Maturin's own ambition to write drama on a Shakespearean level. Already in

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*Literaria*, an autobiographical work heavily informed by Post-Napoleonic reactionary positions that revived the theme of Gothic drama's alleged ideological harmfulness. To him, *Bertram* was an emblematic symptom of English drama's reprehensible dependence on German materials, in turn considered as twisted and debased re-elaborations of English models, above all Shakespeare. However, Coleridge's rejection of Gothic drama as immoral and 'jacobinical' probably sounded much less effective in 1816 than it would have in the 1790s (although Metternich himself obsessively pointed to revived Jacobinism as the greatest threat to the peace recently established by the Restoration). In fact, some commentators – notably William Hazlitt – remarked how Coleridge's resentment had been fuelled primarily by the fact that the Drury Lane Sub-Committee had preferred to produce *Bertram* instead of his own *Zapolya: A Christmas Tale* (1817), a two-act dramatic poem inspired by Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline* that was eventually performed in February 1818 at the Surrey Theatre, in another paradoxical exchange between legitimate and illegitimate theatre. See also Townshend, Dale, 'Charles Robert Maturin', in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith, Chichester: Wiley (2016), p. 428, and Moody, Jane (2007), pp. 59-62.

<sup>291</sup> Townshend, Dale (2016), p. 428.

<sup>292</sup> *The Eclectic Review* gave a fascinating description of this character type, putting emphasis on his 'unnatural' and 'undramatic' otherworldliness, which makes him something of a human demon: 'The hero, formerly, must have been the perfection of beauty and virtue: this is done away with now; he needs have no one virtue under heaven but strong feeling for himself; as many vices as you please, but all of a colossal magnitude; no beauty whatsoever, but then his face must be such as, once seen, can never be forgotten; and he must be very desperate. His eye withers; and a single word from him blasts. He has no moderate sensations;—his brain must be on fire,—or his breast must be locked up in ice. No pause, no breathing-time from exquisite feeling; no relief; all tumult and tornado, earthquake and cross-lightning; or again, all dumb despair and utter desolation. Every one of his words is emphatic,—in Italics,—with three notes of admiration. He is like the wanderers in the Halls of Eblis,—has always his land upon his heart. He never weeps;—burning agonies have dried up the fountains of his eyes long before the time that he could pretend to be the hero of a romance; but he laughs—a hideous laugh of phrensy [*sic*]. He is thrown at midnight on the flinty crag, and bares his forehead to the breeze; or he walks, amid terrors of conflicting elements, dashing his clenched hand against his feverish brow. He swears, and the more dreadful the imprecations, the stronger the sensation produced: he loves, and [...] the guiltier the passion, the more violent the shock'. *The Eclectic Review*, vol. 6 (October 1816), p. 385.

the preface to his debut Gothic novel *Fatal Revenge; or, The Family of Montorio* (1807), Maturin had declared his intention to detach himself from his Gothic colleagues and become the promoter of a more legitimate and elevated Gothicism respectful of Shakespeare's authority, which in his view had been utterly betrayed by Germanised writers such as Matthew Lewis:

The present style of novel is most piteously bewailed by those who are, or say they are, well affected to the cause of literature. *Diablerie, tales fit to frighten the nursery*, German horrors, are the best language they give us. Whatever literary articles have been imported in the *plague ship* of German letters, I heartily wish were pronounced contraband by competent inspectors. But I really conceive that the present subjects of novels and romances, are calculated to unlock every store of fancy and of feeling. I question whether there be a source of emotion in the whole mental frame, so powerful or universal as *the fear arising from objects of invisible terror*. [...] The abuse of the influence of this passion by vulgar and unhallowed hands, is no argument against its use. The magic book has indeed often been borne by a rude ignorant, like William of Deloraine, journeying from the abbey of Melrose with his wizard treasure. The wand and robe of Prospero have often been snatched by Caliban; but, in a master's hand, gracious Heaven! what wonders might it work! I have read novels, ghost-stories, where the spirit has become so intimate with flesh and blood, and so affable, that I protest I have almost expected it, and some of its human interlocutors, like the conspirators in Mr. Bayes's play, to "to take out their snuff-boxes and feague it away." Such writers have certainly made ridiculous what Shakespeare has considered and treated as awful. Such have occasioned the outcry against converting the theatre of literature into a phantasmagoria, and substituting the figures of a German magic lanthorn, for those forms which are visible to "*the eye in a fine frenzy rolling*".<sup>293</sup>

Such words could also have been easily applied to the theatre, where the supernatural had been similarly appropriated 'by vulgar and unhallowed hands'. However, Maturin's apparent desire to faithfully emulate Shakespeare contrasted with actual practice, and any comparison with the great poet immediately appeared as preposterous. As to the portrayal of the supernatural, Maturin's works actually seemed less inclined to recreate Shakespeare's solemn apparitions than to outdo the scary tactics and diabolic paraphernalia of his own Gothic predecessors. His theatrical undertakings were, therefore, significantly constrained by a context that had grown less permissive than it had been some years earlier concerning certain varieties of transgression (in 1816 Drury Lane was co-managed by Thomas Dibdin and Alexander Rae, whose stated purpose was to restore the theatre 'to its former classical renown and 'exterminat[e] the speaking monsters imported from the banks of the Danube'<sup>294</sup>). In order to make *Bertram* fit for the stage, Maturin had to make some alterations, the most relevant of which was the utter elimination of the Dark Knight of the Forest, a malevolent

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<sup>293</sup> Maturin, Charles Robert, Preface to *Fatal Revenge; or, the Family of Montorio*, 3 vols, vol. 1, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme (1807), p. iii-vi; vii. As Benedicte Seynhaeve and Raphaël Ingelbien emphasised, '[b]y associating himself with Prospero, Maturin not only justifies his novel's magic spells and engineered terror, he also identifies with a figure of Shakespearean authority who was often seen as a proxy for Shakespeare himself'. Ingelbien, Raphaël and Seynhaeve, Benedicte, 'Whose Gothic Bard? Charles Robert Maturin and Contestations of Shakespearean Authority in British/Irish Romantic Authority', in *Shakespeare and Authority: Citations, Conceptions and Constructions*, ed. Katie Halsey and Angus Vine, London: Palgrave Macmillan (2018), p. 284. The '*eye in a fine frenzy rolling*' is a quotation from *A Midsummer Nighth's Dream* (Act 5, Scene 1).

<sup>294</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, (1891), p. 274.

demon living in the woods near Aldobrand's castle. In the original version of the text, this figure was instrumental in arousing Bertram's 'forgotten thoughts of evil'<sup>295</sup> and encouraging him into fulfilling his horrible revenge (somehow anticipating the Faustian theme so prominent in Maturin's 1820 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*). It was a perfect example of those Germanised monstrosities<sup>296</sup> which Maturin had ostensibly claimed he wanted to avoid. And although it was probably not supposed to physically appear on stage, the mere existence of this Mephistophelic character in the story was more problematic than that of any other Gothic ghost or ghoul that had appeared on stage until that moment. Walter Scott, who some years earlier had penned a harsh review of *Fatal Revenge* in which he advised Maturin to find a 'literary friend or counsellor [...] on whose taste and judgment he can rely'<sup>297</sup>, became his mentor and strongly recommended him to drop all the scenes and speeches relating to the Dark Knight, given that even its suggested presence would have been utterly intolerable to the audience:

[Maturin] had our old friend Satan (none of your sneaking St. John-street devils, but the arch-fiend himself) brought on stage bodily; I believe I have exorcised the foul fiend—for, though in reading he was a most terrible fellow, I feared for his reception in public.<sup>298</sup>

Lord Byron and George Lamb too separately advised him to drop any reference to the character,

<sup>295</sup> Maturin, Charles Robert, *Bertram; or, The Castle of St. Aldobrand*, in *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789–1825*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, Athens: Ohio University Press (1992), p. 380.

<sup>296</sup> To Coleridge, also the Dark Knight of the Forest was the result of a perverted reworking of English sources. In reviewing a passage in which the fiend is mentioned, he recognised the influence of Shakespeare, Dryden and Milton. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1891), p. 292.

<sup>297</sup> *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 6 (May 1810), p. 347.

<sup>298</sup> Scott, Walter, Letter to Daniel Terry (10 November 1814), quoted in Cox, Jeffrey N. (1992), p. 62. In his edition of *Bertram*, Jeffrey N. Cox included the deleted scenes featuring the Dark Knight of the Forest from the manuscript held in the Abbotsford library (the same that Maturin submitted to Scott), showing how the tragedy originally ended with Bertram being taken from prison and sacrificed (off stage) by the fiend, in a scene reminiscent of the shocking conclusion to Lewis's *The Monk* as well as the ending to Goethe's first part of *Faust*. See Cox, Jeffrey N. (1992), pp. 377-83. In a review of one of Maturin's subsequent novel *Women; or, Pour et Contre* (1818), Scott returned extensively to the subject and confessed that he was a great admirer of the Dark Knight scenes, although he still believed that retaining them from the stage had been a wise choice: 'The description of the fiend's port and language,—the effect which the conference with him produces upon Bertram's mind,—the terrific dignity with which the intercourse with such an associate invests him, and its rendering him a terror even to his own desperate banditti,—is all well conceived, and executed in a grand and magnificent strain of poetry; and, in the perusal, supposing the reader were carrying his mind back to the period when such intercourse between mortals and demons was considered as matter of indisputable truth, the story acquires probability and consistency, even from that which is in itself not improbable but impossible. The interview with the incarnate fiend of the forest, would, in these days, be supposed to have the same effect upon the mind of Bertram, as the "metaphysical aid" of the witches produces upon that of Macbeth, awakening and stimulating that appetite for crime, which slumbered in the bosom of both, till called forth by supernatural suggestion. At the same time, while we are happy to preserve a passage of such singular beauty and power, we approve of the taste which retrenched it in action. The *suadente diabolo* is now no longer a phrase even in our indictments; and we fear his Satanic Majesty, were he to appear on the stage in modern times, would certainly incur the appropriate fate of damnation'. *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 30 (June 1818), pp. 206-7. Curiously, Scott's own melodrama *The Doom of Devorgoil* (1830) would be rejected by Daniel Terry, then manager of the Adelphi theatre, because '[t]he manner in which the mimic goblins of Devorgoil are intermixed with the supernatural machinery, was found to be objectionable'. Scott, Walter, *The Doom of Devorgoil, A Melo-Drama. Auchindrane; or, the Ayrshire Tragedy*, Edinburgh: Cadell & Co. (1830), p. i.

and Lamb himself would help him adapt the drama for the stage<sup>299</sup>. Maturin eventually gave in to the pressure, but certainly did not agree with this decision. As he wrote in a letter sent to Scott some months after *Bertram's* premiere, he was disappointed that the printed edition of the play reflected the acted version and not his original text:

They have printed it as acted, and, if I may be allowed a coined and *apparently* affected expression, have un-*Maturined* completely, they have broken my wand and drowned my Magic book, and Prospero himself, without his storms, his Goblins, & his Grammary, sinks into a very insignificant sort of Personage—[...] I do not say this (you will do me the justice to believe) in affectation or vanity, but I think whatever tends to Efface the radical distinctions of intellectual character, and reduce all the wild and wayward shoots of Mind, stubbed, unsightly and grotesque as they may be, to one smooth-shaven Level, by the ponderous operation of the Critical Roller [...] I have no power of affecting, no hope of instructing, no play or other production of mine will ever draw a tear from the eye, or teach a lesson to the Heart, so I wish they would let me do what I am good for, sit down by my magic Cauldron, mix my dark ingredients, see the bubbles work, and the spirits rise, and by the pale and mystic light, I might show them “the best of my delights”.<sup>300</sup>

To Maturin, the Dark Knight of the Forest was not a Gothic extravaganza, but a powerful Shakespearean effect. The sudden popularity and big profit that *Bertram* brought him, however, certainly contributed to lessen Maturin's regret. If on the one hand the allegations against the work's presumed immorality put an end to his hopes to make a career in the Church (he was a poorly paid curate at St. Peter's parish in Dublin), on the other its commercial success launched his career as a respected man of letters well integrated into fashionable society. Unfortunately for him, *Bertram* remained a one hit wonder. In a way, it could be retrospectively considered as the swan song or even a sort of involuntary afterthought on Gothic drama, then a dying genre. Its ‘want of originality’ in the plot was counterbalanced by its ‘effective execution’, which, as a reviewer of *The New Monthly Magazine* wrote, ‘stands in the place of invention, and supplies the charm of novelty’<sup>301</sup>. And yet one could argue that the lack of courage in including such an unusual character probably meant that the tragedy did not leave a more impressive and enduring mark<sup>302</sup>. Maturin's subsequent

<sup>299</sup> Lougy, Robert E., *Charles Robert Maturin*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press (1975), p. 44.

<sup>300</sup> Maturin, Charles Robert, Letter to Walter Scott (2 July 1816), in *The Correspondence of Sir Walter Scott and Charles Robert Maturin, with a Few Other Allied Letters*, ed. Fannie E. Ratchford and Wm. H. McCarthy, Jr., Austin: University of University of Texas Press (1937), p. 59.

<sup>301</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 20 (October 1827), p. 376.

<sup>302</sup> William Hazlitt, for example, wrote that ‘[t]he interest flags very much during the last act, where the whole plot is known and inevitable. [...] It is a Winter's Tale, a Midsummer Night's Dream, but it is not Lear or Macbeth’. *The Examiner*, 19 May 1816. It could be easily argued that the removal of the Dark Knight of the Forest had made *Bertram's* conclusion flatter and more predictable, which was precisely the most frequently mentioned flaw in the reviews. *The British Critic*, however, lamented that the wicked character of *Bertram* seemed to possess some of the satanic traits of the suppressed fiend: ‘We have been informed, from good authority, that in the first manuscript of the Tragedy, there was not only half an hour's more storm, but also a volcano, and the devil (in the shape of whom we know not) issuing from it. We understand that the author did not willingly part with either the storm or the volcano; but that it was with peculiar reluctance that he was induced at length to give up his devil. We trust, after so auspicious a resignation of this personage himself, that, in a second attempt, he will not retain him in human form; or, if he does, that he will hold him up to the contempt and detestation which he and his fellows amply deserve’. *The*

productions, the tragedies *Manuel* (Drury Lane, 1817) and *Fredolfo* (Covent Garden, 1819), in which the author attempted to ‘speak like a Man of this world’<sup>303</sup>, met with a far worse fate, and his theatrical career came to an abrupt end. Unfortunately for him, a work like *Bertram* seemed to come too late, when pure Gothic drama had already been replaced by various forms of melodrama, surviving only as a closet genre thanks to provocative Romantic writers such as Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who saw it ‘as a form of protest drama, as a self-conscious return [...] to an earlier form with radical associations’<sup>304</sup>. In closet drama the supernatural, any form of the supernatural, was admissible, for this genre ‘is almost as free as fiction to introduce mystical, symbolic and invisible presences. [It] is usually in poetic form and poetry is closer akin to certain forms of the supernatural than is prose, which makes their use more natural’<sup>305</sup>. In the metaphysical drama *Manfred* (1817), for example, Lord Byron felt free to insert phantoms, spirits and other unearthly beings because the closet granted him a creative independence that he could never have on the stage<sup>306</sup>. Maturin, instead, did not seem to share one of the Romantics' main tenets, namely, that the supernatural's only rightful abode was the closet. Ironically, in the following years plays adapted from or inspired by his late masterpiece *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) would be produced at illegitimate theatres such as the Coburg, where the audience were delighted to see the Devil himself and other infernal terrors shamelessly summoned on the stage.

## 2.2 Joanna Baillie and the ‘psychologisation of the supernatural

The stage decline of the Gothic was due, among other things, to a process of reconfiguration of its inherent tendency to supernaturalism, which was felt as necessary after the uncontrollable craze of stage ghosts in the late 1790s and early 1800s. However, if some kind of preventive censorship was possible in extreme cases such as that of *Bertram*, the supernatural could not be utterly removed or relegated to the closet. In fact, it would have been decidedly counter-productive, given the renewed

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*British Critic*, vol. 5 (May 1816), p. 509.

<sup>303</sup> Maturin, Charles Robert, Letter to Walter Scott (2 July 1816), in Ratchford, Fannie E., and, McCarthy, Wm H, Jr. (ed.) (1937), p. 59.

<sup>304</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N. (1992), p. 59.

<sup>305</sup> Scarborough Dorothy (1917), p. 307.

<sup>306</sup> However, even closet supernaturalism was not uncontroversial, as shown by this severe comment on *Manfred*: ‘Of this most extraordinary production we scarcely know what to say. There are lines in it of peculiar beauty, which melt us to tenderness in the midst of the horrors surrounding this most horrid character [Manfred]. Surely, Lord Byron could not mean this piece for representation. No; bad as is the age, we yet dare hope and believe no English audience would endure the daring impiety of many of the scenes. Even in the closet it shocks us to peruse dialogues between demons, spirits, a star, a witch, and Manfred, who is represented as having acquired absolute command over these immaterial beings’. F.H.B., *An Address to the Right Hon. Lord Byron, with An Opinion on Some of His Writings*, London: Wetton and Jarvis (1819), p. 20.

pre-eminence that the theme had acquired in the audience's taste as well as in contemporary literary criticism and dramatic theory. The risk was that the public would definitively abandon legitimate drama in favour of melodramas, pantomimes, ballets and, ultimately, the shows of unpatented theatres, where Gothic supernaturalism was rampant. Therefore, a need arose to find new ways to treat the supernatural in serious drama, re-framing and re-visioning its role in order to subdue its subversive potential. Ghosts, in particular, were still the most debated subject, and the patent theatres continued to be faced with the problem of how to portray them properly. However, the most recent advancements in philosophy and science came to the rescue. As Terry Castle has noted, around 1800, that is at the height of the popularity of Gothic supernatural fiction, there was a 'remarkable cluster of scientific and philosophical anti-apparition writings'<sup>307</sup>, beginning with 'Memoir on the Appearance of Spectres and Phantoms occasioned by Disease, with Psychological Remarks', a lecture delivered by German philosopher Christoph Friedrich Nicolau at the Royal Society of Berlin on 28 February 1799 and translated into English four years later. This work broke new ground by re-locating ghost-seeing occurrences and other seemingly paranormal phenomena from the objective external reality into one's own subjective imagination and visual sphere, using the Enlightenment instruments of reason and observation to 'map out the gothic shadows of the psyche'<sup>308</sup>. The factual reality of apparitions was therefore neither denied nor denigrated, but fully admitted as a symptom of bodily distemper that caused a delusional effect, namely a hallucination, that was linked to one's deepest fears and anxieties. The reconceptualisation of the supernatural as a mere mental state induced by perfectly natural causes marked the beginning of a new era in the study of the mechanisms of the human mind that would ultimately lead to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic explorations of the unconscious. Crucially, these new theories also provided authors of fiction, poetry and drama with new tools to interpret and represent the experience of the supernatural in a way that could be both entertaining and instructive. In *An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions* (1813), for example, physician John Ferriar polemically addressed Gothic writers – also and especially those who used the technique of the explained supernatural – for their improper treatment of the subject:

when I consider the delight with which stories of apparitions are received by persons of all age, and of the most various kinds of knowledge and ability, I cannot help feeling some degree of complacency, in offering to the makers and readers of such stories, a view of the subject, which may extend their enjoyment far beyond its former limits. It has given me pain to see the most fearful and ghastly commencements of a tale of horror reduced to mere common events, at the winding up of the book. I have looked, also, with much compassion, on the pitiful instruments

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<sup>307</sup> Castle, Terry, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press (1995), p. 171.

<sup>308</sup> McCorristine, Shane (2010) p. 42.

of *sliding panels, trap-doors, back-stairs, wax-work figures, smugglers, robbers, coiners*, and other vulgar machinery, which authors of tender of consciences have employed, to avoid the imputation of belief in supernatural occurrences.<sup>309</sup>

He then proudly claims that his essay will be useful to them, since it offers a new key to interpret the supernatural (at least that related ‘to profane history, and to delusions of individuals’<sup>310</sup>, therefore refusing to engage with religious and theological implications) and, therefore, a new and more proper way to depict it in works of fiction:

Now I freely offer, to the manufacturers of ghosts, the privilege of raising them, in as great numbers, and in as horrible a guise as they may think fit, without offending against true philosophy, and even without violating probability. The highest flights of imagination may now be indulged, on this subject, although no loop-hole should be left for mortifying explanations, and for those modifications of terror, which completely bulk the reader's curiosity, and disgust him with a second reading. Another great convenience will be found in my system; apparitions may be evoked, in open day,—at noon, if the case should be urgent, in the midst of a field, on the surface of water, or in the glare of a patent-lamp, quite as easily, as in the ‘darkness of chaos or old night.’ Nay, a person rightly prepared may see ghosts, while seated comfortably by his library-fire, in as much perfection, as amidst broken tombs, nodding ruins, and awe-inspiring ivy. To these unfortunate persons, who feel a real dread of apparitions, I hope to offer considerations which will quiet their fears, and will even convert the horrors of solitude into a source of rational amusement.<sup>311</sup>

These passages perfectly illustrate how the early nineteenth-century scientific discourses on the supernatural ended up intertwining with literature and theatre. In this regard, the pioneering undertakings of Scottish author Joanna Baillie are surely worth analysing, as her theatrical works seemed especially receptive towards the impulses coming from the realm of science. Developing a process started by Ann Radcliffe's novels, Baillie further developed the interiorisation and psychologisation of the supernatural, trying to appropriately translate these concepts into dramatic writing. At the same time, she was possibly the first playwright to really try and conciliate the long-standing tenets of regular drama with the audience's fondness for the Gothic, showing a remarkable theoretical awareness in her approach towards the problem of staging the supernatural.

In 1798, Baillie published the first volume of a project that would come to be known as *Plays on the Passions*, in which each play (either a tragedy or a comedy – as if to underline her strict adherence to legitimate drama) was dedicated to one particular character and one particular human passion (love, hate, hope, fear, jealousy, ambition, revenge, remorse etc.). The series' declared objective was ‘to delineate passion in its progress, to trace it from its early beginning, and to show the fearful gulf towards which it hastens, if not checked in the earlier portions of its career’<sup>312</sup>, in

<sup>309</sup> Ferriar, John, *An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions*, London: Cadell and Davies (1813), pp. vi-vii.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>312</sup> Baillie, Joanna, *The Dramatic and Poetic Works*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans (1853), p. x-xi. All quotations from Baillie's plays, prefaces, and poems are taken from this volume.

order to teach something to the audience, namely, how to recognise and deal with the various passions (and possibly to help others do so) on the basis of negative exempla. As a matter of fact, Baillie's larger aim was that of bringing theatre back to its moral and didactic function (her cultural formation had been starkly influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment tradition), favouring the meticulous psychological analysis of the characters over the mindless and illogical entertainment provided by contemporary German-Gothic drama. In order to do so, her plan was to blend 'classical form and simplicity with renaissance poetry and gothic spectacle in the attempt to re-educate the tastes of British theatre audiences'<sup>313</sup>. A controversial and to an extent vulgar element like the supernatural was generally excluded, being predominately relegated to the characters' mental world, mainly as *fear* of the supernatural, a recurrent motif through the *Plays on the Passions*<sup>314</sup>. According to Michael Gamer, 'Baillie sought to "reform an English theater audience addicted to supernatural spectacle by refocusing these very tastes on character psychology and subjectivity"<sup>315</sup>. It was a particularly smart way to handle such a delicate theme from a safe, rational distance, founded in the conviction that it is better to tell rather than to show. As Baillie stated in the 'Introductory Discourse' that prefaced the 1798 volume,

No man wishes to see the Ghost himself, which would certainly procure [*sic*] him the best information on the subject, but every man wishes to see one who believes that sees it, in all the agitation and wildness of that species of terror.<sup>316</sup>

Baillie's interest rather lay in the recovery of the 'plain order of things in this every-world', which in contemporary Gothic fiction and drama had been overshadowed by a too extensive reliance on spectacle and sensation:

Our love of the grand, the beautiful, the novel, and, above all, of the marvellous, is very strong; and if we are richly fed with what we have a good relish for, we may be weaned to forget our native and favourite aliment. Yet we can never so far forget it but that we shall cling to, and acknowledge it again, whenever it is presented before us. In a work abounding with the marvellous and unnatural, if the author has any how stumbled upon an unsophisticated genuine stroke of nature, we shall immediately perceive and be delighted with it, though we are foolish enough to admire, at the same time, all the nonsense with which it is surrounded. [...] Into whatever scenes the novelist may conduct us, what objects soever he may present to our view, still is our attention most sensibly awake to every touch faithful to nature; still are we upon the watch for every thing that speaks to us of ourselves.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Gamer, Michael, *Popular Stigmas and Appropriate Authors: High Romanticism's Hidden Gothic*, PhD dissertation, University of Michigan (1993), p. 90.

<sup>314</sup> Actually, Baillie's own imagination had been filled with superstitious tales and legends since childhood, especially thanks to her sister Agnes. As she wrote in a poem composed on the occasion of her birthday, 'Thy love of tale and story was the stroke / At which my dormant fancy first awoke, / And ghosts and witches in my busy brain / Arose in sombre show, a motley train'. Quoted in Baillie, Joanna (1853), p. 811.

<sup>315</sup> Gamer, Michael (1997), p. 50.

<sup>316</sup> Baillie, Joanna (1853), p. 3.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

Critical reactions were decidedly positive. *The Monthly Review* immediately expressed its unconditional approval of this experiment:

In the present fallen state of the drama, when rant is pathos, and a pun is wit, and when pasteboard pageantries and German spectres have almost driven Shakspeare and Congreve from the stage, we cannot but applaud any attempt to “hold the mirror up to Nature,” and to exhibit a faithful picture of manners and life.<sup>318</sup>

Likewise, Hewson Clarke's *Literature Leisure* welcomed the project as a breath of fresh air:

From the Blue Beards, the Pizarros, the Castle Spectres of the English stage, from the wild ravings of the German drama, and the lax morality thence incorporated with our theatrical exhibitions, from the mummery of pageantry, and the cant-words of comedy, is a welcome relief to turn the page where the powers of the mind find real exercise—where the feeling heart subscribes to the truth of the portrait—where the embellishments of poetry are made subservient to the noblest purposes.<sup>319</sup>

One of the texts contained in the first volume, the tragedy *De Monfort*, attracted the attention of John Philip Kemble, who saw the roles of the titular protagonist and his sister Jane as a potential showcase for him and Sarah Siddons. After a long period of speculation in literary circles, in April 1800 Kemble announced a staging of *De Monfort* to the excitement of both the public and critics, who wishfully regarded it as the beginning of a new era for the English theatre. The story, set in some town in Germany, is devoted to the theme of hatred and revolves around the violent rivalry between two noblemen, De Monfort and Rezenvelt, which unfolds as a case study on madness and monomania within an intensely Gothic framework. The supernatural seems a latent presence ready to deflagrate at any time, but it never does, remaining a mental suggestion provoked by terrific sounds and shadowy shapes that are scattered throughout the play and contribute to create a heavily superstitious mood. This is best shown in the passage where the agitated De Monfort walks ‘a wild path in a wood’ illuminated by a spectral moonlight:

How hollow groans the earth beneath my tread!  
Is there an echo here? Methinks it sounds  
As tho' some heavy footstep follow'd me.  
I will advance no farther.  
Deep settled shadows rest across the path,  
And thickly-tangled boughs o'er hang this spot.  
O that a tenfold gloom did cover it!  
That 'midst the murky darkness I might strike;  
As in the wild confusion of a dream,  
Things horrid, bloody, terribly, do pass,  
As tho' they pass'd not; nor impress the mind  
With the fix'd clearness of reality.

<sup>318</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 27 (September 1798), p. 66.

<sup>319</sup> *Literature Leisure*, vol. 1 (January 1800), quoted in Baillie, Joanna (2001), p. 428.

[An owl is heard screaming near him.  
 (Starting.) What sound is that?  
 [Listen, and the owl cries again.  
 It is the screech-owl's cry.  
 Foul bird of night! what spirit guides you there?  
 Art thou instinctive drawn to scenes of horror?  
 I've heard of this.<sup>320</sup>

The scene's audiovisual mirages are made of the same immaterial stuff as the invisible ghost in Kemble's *Macbeth*, and the audience cannot have but an indirect knowledge of them. Yet the fact that these phantoms are only imaginary does not make them less scary since they produce ‘the very real effect of Rezenvelt's murder, as well as causing De Monfort's heart to implode from the force of his emotions’<sup>321</sup>.

Kemble, as was his custom, made some alterations to the original text and *De Monfort* finally debuted on 29 April 1800 at Drury Lane with music by Michael Kelly and Thomas Shaw and scenery by Thomas Greenwood and William Capon. The prologue, written by Francis North (the author of *The Kentish Barons*, an early Gothic play staged at the Haymarket in 1791) and spoken by Mrs Powell, openly stated the intention of the author to resurrect the glory of English drama, recently damaged by the overbearing influence of German and Gothic models:

Too long has Fancy led her Fairy Dance,  
 Thro' all the various mazes of Romance;  
 On Classic ground her motley standard rear'd  
 While honest nature blush'd, and disappear'd—  
 O, shame!—why borrow from a foreign store?  
 As if the Rich should pilfer from the poor.—[...]  
 Should you approve, on this auspicious Day  
 The British Drama reassumes her sway.<sup>322</sup>

However, the initial enthusiasm turned into sad disappointment. In spite of the lead performers' excellent acting, *De Monfort* failed to excite prolonged interest and was withdrawn after only 11 nights, falling into oblivion until Edmund Kean briefly revived it in 1821 in altered form<sup>323</sup>. As Jeffrey N. Cox has argued, Baillie, regardless of her stated intention, did ‘not embrace a chaste, classicizing, regular, “legitimate” drama but the “varied”, “irregular”, “interesting” tactics of the so-called illegitimate theatres’<sup>324</sup>. Kemble's ongoing attempts to make improvements to the text proved

<sup>320</sup> Baillie, Joanna (1853), p. 95.

<sup>321</sup> Gamer, Michael (1997), p. 59

<sup>322</sup> North, Francis, Prologue to *De Monfort*, in *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, Athens, Ohio University Press (1992), pp. 233-4.

<sup>323</sup> Kean reportedly made some adjustments to lessen the work's inherent gloominess, but in spite of Baillie's approval the revival totalled only five performances. Hawkins, F. W., *The Life of Edmund Kean*, 2 vols., vol. 2, London: Tinsley Brothers (1869), pp. 177-82.

<sup>324</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N., ‘Staging Joanna Baillie’, in *Joanna Baillie, Romantic Dramatist*, ed. Thomas C. Crochunis, London: Routledge (2004), p. 150.

insufficient, and critics preferred to put the blame on Baillie. But his interventions were not aimed at rendering the play more 'legitimate: quite the contrary. Although a prompt-book of Kemble's adaptation has not survived, the fact that Dutton described it as 'a heterogenous compound of Tragedy, Comedy, Farce, Opera, Pantomime and Puppet-Shew; in which dancing, feasting, revelry, *drunken songs*, screech owls, murders, funeral processions, music and lamentations, are promiscuously jumbled together'<sup>325</sup> may be revelatory of Kemble's attempt to make the tragedy more accessible and appealing for the general public. Even the screech owl that appears in the fourth act to torment De Monfort's nocturnal wanderings seems to have been physically represented on stage (perhaps by a puppet), being however promptly removed after the first performance<sup>326</sup>. Although critics attributed the tragedy's failure to its presumed similarity with contemporary Gothic productions, the problem was likely the opposite: it was not Gothic enough. The Drury Lane audience was simply bored by the piece's slow, heavy pace and its want of suspense and action<sup>327</sup>. The physical absence of the supernatural in a play that often alludes to its presence certainly was a disappointment, a frustration in some ways similar to that provoked by James Boaden's de-supernaturalised adaptation of *The Monk*.

For its part, *De Monfort* did actually spark 'a marked and sustained'<sup>328</sup> revival of tragedy in the early nineteenth century, but the attempt to de-Gothicise and de-supernaturalise tragedy in order to save it from decadence ultimately proved disastrous from a commercial point of view, with very few exceptions (notably *Bertram*, which however utilised many tropes and tactics of the Gothic). Baillie's own dramatic career continued with ups and downs after *De Monfort*. Although the *Plays on the Passions* were specifically designed for performance<sup>329</sup>, very few of them actually managed

<sup>325</sup> *The Dramatic Censor* (10 May 1800), quoted in Baillie, Joanna (2001), p. 452.

<sup>326</sup> *The Dramatic Censor* (30 April 1800), quoted in Baillie, Joanna (2001), p. 449.

<sup>327</sup> 'The audience yawned in spite of themselves, in spite of the exquisite poetry, the vigorous passion, and the transcendent acting of John Kemble and Mrs. Siddons. [...] It was a positive reprieve when the curtain dropped; and though all felt convinced they had been dealing with a very superior production, many doubted if they understood it; few shed tears (the most genuine test of tragedy), and still fewer cared to undergo the operation a second time'. 'Leaves from the Portfolio of a Manager', in *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 37 (April 1851), p. 530.

<sup>328</sup> Gamer, Michael, 'Romantic Drama' in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, ed. David Scott Kastan, 5 vols., vol. 1, (2006), p. 400. See titles such as William Godwin's *Antonio; or, the Soldier's Return* (Drury Lane, 1800), William Sotheby's *Julian and Agnes* (Drury Lane, 1801), Matthew Gregory Lewis's *Alfonso, King of Castile* (Covent Garden, 1803), *The Harper's Daughter* (Covent Garden, 1803) and *Adelgitha; or, The Fruits of a Single Error* (Drury Lane, 1807), George Manners's *Edgar; or, Caledonian Feuds* (Covent Garden, 1806) and William Godwin's *Faulkner* (Drury Lane, 1807), just to mention the earliest examples.

<sup>329</sup> As Baillie stated in the 1798 'Introductory Remark', she published her plays less by choice than necessity: 'To have received approbation from an audience of my countrymen, would have been more pleasing to me than any other praise. A few tears from the simple and young would have been, in my eyes, pearls of great price; and the spontaneous, untutored plaudits of the rude and the uncultivated would have come to my heart as offerings of no mean value. I should, therefore, have been better pleased to have introduced them to the world from the stage than from the press. I possess, however, no likely channel to the former mode of public introduction: and, upon further reflection, it appeared to me, that by publishing them in this way, I have an opportunity afforded me of explaining the design of my work, and enabling the public to judge, not only of each play by itself, but as making a part likewise of the whole; an advantage which perhaps, does more than over-balance the splendour and effect of theatrical representation'. Baillie, Joanna (1853), p. 16. Somewhat ironically, however, Baillie came to be regarded

to reach the stage<sup>330</sup>. Apart from *De Monfort*, only *The Family Legend* had the honour to be staged at a patent theatre, namely Drury Lane, where it opened in 1815 after a brilliant run at Edinburgh Theatre five years earlier. In London *The Family Legend* was received less favourably, but it is nevertheless interesting because, even more than *De Monfort*, it shows Baillie's peculiar engagement with the supernatural as a psychological phenomenon<sup>331</sup>. The plot narrates the legendary feud between two clans, the Campbells and the Macleans, in fifteenth-century Scotland. In order to maintain peace, the Chief of the Macleans marries Helen, the daughter of the Earl of Argyll (the Chief of Campbells), who soon gives him a son. However, Maclean's fellow clansmen hate the fact that the Maclean's heir has a blood connection to the Campbells and command their chief to get rid of his wife. Maclean manages to convince them not to kill her, but in exchange, he agrees to confine her on a barren rock in the midst of the sea. However, the woman is providentially rescued by boatmen who restore her to her family, and both Maclean and the conspirators are punished. If in the original legend Maclean took the decision to banish Helen because of his fear of being killed, in Baillie's version he does so because he is a superstitious man afraid of bringing some terrible calamity upon his clan, a preoccupation fostered by his own vassals, who are worried by ill omens as well as the terrible premonitions of a mysterious seer:

GLENFADDEN. Our sighted seers the fun'ral lights have seen,  
Not moving onward in the wonted path  
On which by friends the peaceful dead are borne,

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by her contemporaries as well as later commentators as the champion of closet drama, serving as a model for important Romantic authors such as William Wordsworth, Walter Scott, James Hogg, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Lord Byron, Walter Savage Landor and Charles Lamb, who all published plays intended for the closet rather than the stage (although sometimes this was due to the fact that they had been rejected by theatre managers).

<sup>330</sup> Moreover, her few performed dramas underwent important changes. The comedy *The Election* (1802), for example, was turned in 1817 into a musical piece for the English Opera House, and in the same year the tragedy *Constantine Paleologus; or the last of the Cæsars* (1802) became a melodrama for the Surrey Theatre entitled *Constantine and Valeria; or; the last of the Cæsars*.

<sup>331</sup> Baillie did not always stick to this approach: in fact, she employed different forms of the supernatural throughout her dramatic oeuvre, moving away from the rigid schemes of legitimate drama in the attempt to reach some kind of success. In the (unstaged) two-part, ten-act historical tragedy *Ethwald*, for example, there are genuine supernatural figures inspired by none other than Shakespeare. The work's heavy indebtedness to Shakespeare is particularly obvious in act 4, almost an exact replica of *Macbeth's* cauldron scene. Here the ambitious Ethwald, heir to the throne of Mercia, and his friend Ethelber, a noble thane, enter a gloomy cave where they meet the Arch Sister, three Mystic Sisters and other mysterious magical figures who perform a long and terrific ritual in order to show Ethwald a vision of his future greatness. The idea underlying this near-perfect mimesis seems to have been that of replicating an unequivocally British and Shakespearean supernaturalism that could be critically unimpeachable. *Ethwald's* stage directions also reveal Baillie's accurate knowledge of Gothic conventions, but unfortunately no theatre undertook to produce the play, mainly because of the elevated costs of production (the work included three long battles and several other elaborated scenes). Critics were perplexed and outraged by Baillie's change of direction as regards the portrayal of the supernatural. *The Edinburgh Review* commented that the play 'can scarcely be read by any body who is not familiar with Shakspeare's *Macbeth*. We do not remember any instance in which so notorious a model has been so exactly imitated', adding, not without a certain scorn, that '[n]one of the dramas that are usually quoted as proofs of the bloodiness of the English theatre, and the barbarity of our national taste, come up to the horrors delineated in these tragedies by the delicate hand of a female'. *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 2 (July 1803), pp. 279-80.

But hov'ring o'er the heath like countless stars  
 Spent and extinguish'd on the very spot  
 Where first they twinkled. This too well foreshows  
 Interment of the slain, whose bloody graves  
 Of the same mould are made on which they fell.  
 2D VAS. Ha! So indeed! some awful tempest gathers.  
 1D VAS. What sighted man hath seen it?  
 GLEN. He whose eye  
 Can see on northern waves the found'ring bark,  
 With all her shrieking crew, sinks to the deep,  
 While yet, with gentle winds, on dimpling surge  
 She sails from port in all her gallant trim:  
 John of the Isle hath seen it.  
 OMNES. Then hangs some evil over us.  
 GLEN. Know ye not  
 The mermaid hath been heard upon our rocks?  
 OMNES (*still more alarmed*). Ha! when?  
 GLEN. Last night, upon the rugged crag  
 That lifts its dark head through the cloudy smoke  
 Of dashing billows, near the western cliffs.  
 Sweetly, but sadly, o'er the stilly deep  
 The passing sound was borne. I need not say  
 How fatal to our clan that boding sound  
 Hath ever been.

However, these alarming supernatural suggestions are toned down by the fact that the Macleans are clearly portrayed as vulgar and unrefined people, while ‘the legendary gift of precognition is presented as inherently false and suggestible, used to sway the weak and superstitious’<sup>332</sup>. The irrational is therefore implicitly rationalised throughout the text, although, as in *De Monfort*, it leads to terrible consequences. In point of fact, Baillie often turns her attention to the perils of false or unreasonable beliefs by presenting case studies that are instructive and cautionary, in tune with the acknowledged function of legitimate drama. Similarly, in another unperformed tragedy, *Rayner* (1804), there is an intensely Gothic episode in which an old hermit, who had been a murderer in his youth, feels himself haunted by a ghostly presence unseen by other characters and the audience. Once again, Baillie's most immediate visual reference was Macbeth's ranting at the invisible ghost of Banquo in Kemble's production, a true cornerstone as regards the representation of a morally edifying as well as aesthetically irresistible use supernatural<sup>333</sup>. Nonetheless, both *The Family Legend* and *Rayner* generally received critical commendation.

These themes were even more thoroughly developed in *Orra* (1812), the tragedy that Baillie specifically devoted to superstitious fear. As she wrote in the preface to the third volume of her *Plays on the Passions* (1812), supernatural belief is ‘so universal and inherent in our nature, that it

<sup>332</sup> Bell, Barbara A. E., ‘Scottish Gothic Drama’, in *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Carol Margaret Davison, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2017), p. 65.

<sup>333</sup> Gamer, Michael (1997), pp. 62-3.

can never be eradicated from the mind, let the progress of reason or philosophy be what it may be'<sup>334</sup>. Scientists such as Nicolau and Ferriar would have certainly agreed with such a statement, for their works pointed to the brain as the only source of supernatural apparitions. The fear of ghosts, in particular, is analysed by Baillie as an 'instance of mental monstrosity'<sup>335</sup>, focusing on its nefarious effects on the human mind with an almost clinical scrupulousness (it is perhaps interesting to note that her brother Matthew was a physician who long studied the brain and nervous system). What really interests the Scottish author is the 'natural horror of supernatural intercourse', which make the feeble-minded vulnerable to those ready to capitalise on their weaknesses: in *Orra* it becomes an instrument for patriarchal dominion and female suppression. The eponymous heroine is a superstitious maiden fond of 'stories of the restless dead, / Of spectres rising at the midnight watch'<sup>336</sup>. This passion is however viciously used against her when Orra is confined into a ruined castle situated in the Swiss Black Forest by her suitor Rudigere, who aims to surreptitiously inflame her imagination and thus win control of her mind, in what also becomes a sort of meta-reflection on the suggestive power of the Gothic<sup>337</sup>. Her lady-in-waiting Cathrina, in turn blackmailed by Rudigere, contributes to further excite Orra's mind by telling her that the place is haunted every St. Michael's Eve by a spectre-huntsman, causing the girl to see signs of the spectre's presence everywhere. Nonetheless, she keeps demanding stories of ghosts and goblins and shows an almost masochistic addiction to Gothic storytelling and what she defines as the 'joy in fear'<sup>338</sup>, which, however, is precisely what is intoxicating her senses. The story also subverts a typical comic Gothic device when the noble Theobald of Falkenstein disguises himself as the huntsman's ghost in order to enter the castle and save Orra, who, mistaking him for a real apparition, slips into insanity. The cruel irony of the incident does nothing but intensify the shock derived from Orra's desperately terrified response to the situation and her helplessness in the face of the series of events that befalls her. Here Baillie updates Ann Radcliffe's concept of the supernatural explained (which previous Gothic playwrights like Boaden regarded as unsuitable for the theatre) and reconfigures the act of ghost-seeing as a pathology of the mind, a phantasmagorical projection of fears and fantasies, blending the Gothic tradition with the most recent developments in science and technology<sup>339</sup>. The

<sup>334</sup> Baillie, Joanna (1853), p. 228.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>337</sup> Cox calls *Orra* 'the tragic counterpart of Austen's *Northanger Abbey*'. Cox, Jeffrey N. (1992), p. 56.

<sup>338</sup> Baillie, Joanna (1853), p. 242.

<sup>339</sup> Purinton, Marjean D., 'Pedagogy and Passions: Teaching Joanna Baillie's Dramas', in *Joanna Baillie, Romantic Dramatist: Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas C. Crochunis, New York: Routledge (2004), p. 230. Terry Castle calls this process 'spectralization', that is the 'absorption of ghosts into the world of thought'. See Castle, Terry (1995), p. 142. This principle was staunchly embraced by Romantic writers such as Scott, Hogg and Coleridge, who variously explored the link between abnormal or heightened psychological states and supernatural agency. According to Scott, for example, ghostly sightings can be caused by 'a lively dream, a waking reverie, the excitation of a powerful imagination, or the misinterpretation of a diseased organ of sight'. Scott, Walter, *Letters on Demonology and*

play concludes with the crazed Orra convinced that she is persecuted by ghosts, her mind forever entrapped in 'a dark world / of dismal phantasies and horrid forms'<sup>340</sup>:

Ha! dost thou groan, old man? art thou in trouble?  
Out on it! though they lay him in the mould,  
He's near thee still. — I'll tell thee how it is:  
A hideous burst hath been: the damn'd and holy,  
The living and the dead, together are  
In horrid neighbourhood — 'Tis but thin vapour,  
Floating around thee, makes the wav'ring bound.  
Pooh! Blow it off, and see th' uncurtain'd reach.  
See! from all points they come; earth casts them up!  
In grave-clothes swath'd are those but new in death;  
And there be some half bone, half cased in shreds  
Of that which flesh hath been; and there be some  
With wicker'd ribs, through which the darkness scowls.  
Back, back! — They close upon us. — Oh! the void  
Of hollow unball'd sockets staring grimly,  
And lipless jaws that move and clatter round us  
In mockery of speech! — Back, back, I say!  
Back, back!<sup>341</sup>

Her descent into hysteria, which in the end turns out to be permanent, therefore makes the supernatural ontologically real.

The way in which supernatural anxieties turn into an overwhelming mental fixation that ultimately conditions and directs one's perception of external reality lies also at the centre of *The Dream* (1812). In this unproduced three-act prose, two monks of a fourteenth-century Swiss monastery, Jerome and Paul, have the same strange dream and link it to possible supernatural causes:

Twice in one night the same awful vision repeated! And Paul also terrified with a similar visitation! This is no common accidental mimicry of sleep: the shreds and remnants of our day-thoughts, put together at night in some fantastic incongruous form, as the drifting clouds of a broken-up storm piece themselves again into uncertain shapes of rocks and animals. No, no! there must be some great and momentous meaning in this.<sup>342</sup>

As Jerome relates, the dream features the ghost of a mysterious stranger arriving at the monastery and demanding penance for a terrible crime, providing information that leads to the discovery of a skeleton bearing clear signs of murder. The accused is Osterloo, an Austrian imperial general, who, after being invited to a stop at the monastery, is seized, tried and sentenced to death. The sceptical monk Benedict, however, realises that something is not right because Jerome, the first monk who had the dream, was the deathbed confessor of the hermit who buried the corpse, and thus probably

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*Witchcraft*, London: John Murray (1830), p. 355.

<sup>340</sup> Baillie, Joanna (1853), p. 259.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

learned from him its secret story. Moreover, it was Jerome who described in great detail the dream to Paul, possibly affecting his imagination. These suspicions seem to be corroborated when it is revealed that the skeleton belongs to the prior's brother, wrongly supposed to have been killed years earlier by bandits. Baillie keeps a certain degree of vagueness, but as the play progresses, it appears more and more obvious that it is all an ingenious plan orchestrated by the vindictive prior and the other monks (except Benedict, who is totally unrelated to the conspiracy and instead tries to help Osterloo) in order to avenge the murder. While in his prison chamber, the anguished and guilt-stricken Osterloo has a vision in which he meets with a dreadful retribution in the afterlife:

The dead are there; and what welcome shall the murderer receive from that assembled host? Oh, the terrible form that stalks forth to meet me! the stretching out of that hand! the greeting of that horrible smile! And it is thou, who must lead me before the tremendous majesty of my offended Maker! Incomprehensible and dreadful! What thoughts can give an image of that which overpowers all thought!<sup>343</sup>

In the denouement an ambassador stops the execution in order to take Osterloo under his protection, but it is too late: the general has already died of terror. What killed him was the fear of ending up in 'the regions of anguish'<sup>344</sup> and meeting the ghost of his victim as well as the Lord's judgement. Also in this play, therefore, the supernatural becomes an instrument of control and deceit, being the dream used by the prior a pretext to abuse his powers and carry out an unrelenting and unlawful revenge. But even though the dream was probably a lie, it generates the real horrific vision that ultimately destroys Osterloo's mind and leads him to death. Osterloo is indeed a murderer, but it is the prior and his accomplices that Baillie depicts as the story's true villains<sup>345</sup>. The threat does not come from a supernatural force, but from human injustice and cruelty. As Christine A. Colón puts it, '[t]he true danger to Osterloo lies not in any ghosts that may exist within the dark, mysterious vaults of the monastery but rather in the embittered heart of the prior'<sup>346</sup>.

Unfortunately, *Orra* and *The Dream* were never performed, and it is difficult to image how the audience might have reacted. Yet these works are particularly telling if considered in light of the so-called techno-Gothic, a sub-genre that in many ways Baillie spearheaded<sup>347</sup>. There is a crucial yet

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<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>345</sup> Regina Hewitt remarks that the 'portrayal of the monastery as a selfish and self-enclosed society owes a large debt to the anti-Catholic conventions of Gothic fiction'. Hewitt, Regina, *Symbolic Interactions: Social Problems and Literary Interventions in the Works of Baillie, Scott, and Landor*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press (2006), p. 80.

<sup>346</sup> Colón, Christine A., 'Joanna Baillie and the Christian Gothic: Reforming Society Through the Sublime', in *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*, ed. Holly Faith Nelson, Lynn R. Szabo and Jens Zimmermann, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press (2010), p. 138.

<sup>347</sup> In the later part of her career Baillie continued to explore the supernatural in relation to psychological and even medical discourses in the tragedy in prose *Witchcraft* (1836), whereas in the two-act musical drama *The Phantom* (1836) she ventured to introduce a real ghost in the plot (taking advantage of the irregular nature of this little piece), confirming her multifaceted approach to the topic.

often ignored difference between the rational Gothic of Ann Radcliffe and the techno-Gothic. Though he did not call it so, Eino Railo was probably one of the few modern critics who clearly distinguished between the kind of Gothic works that deal with supernatural events ‘in such a manner that they only appear to be supernatural and are capable of being satisfactorily explained’, namely the Radcliffean mode, and those that deal with them ‘in a manner that permits of “scientific” explanation’, namely the techno-Gothic mode<sup>348</sup>. Though generally associated with prose fiction, with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) easily identifiable as a pivotal text, the techno-Gothic found fertile ground also in drama. The features of this sub-genre, or sub-mode, have been brilliantly illustrated by Marjean D. Purinton:

Staged as gothic, seemingly natural elements associated with science and medicine were technologically designed and manipulated to create a world of illusions and phantasmagoria [...] Techno-gothic is an ideologically charged and melodramatic structure in which disturbing issues and forbidden experiences characteristic of gothic are recontextualized by the period's pursuit of science. Techno-gothic drama is, in fact, a product of the Romantic revolution in science. A hybrid genre, techno-gothic drama constitutes an incipient “science fiction”—theatrical, and therefore fictive, representations of science.<sup>349</sup>

Ghosts were of course the principal subject of interest in that they naturally find themselves at the crossroads between reality and fiction, science and superstition, embodiedness and disembodiedness. Techno-Gothic ghosts, in particular, ‘were dramatic figurations for scientific scrutiny and speculation on mental disorders—hallucinations, hysteria, deliria, madness, mania, nervous disorders—that were charged with new medical significations’ (mostly missing in writers like Radcliffe)<sup>350</sup>. Actually, in the first place the origins of techno-ghosts can be traced back not to literature and theatre but to the numerous phantasmagorias and pseudo-supernatural exhibitions that popped up in the late eighteenth-century. The phantasmagoria proved indeed a perfect metaphor for the process of psychologisation of the supernatural: in these kinds of show, presented as scientific exhibitions, moving images of ghosts, goblins and other strange creatures were projected onto a (pseudo-theatrical) stage by means of various technical effects that basically imitated the mechanism through which the delusional minds projected their imagination onto the external world. In England, the huge popularity of phantasmagorias created a parallel market in the Gothic entertainment industry that came to influence also patent theatres, where soon similar attempts were made to negotiate between spectacular sensationalism and scientific truth, Gothic and technology,

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<sup>348</sup> Railo, Eino, *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism*, New York: Humanities Press (1964 [1927]), p. 324.

<sup>349</sup> Purinton, Marjean D., ‘Science Fiction and Techno-Gothic Drama: Romantic Playwrights Joanna Baillie and Jane Scott’, *Romanticism on the Net* 21 (February 2001), no page numbers, <https://ronjournal.org/articles/n21/science-fiction-and-techno-gothic-drama-romantic-playwrights-joanna-baillie-and-jane-scott/> [Last accessed 02 April 2020].

<sup>350</sup> Purinton, Marjean D., ‘Staging the Physical: Romantic Science Theatricalized in T. L. Beddoes's *The Brides' Tragedy*’, *European Romantic Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (March 2003), p. 96.

turning the supernatural into a manifestly self-conscious device, almost a meta-theatrical prop. This experimentation had the ultimate goal of finding a psychological, firmly rational ground for the supernatural. It was, in short, an extreme attempt to assimilate it into legitimate drama and, by extension, into modern culture.

### 2.3 *The phantasmagoria and the techno-supernatural*<sup>351</sup>

The most characteristic device of the techno-Gothic is, unquestionably, the phantasmagoria (from the *ancient Greek* words *φάντασμα* [phántasma] meaning ‘image’, ‘apparition or ‘phantom’ and *αγορά* [agora] meaning ‘assembly’, ‘gathering’<sup>352</sup>), a form of theatre entertainment that created the illusion of the appearance of ghosts, spirits and other imaginary forms by projecting vivid images on walls, semi-transparent screens (made of silk, gauze or canvas rendered translucent by clear wax) or a curtain of smoke. This technique was first described by French physician Edmé Gilles Guyot in his *Nouvelles Récréations physiques et mathématiques* (1769) and came to the fore in the last decades of the eighteenth-century. Differently from what happened in traditional magic lantern shows, in phantasmagorias the projection apparatus was concealed by a strategic use of darkness and other technical arrangements devised to reinforce the illusion of reality and encourage the spectators' complete immersion. The use of unearthly music and various atmospheric light and sound effects, combined with the illusionist's showmanship skills, usually added considerably to the effect. As Maximiliaan Van Woudenberg has pointed out, this kind of shows offered ‘a dalliance with the supernatural, the apparitions and spectres that characteristically fitted across their screens all designed to provoke in the audience the emotional and psychological responses of fear, horror and terror’<sup>353</sup>. They had, therefore, a strong grip on the imagination of the audience as the projected ghosts blurred the boundary between the auditorium and the stage, materiality and immateriality, natural and supernatural. In fact, there were fears that these techniques could be taken as real by the the simple minded and the uneducated: suffice it to recall the case of Johann Georg Schröpfer, a German coffee shop owner, Freemason and pretended necromancer who, in the early 1770s, staged fake séances that deceived credulous townspeople as well as men of power such as Prince Charles of Saxony, who famously asked him to conjure up the ghost of his uncle during a nocturnal

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<sup>351</sup> I decided to use the term ‘techno-supernatural’ following the steps of Marjean D. Purinton's theorisation of the techno-Gothic.

<sup>352</sup> Mannoni, Laurent, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema*, trans. Richard Crangle, Exeter: University of Exeter Press (2000), p. 136

<sup>353</sup> Van Woudenberg, Maximiliaan, ‘*Fantasmagoriana: The Cosmopolitain Gothic and *Frankenstein**’, in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic: Volume 2, Gothic in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2020), p. 49.

necromantic session held at his palace in Dresden. Along with his team of assistants, the *Gespenstermacher* ('ghost maker') of Leipzig – as Schröpfer soon came to be known – made his ghosts appear on fields of smoke and relied on sinister sounds, creepy voices, burning incense, wine, hallucinogenic drugs and various other dissimulation techniques. Eventually he was denounced as a swindler and, as the legend goes, he became so convinced of his own power to raise the dead that he committed suicide in a forest near Leipzig shortly after performing a necromantic ritual in his coffee house and suffering delusions of his own apparitions being real<sup>354</sup>.

It is widely acknowledged that Schröpfer, along with Count Cagliostro (a legendary mystical Freemason who roughly in the same period made a sensation in several European countries by conducting magic séances and predicting the future for the rich and aristocrats), provided the main inspiration for Schiller's fragmentary novel *Der Geisterseher* (issued in instalments between 1787 and 1789 and first translated into English in 1795), generally regarded as 'a paradigmatic text for its use of the spectre-show as a potent psychological metaphor'<sup>355</sup>. The plot, suggestively set in Venice during the Carnival season, incorporates political conspiracies, religious paranoia, the machinations of the Freemasons and the horrors of the Inquisition. In one of the story's most famous episodes, the protagonist, a Prince naively fascinated by the occult, attends a séance held by a Sicilian magician (a clear nod to Cagliostro), who promises to raise the ghost of his dead friend Lanoy. The exhibition is a sort of mix between an initiation Masonic ceremony and a Schröpferian necromantic conjuration:

It was now near two o' clock when the magician appeared again, and announced that he was prepared. Before we returned, he ordered us to pull off our shoes, and to appear in our shirts, stockings, and under garments. The doors as before were all fastened. We found, when we returned into the hall, a large circle made with coals, in which we could all stand very conveniently. Round about the room, and by the four walls, the boards were taken away, so that we seemed to stand as it were upon an island. An altar, hung with black cloth, was erected in the middle of the circle, under which was spread a carpet of red silk; a Chaldean Bible lay open near a death's head upon the altar, and a silver crucifix was fastened in the centre. Instead of castles, spirits were burning in a silver vessel. A thick smoke of olive wood darkened the hall, which almost extinguished the lights. The conjurer was clothed as we were, but bare-footed. On his bare neck he wore an amulet suspended by a chain of human hair. Upon his loins he wore a white mantle, which was decorated with magical characters and mysterious figures. He made us join hands, and maintain a deep silence. Above all, he recommended us not to ask the apparition any questions. [...] The magician placed himself upon the carpet, with his face towards the east, sprinkled holy water to the four points of the compass, and bowed thrice before the Bible. A

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<sup>354</sup> Heard, Mervyn, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, Hastings: The Projection Box (2006), pp. 48-9.

<sup>355</sup> McCorristine, Shane (2010), p. 35. Schiller himself, however, drew inspiration from an emerging trend: David J. Jones notes that '[t]here had been a flurry of literature addressing magic lantern shows in the early 1780s and Schiller definitely knew of Johann Karl August Musäus's very popular *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (*German Folk Tales*) (1782-86), where lantern trickery is revealed in the context of local nobility and a woman of mixed human and elfin ancestry who runs the show'. Jones, David J., *Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern: Desire, Eroticism and Literary Visibilities from Byron to Bram Stoker*, London: Palgrave MacMillan (2014), p. 36.

quarter of an hour passed in ceremonious acts, perfectly unintelligible to us; at the end of which, he gave those a sign who stood behind him to hold him fast by the hair. Struggling apparently with dreadful convulsions, he called the deceased by name three times; at the last, he stretched out his hand towards the crucifix. We instantly experienced a violent shock, which separated our hands. A sudden clap of thunder shook the house to its foundation; at the same time the window shutters rattled, and all the doors burst open. The apparatus fell in pieces, and as soon as the light was extinguished, we observed distinctly on the wall over the chimney-piece the figure of a man clothed in a bloody garment, with a pale and livid aspect.<sup>356</sup>

The séance is abruptly interrupted by the appearance of the real ghost of Lanoy, which surprises the magician and reveals the utter artificiality of the magician's powers:

“Who is among us?” cried the magician, looking with horror and astonishment at the spectators. “I did not much wish for thee.” The ghost immediately walked with a slow and majestic step to the altar, and stood upon the carpet opposite to us. It seized the crucifix, and the first apparition instantly vanished. “Who is it that has called me?” said the second apparition. The magician began to tremble. Fear and astonishment almost overpowered us. I now seized a pistol—the magician wrested it from my hand, and fired at the ghost. The ball rolled along the altar, and the figure remained amidst the smoke unhurt. The magician immediately sunk down in a fit.<sup>357</sup>

The Sicilian, exposed as an impostor, is then arrested by the Venetian police, who dismantle the set of the séance and discover how he performed his tricks:

When we came back, the searching of the house was finished. After they had removed the altar, and forced up the boards of the floor, they discovered a vault where a man was able to sit upright, which was separated by a secret door from a narrow stair-case that led to a gloomy cave. In this abyss they found an electrical machine, a clock, and a small silver bell; which last, as well as the electrical machine, had a communication with the altar and the crucifix that was fixed upon it. A hole had been made in the window-shutter opposite the chimney, which opened and shut with a slide. In this hole, as we learned afterwards, was fixed a magic lantern, from which the figure of the ghost had been reflected on the opposite wall over the chimney. From the garret and the cave they brought several drums, to which large leaden bullets were fastened by strings: these had probably been used to imitate the roaring of thunder which we had heard. In searching the Sicilian's clothes, they found in a case different powders, genuine mercury in vials and boxes, phosphorus in a glass bottle, and a ring, which we immediately knew to be magnetic, because it adhered to a steel button that had been placed near to it by accident. In his coat pockets were a rosary, a jew's beard, a dagger, and a pocket pistol.<sup>358</sup>

While in jail at Sr. Mark's, the Sicilian answers the Prince's further inquiries about the contrivances by which the fake ghost had been created, very similar to those employed by contemporary pseudo-necromancers (including the use of smoke as both screen and suggestive environmental effect):

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<sup>356</sup> Schiller, Friedrich, *The Ghost-Seer!*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley (1831), pp. 23-4. Even the ‘violent shock’ felt by the bystanders was a common trick in Schröpfer's magic séances. As Laurent Mannoni explains, ‘[l]ittle explosive balls, made of thin glass filled with spirits of wine and pressed into the candles, blew out the flame as they burst. As for the shock, it was just that, an electric discharge through the spectators. At the end of the performance, one of the magician's assistants produced the current by means of wire hidden in the floor and linked to an electric machine’. Mannoni, Laurent, ‘The Phantasmagoria’, *Film History*, vol. 8 (1996), p. 392.

<sup>357</sup> Schiller, Friedrich (1831), pp. 24-5.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

“how did you produce the figure that appeared on the wall over the chimney?” “By means of a magic lantern that was fixed in the opposite window-shutter, in which you have, no doubt, observed an opening.” “And how did it happen that none of us perceived the lantern?” [...] “You remember, my Lord, that on your re-entering the room, it was darkened by a thick smoke of olive wood. I used likewise the precaution to place upright against the wall near the window the boards which had been taken up from the floor. By these means I prevented the shutter from coming immediately under your sight. Moreover, the lantern remained covered until you had taken your places, and until there was no further reason to apprehend any examination from the persons in the hall.” [...] “But the figure seemed to move?” “It appeared so; yet it was not the figure, but the smoke which received its light.” [...] “How did it happen [...] that your ghost appeared neither sooner nor later than you wished him?” “The ghost was in the room for some time before I called him; but while the room was lighted, the shade was too faint to be perceived. When the formula of the conjuration was finished, I caused the cover of the box, in which the spirit was burning, to drop down; the hall was darkened, and it was not till then that the figure on the wall could be distinctively seen, although it had been reflected there a considerable time before.” “When the ghost appeared, we all felt an electrical stroke. How was that managed?” “You have discovered the machine under the altar. You have also seen, that I was standing upon a silk carpet. I ordered you to form a half moon around me, and to take hold of each other's hand. When the crisis approached, I gave a sign to one of you to seize me by the hair. The silver crucifix was the conductor; and you felt the electrical shock when I touched it with my hand.”<sup>359</sup>

The Sicilian also confesses his past collaboration with the mysterious Armenian, a masked figure who had been pursuing the Prince for some shadowy reason. He claims that this Armenian, who too attended the séance, is an immortal sorcerer that indeed has the power to raise the spirits of the dead. However, as it would later be disclosed, also the second ghost was false, though its mode of operation is never fully explained (it is suggested by the Prince it was either a puppet or disguised man, and that also the gunshot projectiles that supposedly hit it were some sort of trick). The Prince gradually understands that the Sicilian, the Armenian (in fact a disguised agent of the Inquisition) and the Venetian authorities are all secretly in league in what is revealed to be a huge international conspiracy to convert the Prince from Protestantism to Catholicism, triggering an increasingly nightmarish and inexplicable spiral of events.

Besides being a prototype of the *Schauerroman*, the German equivalent to the English Gothic novel, Schiller's book initiated the popular sub-genre of the *Geisterseherroman* and could be considered the first true example of a techno-Gothic text<sup>360</sup>, anticipating by some decades *Frankenstein* (with which it was fascinatingly coupled in the ninth number of Colburn and Bentley's *Standard Novels*

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-5.

<sup>360</sup> In these works, ‘a series of supernatural events, such as appearances of apparitions or demonstrations of immortality, are shown to be elaborately executed theatrical effects. These ‘*delusive miracles*’ used a wide variety of stage effects, produced by trap-doors, hidden recesses, concealed mirrors, translucent veils, lantern slides, and various pyrotechnic effects of smoke and explosion. All these spectral simulacra use a technology familiar to the theatrical stage and related visual spectacles of the 1790s, such as panorama, eidophusicon, and magic lantern shows’. Ellis, Markman, ‘Enlightenment or Illumination: The Spectre of Conspiracy in Gothic Fictions of the 1790s’, in *Recognizing the Romantic Novel: New Histories of British Fiction, 1780-1830*, ed. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson and Charlotte Sussman, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press (2010), p. 87.

series in 1831). First translated into English in 1795, *Der Geisterseher* initially received scarce critical attention and was disdainfully dismissed as one of those debased German novels packed with any sort of supernatural monstrosity with which the English literary market was being inundated, fuelling prejudice against imported foreign fiction. However, this preconceived rejection was actually due to the desire to reconfigure the Gothic as an alien phenomenon totally unrelated to English culture. The supernatural elements of the story – like those of all other *Geisterseherromane* – are not authentic. Neither are, as in Radcliffe's novels, commonplace or trivial events misinterpreted as paranormal occurrences. Radcliffe's illusory supernatural has a perfectly natural explanation, whereas the Schillerian supernatural is artificial, manufactured, *technological*<sup>361</sup>. The former is a misapprehension generated by the subject's inner world, the latter a deception contrived mechanically and deliberately for mostly negative purposes. Radcliffe deflating endings come as a sort of soothing relief for the reader, whereas Schiller's twists reveal appalling realities that are nested like Russian matryoshka dolls, and the fact that the supernatural is not actually involved does not make them any less shocking. Most of the times, techno-supernatural manifestations are the result of a hoax engineered by swindlers who aim to capitalise on the irrational beliefs of honest but ignorant people in order to carry out their evil plans. In this sense, *Der Geisterseher* assumed a precise cautionary, even political function in denouncing the perils of superstition, reflecting contemporary paranoid anxieties towards supposed necromancers and magicians that could exploit credulousness to run conspiracies and gain more and more power, even to the extent of overthrowing entire governments. As Jürgen Barkhoff put it, in this type of novels 'ghosts appear only so that Enlightenment detective work can unmask them as the charlatan's tricks of the *Magia Naturalis*'<sup>362</sup>. At the same time, an admonitory aspect emerges as 'the desire to see beyond the human sphere is treated as a vice'<sup>363</sup>, revealing a well-defined moral attitude often overlooked by

<sup>361</sup> Walter Scott was possibly the first to plainly emphasise this difference: 'It may [...] be claimed as meritorious in Mrs Radcliffe's mode of expounding her mysteries, that it is founded in possibilities. Many situations have occurred, highly tintured with romantic incident and feeling, the mysterious obscurity of which has afterwards been explained by deception and confederacy. Such have been the impostures of superstition in all ages, and such delusions were also practised by the members of the Secret Tribunal, in the middle ages, and in more modern times by the Rosicrucians and Illuminati, upon whose machinations Schiller has founded the fine romance of *The Ghost-Seer*. But Mrs Radcliffe has not had recourse to so artificial a solution. Her heroines often sustain the agony of fear, and her readers that of suspense, from incidents which, when explained, appear of an ordinary and trivial nature'. Scott, Walter, 'Life of Mrs Radcliffe' (1823) in *The Prose Works of Walter Scott*, 9 vols., vol. 5, Paris: A. and W. Galignani (1827), p. 459. Emma J. Clery too recently drew attention to Radcliffe's and Schiller's different approaches towards the supernatural, though focusing on the gender variable: 'if the Radcliffian narrative can be termed "feminocentric supernaturalism", the narrative on the *Ghost-Seer* model instantiates a "paranoiac supernaturalism", featuring a "male chase" in which hunter and hunted systematically exchange roles. Here, the simulation of the marvellous disguises and prepares for the revelation of a nightmare-like reality, a waking nightmare beyond a nightmare'. Clery, Emma J. (1995), p. 141.

<sup>362</sup> Barkhoff, Jürgen, "'The echo of the question, as if it had merely resounded in a tomb": The Dark Anthropology of the Schauerroman in Schiller's *Der Geisterseher*', in *Popular Revenants: German Gothic and Its International Reception, 1800–2000*, ed. Andrew Cusack and Barry Murnane, Rochester: Camden House (2012), p. 44.

<sup>363</sup> Hall, Daniel (2005), p. 102.

contemporary English critics, too conditioned by their prejudices against German literature. Moreover, it is possible to assume that the book's first English readers did not fully understand what *Der Geisterseher's* ghost scenes were really about (also because Schiller does not always provide clear explanations), namely, the literary representation of a phantasmagoria. Actually, phantasmagoria shows landed in London only in the early 1800s thanks to pioneering illusionist and showman Paul Philidor, a figure with important ties to the world of German necromancy and charlatanry.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Philidor travelled extensively in Europe trying to follow the steps of occultists like Schröpfer and Cagliostro, though with some initial difficulty. His first magic shows in Berlin proved disastrous, leading to his expulsion from the city in 1789 after a failed ghost-raising session in which he had attempted to evoke the spirits of Voltaire and Frederick the Great, among others. He had more success when he moved to Vienna, where he presented his 'Phantasmorasi, oder natürlicher Geister Erscheinungen', a Gothic show in which he relied on carefully crafted special effects (rain, wind, thunder, lightning and so on) in order to provide atmosphere for the appearance of ghosts as well as of witches and fairies<sup>364</sup>. Then, in 1792, Philidor arrived in Paris, where on 16 December he held the first *phantasmagorie* at Rue de Richelieu, presenting not only the usual repertoire of supernatural figures and bizarre creatures but also Revolutionary heroes and *doppelgängers* of living people, including members of the audience<sup>365</sup>. The show typically concluded with the appearance of the Devil itself, or rather a humorous caricature of it that 'betrayed the images' artificiality and dispelled the mystification<sup>366</sup>, bringing spectators back to reality with a tension-dispelling laugh. The public's response was enthusiastic, but also in this case Philidor had to close his show after a few months and leave the country, probably in order to avoid problems with the local authorities as the number of arrests and executions was rapidly growing.

It took Belgian optician and entrepreneur Etienne-Gaspard Robert (better known by the stage name of Robertson) to really popularise this form of entertainment thanks to the highly elaborated phantasmagorias he put up at the Pavillon de l'Échiquier in Paris from 1798 onwards. As a matter of fact, Robertson brought this kind of show to an unprecedented level of frightfulness and flamboyance. Even more than his predecessors, Robertson relied on a rich apparatus of special

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<sup>364</sup> Jones, David J. (2014), p. 37. Philidor also used the recently invented Argand lamp, which would be notably employed to illuminate the Phantom in James Boaden's *Fontainville Forest*. Grau, Oliver, 'Remember the Phantasmagoria! Illusion Politics of the Eighteenth Century and its Multimedia Afterlife', in *MediaArtHistories*, ed. Oliver Grau, Cambridge: MIT Press (2007), p. 144.

<sup>365</sup> Mannoni, Laurent (1996), p. 396.

<sup>366</sup> Cruz, Gabriela, *Grand Illusion: Phantasmagoria in Nineteenth-Century Opera*, New York: Oxford University Press (2020), p. 58.

effects and dissimulation techniques to fully immerse audiences in the fictional world he created. He was well aware of the public's fascination with the terrific paraphernalia of Gothic fiction, which by the time had also exploded in France, and drew from a wide-ranging repertoire that included Johann Heinrich Füssli's *The Nightmare*, *The Monk's Bleeding Nun*, Banquo's ghost, the Head of Medusa and a large variety of other supernatural subjects taken from the Bible, literature and classical mythology as well as spectres of recently deceased celebrities such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Cagliostro, Robespierre, Danton and many others<sup>367</sup>. The apparitions were introduced by a prefatory speech largely drawn from Schiller's *Der Geisterseher*<sup>368</sup>. In January 1799, Robertson moved his show from the Pavillon to an abandoned Capuchin convent near Place Vendôme and the new location did nothing but enhance the Gothic theatricality of the performances, which became the city's most popular attraction:

The curiosity-seekers who attended these séances were conducted by ushers down dark flights of stairs to the vaults of the chapel and seated in a gloomy crypt shrouded with black draperies and pictured with the emblems of mortality. An antique lamp, suspended from the ceiling, emitted a flame of spectral blue. When all was ready a rain and wind storm, with thunder accompanying, began. Robertson extinguished the lamp and threw various essence on a brazier of burning coals in the center of the room, whereupon clouds of odoriferous incense filled the apartment. Suddenly, with the solemn sound of a far-off organ, phantoms of the great arose at the incantations of the magician. Shades of Voltaire, Rousseau, Marat and Lavoisier appeared in rapid succession. Robertson, at the end of the entertainment, generally concluded by saying: "I have shown you, citizens, every species of phantom, and there is but one more truly terrible specter—the fate which is reserved for us all." In a moment a grinning skeleton stood in the center of the hall waving a scythe. All these wonders were perpetrated through the medium of a phantasmagoric lantern, which threw images upon smoke. [...] The effect of this entertainment was electrical; all Paris went wild over it.<sup>369</sup>

Robertson devoted himself thoroughly to intensify the impact of his apparitions by introducing several technical improvements, notably the use of professional ventriloquists, particular musical effects (produced by a glass harmonica), distorting mirrors, a large Voltaic pile (an electrical battery invented in 1799 by Italian scientist and Professor of Natural Philosophy Alessandro Volta, whom Robertson befriended<sup>370</sup>) and an innovative method of projection. With the aid of the so-called

<sup>367</sup> Mannoni, Laurent (1996), p. 406. Notably, Robertson's shows also included apparitions of people who were still alive and well like Napoleon, here called *le pacificateur* (the 'peace maker'). Charles Dickens claimed that the oddest feature was '[t]he soul of Nelson brought in Charon's bark to the Elysean Fields'. Dickens, Charles, 'Robertson, Artists in Ghosts', *Household Words*, vol. 30 (1855), p. 138. Yet Robertson frequently inserted lighter and comical interludes in order to temporarily relieve the mood and simultaneously enhance the frightening effect of the show's scarier parts, as in a true theatrical programme. Jones, David J., (2014), p. 64.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>369</sup> Evans, Henry Ridgely, 'Introduction: The Mysteries of Modern Magic', in *Magic: Stage Illusions and Scientific, Including Trick Photography*, ed. Albert A. Hopkins, New York: Dover (1976 [1898]), p. 7

<sup>370</sup> The relationship between the two is mentioned, among others, by Charles Dickens: 'Volta himself, when he had come to Paris [in the autumn of 1801] to explain his views, honoured M. Robertson by being present at one of his entertainments; and when the lecturer expressed some doubts upon the subject of the relations between electricity and galvanism, Volta offered publicly to set his doubts at rest. Volta gratified M. Robertson with friendship, admired the beauty of his instruments; and after his return to Italy, wrote for some like them. Robertson, the conjuror, was the

'fantascope' (a mobile rear projection system – apparently first introduced by Philidor – in which the magic lantern was mounted on wheels so that it could be moved back and forth to increase or reduce the size of the projected image<sup>371</sup>) as well as multiple lanterns, Robertson's ghosts – presented 'such as they must have appeared or could appear in any time, in any place and among any people'<sup>372</sup> – were made to appear, move, grow, shrink and dissolve at a great speed, losing nothing of their vividness. This created the illusion of tridimensionality and prevented members of the audience from exactly pinpointing the apparitions' location in space, just like the confused Macbeth in front of the imaginary dagger (a true phantasmagoria *ante litteram*):

Plunged in darkness and assailed by unearthly sounds, spectators were subjected to an eerie, estranging, and ultimately baffling spectral parade. The illusion was apparently so convincing that surprised audience members sometimes tried to fend off the moving 'phantoms' with their hands or fled the room in terror. Even as it supposedly explained apparitions away, the spectral technology of the phantasmagoria mysteriously re-created the emotional aura of the supernatural. One knew ghosts did not exist, yet one saw them anyway, without knowing precisely how.<sup>373</sup>

Of course many regarded the formidable enchanting power of phantasmagoria with suspicions, given that these shows somehow went even further than traditional theatre in disguising its potentially subversive reality as fiction. This was especially evident when politics were involved: shortly after its debut, Paris police provisionally shut Robertson's show down out of concerns that none other than the ghost of the executed king Louis XVI might be summoned<sup>374</sup>. It definitively closed in October 1802, though Robertson continued to display his tricks throughout Europe. During his Parisian years Robertson also lost a lawsuit against two of his former assistants and was forced to reveal and discuss many of his secrets in open court. As a result, at the turn of the century many similar ghost shows started to pop up in Paris, in the rest of Europe and even in America<sup>375</sup>. In London, the first phantasmagoria show was put up in late 1801 by one Paul de Philipstahl, probably an alias of Paul Philidor himself, who had abruptly left Paris eight years earlier, wandering throughout Continental Europe ever since<sup>376</sup>. Philipstahl obtained a special royal patent to stage his show at the Lyceum Theatre in the Strand, an old exhibition room converted into a theatre in 1790. The phantasmagoria constituted of course the main event of the programme, but there was also a rich exhibition of optical and mechanical curiosities, including animal automata. The proper

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only man whom Volta found in Paris not entirely ignorant of his discoveries'. Dickens, Charles (1855), p. 137.

<sup>371</sup> Mannoni, Laurent (2000), p. 141, and Cruz, Gabriela (2020), p. 55.

<sup>372</sup> *Affiches, Annonces, et Avis Divers* (20 January 1798), p. 2224, quoted in Mannoni, Laurent (1996), p. 398.

<sup>373</sup> Castle, Terry (1995), pp. 143-4.

<sup>374</sup> Mannoni, Laurent (1996), p. 400.

<sup>375</sup> Castle, Terry (1995), p. 150.

<sup>376</sup> On the Philidor/Philipstahl controversy see Mannoni, Laurent (2000), p. 173-5, and Heard, Mervyn, 'Paul de Philipstal & the Phantasmagoria in England, Scotland and Ireland. Part One: Boo!', *The New Magic Lantern Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1 (October 1996), pp. 2-3.

‘spectrology’, as it was called, basically replicated the modalities and contents already seen in France and other parts of Europe:

All the lights of the small theatre of exhibition were removed, except one hanging lamp, which could be drawn up so that its flame should be perfectly enveloped in a cylindrical chimney, or opaque shade. In this gloomy and wavering light the curtain was drawn up, and presented to the spectator a cave or place exhibiting skeletons, and other figures of terror, in relief, and painted on the sides or walls. After a short interval the lamp was drawn up, and the audience were in total darkness, succeeded by thunder and lightning; which last appearance was formed by the magic lantern upon a thin cloth or screen, let down after the disappearance of the light, and consequently unknown to most of the spectators. These appearances were followed by figures of departed men, ghosts, skeletons, transmutations, &c. produced on the screen by the magic lantern on the other side, and moving their eyes, mouth, &c. by the well known contrivance of two or more sliders. The transformations are effected by moving the adjusting tube of the lantern out of focus, and changing the slider during the moment of the confused appearance. [...] Several figures of celebrated men were thus exhibited with some transformations; such as the head of Dr. Franklin being converted into a skull, and these were succeeded by phantoms, skeletons, and various terrific figures, which instead of seeming to recede and then vanish, were (by enlargement) made suddenly to advance; to the surprize and astonishment of the audience, and then disappear by seeming to sink into the ground.<sup>377</sup>

The most effective of all Philipstahl's apparitions was that of the Red Woman of Berlin, an artificial spectre (created by placing a wax mask tinted with transparent oil colours in front of a magic lantern held and moved by an invisible operator – Philipstahl himself – dressed in full black and invisible in the darkness) which one of the agents of the infamous Count de Cagliostro reportedly used at night to spread terror and panic among the citizens of the German capital. In an article published in *The Portfolio* in 1825, an anonymous writer who had the chance to see a performance of the trick explained the incredible impact it had on the English audience (as well as on Philipstahl's own economic fortunes):

The effect was electrical, and scarcely to be imagined from the effect of a written description. I was myself one of an audience during the first week of its exhibition, when the hysterical scream of a few ladies in the first seats of the pit induced a cry of “lights” from their immediate friends, which it not being possible *instantly* to comply with, increased into a universal panic, in which the male portion of the audience, who were ludicrously the most vociferous, were actually commencing a scrambling rush to reach the doors of exit, when the operator, either not understanding the meaning of the cry, or mistaking the temper and feeling of an English audience, at this unlucky crisis once more dashed forward the Red Woman. The confusion was instantly at a height which was alarming to the stoutest; the indiscriminate rush to the doors was prevented only by the deplorable state of most of the ladies; the stage was scaled by an adventurous few, the Red Woman's sanctuary violated, the unlucky operator's cavern of death profaned, and some of his machinery overturned, before light restored order and something like a harmonious understanding with the cause of alarm. I need scarcely say that this accident spread the astonished Frenchman's fame over our wondering city like magic; he had made his

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<sup>377</sup> Nicholson, William, ‘Narrative and Explanation of the Appearance of Phantoms and other Figures in the Exhibition of the Phantasmagoria. With Remarks upon the Philosophical Use of Common Occurrences’, in *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, and the Arts*, vol. 1 (February 1802), p. 148. Philipstahl was really upset when Nicholson revealed his tricks in this text. Mannoni, Laurent (1996), p. 413.

exhibition in Paris during an entire winter, without any remarkable impression, and without sufficient remuneration. The Red Woman's dash into the pit of an English theatre, mainly by his ignorance of our language, from that eventful night crowded his little theatre to suffocation, and, before the close of a short season of four months, produced to his treasury the actual sum of *eight thousand pounds!*<sup>378</sup>

Needless to say, the London public – in this period totally addicted to all things Gothic and supernatural – could not help but to completely fall in love with Philipstahl's phantasmagoria<sup>379</sup>. These ghosts and demons possessed an enigmatic and alarming immateriality that of course an actor in the flesh could never have. The fact that this 'spectral assembly' took place in a theatre with a darkened stage made its link with Gothic drama even clearer, as it was a sort of more advanced and spectacle-driven (but perfectly legitimate, thanks to the royal patent) spin-off of the genre.

Soon there followed many other similar ghost shows, both at the Lyceum and at other locations, featuring more and more spectacular magical illusions and phantasmatic transformations. Competition among illusionists increased. In 1805, for example, two German physicians, Schirmer and School, presented at the Lyceum their 'Ergascopia, or the real actions of phantoms', vowing to detach their apparition from the Gothic sensationalism exploited by their competitors. In fact, during their show imitations of the phantasmagorias of Robertson, Philipstahl and other showmen were displayed only to remark their inferiority and lifelessness with respect to the Ergascopia<sup>380</sup>. They also invited the audience on stage and behind the curtain to explain all their secrets and give instructions as to how to replicate such tricks in their private houses as a winter entertainment. Their aim was to 'prove to an enlightened English Public the great difference between their natural phantoms and those that have been produced by Mr. Philpstahl, and others through a Magic Lanthorn' in order to leave spectators 'to judge between the *beautiful originals* and some *tortured copies*', given that they considered themselves as 'the real Inventors of the most pleasing Optics'<sup>381</sup>. Their apparitions were advertised as being truly original and different:

These Artists never employ the charlatanic aids of *Hail, Thunder* and *Lightening*, in this truly pleasing and scientific Amusement. They disdain to frighten Ladies and Children, in a Theatre,

<sup>378</sup> *The Portfolio*, vol. 4 (19 February 1825), p. 370.

<sup>379</sup> The very word 'phantasmagoria' became exceedingly popular in nineteenth-century English culture. As Erkki Huhtamo explains, '[p]hantasmagoria did not exist merely as a particular kind of show and technique, but also as a notion that manifested itself in myriad forms, from the showman's broadsides and newspaper notices to satirical prints, book titles, popular sayings, literary metaphors, theoretical figures and advertising slogans'. Huhtamo, Erkki, 'Ghost Notes: Reading Mervyn Heard's *Phantasmagoria. The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*', *The Magic Lantern Gazette*, vol. 18, no. 4 (winter 2006), p. 16.

<sup>380</sup> 'The *Ergascopia* differs as day and night from what is styled the *Phantasmagoria*. [...] The Apparatus necessary for the *Ergascopic* or living and acting Phantoms, is of a different and most difficult scientific construction, such as would have done honour to Sir Isaac Newton himself. All the learned professors in the difficult science of Optics, who saw them produced on the continent, readily confessed, that these *Ergascopic* Phantoms produce the NEPLUS ULTRA of *optical delusion, on the human vision*'. Anonymous, *Sketches of the Performances at the large Theatre, Lyceum*, London: Warde and Betham (1805), pp. 19-20.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

where nothing but *decent* and *rational* amusement should prevail. Entire Pantomimic Scenes of Ancient and Modern History will be performed by the most graceful Phantoms, and which cannot possibly be distinguished from real or natural Life. [...] Not only HUMAN ACTIONS, but all the HUMAN PASSIONS, will be expressed by the phantoms, for the audience will see them plainly to eat, drink, laugh, smile, grimace, &c. &c.<sup>382</sup>

Yet, somehow contradictorily, one of the highlights of the Ergascopeia was a spine-chilling Gothic scene set in a graveyard:

A treasure digger comes from a great distance, holding in one hand a Lanthorn, with *really burning Candle*, and in the other, a Spade. He examines the soil in which he hopes to find a treasure. Putting his lanthorn on the ground, he begins to dig, looking fearfully around, whether he is discovered! suddenly, a disguised Figure starts from the hole, and frightens him away. This figure addresses itself, returns to the opening, lights a candle, and waves it about, to convince the spectators, by the motion of a flame, that the candle really burns; it then appears at a great distance, and vanishes into air.<sup>383</sup>

Another famous Ergascopeic scene portrayed a touching meeting between none other than Petrarch and Laura's ghost (a theme previously exploited also by Robertson):

In the scene of LAURA and PETRARCHA, is seen the Tomb of the former. The celebrated Italian Bard is discerned to approach it, bewailing the loss of LAURA, his beloved Mistress. He strews flowers on and about the Tomb, when it opens at last, and LAURA rises from it. She rejoices at her Resurrection, and finds the flowers which her Lover strewed. She also discovers and beckons him. They embrace, and after mutual Endearments they both vanish into the Air: but so slowly, that, even in the last degree of gradual diminution, they are seen in the most accurate Proportions of their Forms.<sup>384</sup>

Whatever their performative techniques and communication strategies, from the 1790s onwards phantasmagorists all had an element in common: they all claimed to be rationalists and promoted the didactic, even cautionary purpose of their spectacles. Their shows were intriguingly advertised as strictly scientific events (complete with preliminary lectures) aimed at debunking popular beliefs in magic and necromancy and educate citizens to recognize and defend themselves from charlatans and fraudsters. The technology behind the apparitions was fully acknowledged and explained as an optical device manufactured by humans. In this way, phantasmagorias fully adhered to the Enlightenment call to demystify the supernatural, eradicate superstition, and stimulate the mind to detect and counteract manipulation and deceit. As Gabriela Cruz puts it, phantasmagoria was

a didactic playing field in which the spectator learned to identify apparitions, rationalize the mechanisms of deception, and even imagine the (prosaic) labor that went into creating the extraordinary immaterial sightings. The spectacle served political education and

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<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11. Robertson's phantasmagoria also included a similar scene, though it also featured a dreadful skeleton and a rat coming out of its mouth. Dickens, Charles (1855), p. 138.

<sup>384</sup> Anonymous (1805), pp. 11-12.

disenchantment, improving the mind and preparing the citizen to live without deception.<sup>385</sup>

It is important to remark that this derived less from a disinterested desire to help people than the phantasmagorists' need to protect themselves. Philidor/Philipstahl, for example, first declared the fictional nature of his shows while in Vienna probably to avoid accusations of being a charlatan or even of practising black arts, as it had happened in his previous experience in Berlin. He continued to do so in Paris and London, and also Robertson and others followed the same track. As a matter of fact, especially in the tense climate of the 1790s, showmen's ability to manipulate large crowds were seen suspiciously and the risk of being misinterpreted as dangerous subverters and incarcerated or even put to death was particularly high. In Revolutionary France, more than any other place, phantasmagorists needed to be extremely careful, and the scientific disguise was necessary to 'placate the police, authorities, or intellectuals concerned with religious impropriety, confidence schemes, or attempts to undermine Enlightenment beliefs'<sup>386</sup>. Whatever the true reasons underlying this approach, phantasmagorias inevitably ended up serving precise social and political agendas in order to be able to survive. In France, where the Cult of Reason and later the Cult of the Supreme Being aimed to replace Catholicism (linked to the Ancien Régime) and establish Atheism, they were appreciated for being a warning against blind belief in supernatural mysteries and the entrapments of the Catholic clergy, who from the Jacobin viewpoint had similarly manipulated the gullible by simulating the apparitions of the spirits of the dead as well as angels, saints, etc. In England, where the enemy was 'popery' and Jacobinism, the debunking impulse was even more relevant, given the diffused anti-Catholic sentiments and the strong association existing between the mystic tricks and occult machinations of secret societies such as the Illuminati, Rosicrucians and Jesuits (directly evoked also by Philipsthal at the Lyceum) and the much-despised revolutionary Jacobinism.

However, there was something smart and subtle in the phantasmagorists' sceptical stance and in their exploitation of the public's fascination for the esoteric, the paranormal and the unexplainable. Though ostensibly presented as serious divulgation experiments in the public interest, their performances were less scientific demonstrations than thrilling rides with awesome special effects that consciously played with the most visceral sensations of the audience, who in turn wanted 'to be entertained, to be scared, and not to be instructed'<sup>387</sup>. They seemed specifically designed to appease the growing section of the public who went to the theatres not to seek intellectual refinement but to experience those all-encompassing emotions that only supernatural apparitions could give. In

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<sup>385</sup> Cruz, Gabriela (2020), pp. 57-8.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>387</sup> Mannoni, Laurent (1996), p. 400.

England, this ambiguity initially was even greater than elsewhere given that in Philipstahl's show 'the attempt to explain the rational object, or purpose of the exhibition was certainly well intended; but unfortunately for the audience his English was unintelligible'<sup>388</sup>, and the audience often responded unpredictably and irrationally to the apparitions. To an extent, it was the extremisation of the audiovisual thrills provided by Gothic plays. Therefore, if on the one hand the use of avowedly technological supernaturalism was meant to foster sceptical and critical thinking, on the other it subtly 'contrived to arouse the spectators' expectations and to confuse their perceptions'<sup>389</sup>. The same could actually be said of Schiller's *Der Geisterseher* (and the long strain of fiction it inspired<sup>390</sup>), which, as Emma J. Clery has noted, 'was considered by its author and dealt with by the reviewers as a work of demystification, an enlightenment cure to political and religious enchantment, yet its own powers of attraction lay in the irrational delights of scenes of the marvellous and the supernatural'<sup>391</sup>. This contradiction (along with the text's ultimate enigmatic nature) was probably what initially triggered mistrust towards this kind of fiction. But phantasmagoria had the advantage of relying on a more solid claim to scientificity that gave illusionists total freedom to stage horrible ghosts, mythological monsters, abolished gods and other exploded superstitions which traditional theatres – especially patent theatres – were often uncomfortable with.

In spite of this (shamelessly exhibited) ambiguity, phantasmagoria nevertheless provided a more 'legitimate' alternative to the subversive representations of the supernatural so extensively used in the contemporary Gothic theatre. Therefore, soon also playwrights understood that the techno-supernatural provided a decent compromise that could allow them to continue to capitalise on the public's obsession with the supernatural while simultaneously rationally distancing from it, thus protecting themselves against criticism by openly acknowledging its artificiality and deceptive nature. In this regard, it is possible to trace a group of dramas produced during the first two decades

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<sup>388</sup> Nicholson, William (1802), p. 149.

<sup>389</sup> Cruz, Gabriela (2020), p. 56. Terry Castle has thoroughly examined the ambivalence inherent in the very essence of phantasmagoria, which rendered present what it claimed did not exist: 'The subliminal power of the phantasmagoria lay in the fact that it induced in the spectator a kind of maddening, contradictory perception: one might believe ghosts to be illusions, present "in the mind's eye" alone, but one experienced them here as real entities, existing outside the boundary of the psyche. The overall effect was unsettling—like seeing a real ghost'. Castle, Terry (1995), pp. 159-60.

<sup>390</sup> Intriguingly, an anonymous 1803 Gothic tale adapted from Cajetan Tschink's *Geschichte eines Geistersehers*, known in England as *The Victim of Magical Delusion*, bears the revealing title of *Phantasmagoria; or, The Development of Magical Deception*, making the link with this technology even clearer. The epigraph on the title page is a particularly telling passage from *Macbeth*: 'That, distill'd by magic slights, / Shall raise each artificial sprights, / As, by the strength of their illusion, / Shall draw him on to his confusion'.

<sup>391</sup> Clery, Emma J. (1995), p. 163. Similarly, Daniel Hall argues that, although this type of supernatural 'is eventually explained in what purport to be clear, reasoned endings', it 'can leave doubts, especially if the supernatural manifestations are believed to be "real" by the intelligent reader or hero/heroine at any stage and if the explanation reveals a more disturbing reality'. Hall, Daniel (2005), pp. 185-6.

of the nineteenth century (to which Baillie's *Orra* fully belongs) that seemed to thematise the role of phantasmagoria and other new visual technologies in challenging Gothic supernaturalism and refurbishing it as an externally-induced sensorial phenomenon, therefore 'mediat[ing] oddly between rational and irrational imperatives'<sup>392</sup>. The supernatural was thus not ridiculed (as in those comic plays that parodied the conventional tropes of Gothic theatrics) but presented as a very serious, deplorable deceit that needed to be discredited through the rhetoric of science, though it did not lose its frightening Gothic potency. *Der Geisterseher* itself, re-translated in 1800 by William Render as *The Armenian; or, The Ghost Seer. A History founded on Fact*, began being re-evaluated and enjoyed a wider circulation (Byron, for example, knew the text through this version), becoming an important literary blueprint for these theatrical experiments. This edition is important because, as Robert Miles has noted, Render 'interpolate[d] a passage in which the Armenian takes responsibility for the second apparition and everything else of a supernatural nature in the romance'<sup>393</sup>, dispelling all ambiguities. Therefore, paradoxically, years after *Der Geisterseher* had initiated the infectious vogue for the German Gothic, the Schillerian techno-supernatural came to represent the starting point for an interesting if convoluted attempt to assimilate a much-debated subject like the supernatural into some sort of instructive framework, namely, into a legitimate theatrical world that was struggling not to entirely succumb to the vulgar trends of the moment and, more generally, to keep justifying its own very existence. In the following pages, three works chronologically distant but thematically akin that tried to reproduce, at least conceptually, the principles of the techno-supernatural on stage will be examined.

#### 2.4 *The techno-supernatural on the legitimate stage*

The first true techno-Gothic play probably was a strange, now completely forgotten two-act comedy called *Urania; or, The Illuminé*, staged at Drury Lane in January 1802, therefore shortly after Philipstahl's phantasmagoria had arrived in London. The author was William Robert Spencer, a wit and poet mostly known for his 1796 translation of Bürger's *Lenore*, appreciated also by Percy Bysshe Shelley<sup>394</sup>. *Urania* was his only dramatic effort, and the fact that it had been immediately chosen for production raised doubts whether this was determined by its merits, or by the fact that he was an intimate friend of Sheridan and the Kembles. Curiously, the play heavily drew inspiration

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<sup>392</sup> Castle, Terry (1995), p. 143.

<sup>393</sup> Miles, Robert, 'Seeing Ghosts: The Dark Side of the Enlightenment', in *Haunted Europe: Continental Connections in English-Language Gothic Writing, Film and New Media*, ed. Michael Newton and Evert Jan van Leeuwen, New York: Routledge (2019), p. 33.

<sup>394</sup> Eng, Steven, 'Supernatural Verse in English', in *Horror Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, ed. Marshall B. Tymn, New York: Bowker (1981), p. 413.

from Schiller's *Der Geisterseher* to ridicule the superstitious beliefs of Germany, 'the only failings of a great, learned, and a virtuous nation'<sup>395</sup>. Yet, the play is not a burlesque of Schiller's tale, but rather a free adaptation that fully embraces its central motif, namely the use of artificial, techno-Gothic tricks to manipulate the credulous, adjusting it for a more comical context. The protagonist is Manfred (Charles Kemble), the Prince of Colonna (Calabria), whose mind is entirely absorbed in extravagant magical interests<sup>396</sup>. His father (Mr. Powell), wants him to marry the Princess of Tarentum (Therese De Camp, Kemble's wife), but the Prince is only thinking of how to escape from this situation, as he confesses to his friend Conrad:

And can you think, my friend, that after such a zealous and persevering enquiry into the occult science; at the moment when I am almost sure of gaining the affections of an immortal intelligencer, can you think that I will be diverted from my high calling by a mere mortal? I own that my pulses throb at the idea of beauty, and that my heart pines for fellowship; I know too that the Princess of Tarentum is fair and virtuous, and mistress of these rich domains; but what are all earthly riches compared to the treasures of the grand science? and what is all human beauty compared to that of the daughters of immortality?<sup>397</sup>

In order to test the prince's sincerity of heart, his father assumes the guise of an Armenian sorcerer and tells him that he can gratify all his wishes if he renounces his father's love. He, however, meets Manfred's disdainful rejection. Before leaving, the false magician raises the celestial spirit of Urania (actually the Princess herself) in order to convince Manfred of his powers. The moment of the conjuration is a masterpiece of techno-supernatural display:

ARM. Imprudent Prince! thou shalt soon repent thy rashness in accusing me of imposture. (*Stamps his foot, the Scene opening discovers a Female Figure, elevated on a brilliant cloud.*) [...]

MAN. Angel! spirit! Oh, speak again; do thou command me; do thou prove me: that voice can never counsel ingratitude or impiety.

ARM. The Powers are kinder to thee than thy deserts can claim: beware of disobedience to her; beware, and prosper. (*The cloud descends to soft music.*) [*Exit.*]

FEMALE. Manfred, your faith and long perseverance have prevailed. I am deputed to reward your labours, if you prove yourself really worthy of supernatural protection.

MAN. O gracious spirit! one sight of thee has already overpaid all my labours, and all my sacrifices. One single look of thine has already blest me more than all the love of the loveliest of human kind. Oh, tell me by what name I may address thee, and by what means I may preserve thy celestial favour.

FEMALE. I am called Urania. I have long approved your merits, and wished to reward them. But much you have yet to do, to confirm your pretensions to my affection.

MAN. My life will be too short to prove the excess and purity of my devotion.

URA. The colder virtues may require to be proved by length of time; but a single day, a single

<sup>395</sup> Preface to *Urania* quoted in Ewen, Frederic, *The Prestige of Schiller in England, 1788-1859*, New York: Columbia University Press (1932), p. 48.

<sup>396</sup> As Daniel Hall notes, the techno-supernatural, which he vaguely calls 'apparently supernatural', is sometimes used 'by those attempting to teach the protagonist a lesson, particularly if the latter has what his/her educators perceive as an unhealthy interest in the otherworldly'. This is certainly the case with Manfred. Hall, Daniel (2005), p. 186.

<sup>397</sup> Quoted in *The Annual Review and History of Literature*, vol. 1 (1802), p. 693.

hour can give more real proofs of love, than a whole age can furnish. Manfred, the head computes by days and years; the heart's calendar is a calendar of moments, of moments so soft, so bright! they are the down on the wings of Time; and the grains of gold amongst the sand of his hour glass.

MAN. Then shall every moment of my existence be a proof of my devotion.

URA. Conrad, your friend, is as yet an enemy to the mystic science; him you must dissuade from his prejudices, and convert to the sect; reveal to him my mission and my nature.—This is all I can communicate at a first interview. Farewell; attempt not to follow me, and remember to obey me. (*The cloud re-ascends to soft music.*)<sup>398</sup>

Manfred is completely entranced by the ethereal beauty of Urania, who promises that she will be his forever on the condition that he betrays his father. Once again, however, the Prince gives evidence of great filial devotion by declining the offer. Meanwhile, he is charged of practising necromancy and arrested by the officers of the Inquisition. The Princess, wearing a veil to cover her face, visits him in prison and offers to free him if he stops pursuing the spirit with which he is so desperately in love. He refuses, and at this point the Princess reveals herself, thus showing Manfred that she actually is Urania. Although the object of his fervent passion is revealed to be not an immortal entity but a very corporeal being, Manfred declares his unconditioned love for the Princess, who accepts his hand. At this point also the father, enthusiastic about his son's demonstrations of loyalty and faithfulness, throws off his disguise and approves the union.

*Urania* is a forgotten gem that was received quite well by both public and critics, also being performed as an afterpiece to *Romeo and Juliet*, though it rapidly disappeared from the repertoire. *The Monthly Review*, which curiously recognised an affinity between its plot and that of *Le Mari Sylphe*, a tale in Jean-François Marmontel's *Conte Moraux* (1765) without mentioning Schiller's novel, defined it 'an agreeable little piece [...] intended to rally the spectral inclinations of the Germans, which have lately produced such frightful apparitions in the form, of novels and plays'<sup>399</sup>. Similarly, *The Annual Review and History of Literature* described the work as 'a mild and very well-managed satire of the prevailing belief in Germany of supernatural visitations, of the existence and agency of ghosts and hobgoblins, demons, vampires, and apparitions of every kind'<sup>400</sup>, while *The European Magazine* appreciated Spencer's skill and delicacy in dealing with such a controversial subject matter:

In the construction of this little drama, the Author has evinced considerable skill. The character of Manfred, the main spring of the plot, though ridiculous to the enlightened mind, is far from being drawn with features of marked hyperbole; for such beings, and such dispositions exist beyond all doubt, even in the nineteenth century, particularly in Germany, Italy, &c. If the lines of probability are in some instances forced, it must, at least, be confessed, that in no respect is any thing presented that is calculated to offend; and even the most fastidious collection, we

<sup>398</sup> Quoted in *The Monthly Review*, vol. 39 (November 1802), pp. 394-5.

<sup>399</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 39 (November 1802), p. 394.

<sup>400</sup> *The Annual Review and History of Literature*, vol. 1 (1802), p. 693.

think, will admit, that the licence usually granted in cases of this nature has in no one particular been exceeded by the Author. In the dialogue, there is a pleasing mixture of the serious and the comic, the philosophic and the romantic.<sup>401</sup>

Intriguingly, the apparition is to all intents and aspects similar to other female spirits seen in contemporary Gothic dramas, such as *The Castle Spectre's* Evelina and *Cambro-Britons'* Lady Griffith (who also descended on a cloud). Therefore, if on a superficial level the scene is meant as a spoof of German supernaturalism, on a deeper level it also addressed the contemporary fashion for Gothic plays, with the audience being implicitly compared to the delusional Manfred, with his reprehensible affection for phantoms that are (literally) only actors wearing a costume. By staging a false supernatural apparition that was similar to the 'real' supernatural apparitions of other productions (with which it shared the same machinery, special effects and even Michael Kelly's musical score), Spencer retrospectively exposed them as a theatrical sham, re-reading and de-powering the Gothic through the 'scientific' lens of the techno-Gothic, though here within a prevailingly humorous framework. Reviewers of the play, however, curiously omitted the fact that these demystifying impulses came precisely from the original Schillerian source (which is not even mentioned), and that the 'German' vogue for the supernatural was in fact more an English one.

*Der Geisterseher* is instead a more acknowledged point of reference for a later and much more famous play such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Remorse*. Originally titled *Osorio*, this tragedy was rejected in 1797 by the Drury Lane management, who preferred to go forth with the production of Lewis's *The Castle Spectre*, to Coleridge's deep disappointment. Years later Coleridge revised the play and, thanks to Lord Byron's fundamental mediation, finally saw it produced at Samuel Whitbread's renovated Drury Lane in January 1813 and in other theatres throughout the country during the following months. Considering Coleridge's notorious hatred towards the so-called German school of writing, the decision to write his own 'German' Gothic tragedy might sound surprising, or even hypocritical. Especially during the time between *Osorio's* rejection and its transformation into *Remorse*, Coleridge turned more and more reactionary and developed the idea that Gothic drama, which he called 'Jacobinical drama', was the worst sign of a political, moral and aesthetic illness imported from the Continent that was corrupting the English spirit, or at least the idea that conservatives had of it. Yet Coleridge was also convinced that the 'German' drama so popular at the turn of the nineteenth century, whether actually written in German (like the popular plays of Kotzebue<sup>402</sup>) or English (like the Gothic pieces of Boaden and Lewis), was in fact 'English

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<sup>401</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 41 (January 1802), p.44.

<sup>402</sup> See, among others, in Farese, Carlotta, "'Rule, Kotzebue, then, and Britannia Rule!'" Considerazioni sulla ricezione dell'opera di A. von Kotzebue in Inghilterra fra Sette e Ottocento', in *Il teatro della paura: Scenari gotici del romanticismo europeo*, ed. Diego Saglia and Giovanna Silvani, Roma: Bulzoni (2005), pp. 47-59.

in its origin, English in its materials, and English by re-adoption'<sup>403</sup>, and, therefore, that the English Gothic playwrights were merely producers of bad copies of copies. As is evident from his comments on authors such as Matthew Gregory Lewis and Charles Robert Maturin, Coleridge had an extremely negative opinion of the Germanised English Gothic, which he regarded as shocking, immoral and disgusting. Coleridge hated being associated with this group of writers, fearing that this might have damaged his own reputation (though this attitude probably revealed also a certain elitist snobbery as well as sincere envy for Gothic drama's commercial success)<sup>404</sup>. Conversely, he was a great admirer of Schiller, whom he considered a tragic author of the calibre of Shakespeare, despite the fact that he held him somehow responsible for the process of debasement of the English letters, given that his works – especially *Die Räuber* – provided a point of reference for a long trail of untalented Gothic writers who plagiarised and perverted them<sup>405</sup>. Traces of Schiller's aesthetics can actually be found throughout the whole of Coleridge's oeuvre. *Der Geisterseher's* techno-Gothic, obviously distant from the devices and techniques commonly employed in the 'Germanised' English Gothic, certainly appealed to him as a mode more akin to his refined Romantic imagination. As a matter of fact, Coleridge totally disdained the 'pernicious' supernaturalism à la Lewis, which blended, 'with an irreverent negligency, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition', as he wrote in a famous review of *The Monk*<sup>406</sup>. Robert F. Geary explained how Lewis's outrageous diabolism, 'neither probable nor symbolic, ill suited any moral framework' and was, therefore, unacceptable to Coleridge<sup>407</sup>. At the same time, he was also not particularly fond of Radcliffe's device of the explained supernatural, as he stated while reviewing *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: 'This method is [...] liable to the following inconvenience, that in search of what is new, an author is apt to forget what is natural; and in rejecting the more obvious conclusions, to take those which are less satisfactory'<sup>408</sup>. Radcliffe's trivial and disenchanting explanations were highly disappointing for Coleridge, who was rather interested in the psychologisation of the supernatural, that is, its assimilation 'into a symbol system revealing horrors of the psyche unsuspected by novelists of benevolent sentimentalism'<sup>409</sup> such as Radcliffe. Therefore, also for Coleridge the techno-Gothic represented a fascinating third way. Actually, the

<sup>403</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1891), p. 277.

<sup>404</sup> Gamer, Michael, 'Gothic Fictions and Romantic Writing in Britain', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2002), pp. 89-90. The German writer Johann Friedrich Jacobsen claimed that 'Coleridge hat eine wahre Wasserscheu vor den Kritikern [Coleridge had a true fear of critics]'. Jacobsen, Friedrich Johann, *Briefe an eine deutsche Edelfrau, über die neuesten englischen Dichter*, Altona: Hammerich (1820), p. 222.

<sup>405</sup> Scott, Matthew, 'Coleridge and European Literature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2009), p. 545.

<sup>406</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 19 (February 1797), p. 197.

<sup>407</sup> Geary, Robert F. (1992), p. 85.

<sup>408</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 11 (August 1794), p. 364.

<sup>409</sup> Geary, Robert F. (1992), p. 83.

supernatural in his works could be read as a phantasmagoria, ‘shadows of imagination’ that have ‘the semblance of truth’<sup>410</sup> but are real only as a subjective, psychic and ultimately poetic phenomenon. This linked him to an author like Joanna Baillie (the change of title from *Osorio* to *Remorse* ideally aligned Coleridge's tragedy with the *Plays on the Passions*), as both were interested in exploring mental states excited by superstitious delusions and ‘represent[ing] interior conflict as both dramatic and spectacular’<sup>411</sup>. The phantasmagoric illusion becomes therefore the most appropriate device to portray this supernatural-related conflict on stage. No wonder, therefore, that Coleridge could consider *Der Geisterseher*'s techno-supernaturalism somewhat akin to his own poetics. The influence is especially striking in *Remorse*, whose pivotal scene – a spectacular necromantic conjuration – draws obvious inspiration from the ‘tale within the tale’ told by the Sicilian in the first volume.

While interrogated by the Prince, the Sicilian relates how in the past he was approached by one Chevalier Lorenzo del M——, the son of a powerful Italian Marquis. Lorenzo was violently in love with Antonia C——, the daughter of a neighbouring aristocrat, who however was betrothed to marry his older brother Jeronymo, who had disappeared at sea five years earlier under mysterious circumstances. Given that the Marquis was anxious to seal the union between the two families before his death, Lorenzo was designed to marry Antonia and inherit the title originally intended for Jeronymo. Antonia, however, had no feeling for Lorenzo and still entertained hopes of his beloved fiancé being alive, thus feeling torn between familial duty and personal happiness. So, in order to get what he wanted, Lorenzo (who had actually murdered his brother, as it would be later discovered) needed to demonstrate to Antonia and the old Marquis that Jeronymo was actually dead. He hence turned to the Sicilian, asking him to host a séance to contact the ghost of Jeronymo and offer final proof of his premature departure. After winning the trust of the old Marquis (a zealous believer in the occult) and the rest of the family, the Sicilian proceeded to summon the ghost of Jeronymo with aid of the usual repertoire of illusionistic tricks and electrical machines:

“You will imagine, that during my long residence in the house I took all opportunities of

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<sup>410</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1891), p. 145. In particular, Coleridge sought to place ‘the phenomena of ghost-seeing within the genera of dreams and dreaming, as an experience psychologically rooted and solemnial in nature’. This is especially obviously in the visionary *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), which can be described as a waking dream or, to quote its telling subtitle, ‘A Poet's Reverie’ – namely, a phantasmagoria of the poetic mind. McCorristine, Shane (2010), p. 39. Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural in his poems generally received high praise: ‘There is an indescribable charm in this preservation of what is natural amid the supernatural; nay, in making the supernatural only serve to unfold and illustrate what is natural, and the wildest and boldest creations of imagination develop the essential principles of humanity. This it is which distinguishes the masters of the magic art from the mere miracle-monger; and make us believe in Shakespeare's witches, while we only laugh at Monk Lewis's goblins’. *The Westminster Review*, vol. 12 (January 1830), p. 29.

<sup>411</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N., and Gamer, Michael, ‘Introduction’, in *The Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer, Peterborough: Broadview (2003), p. xx.

gathering information respecting every thing that concerned the deceased.—Several of his portraits enabled me to give the apparition a striking likeness; and as I suffered the ghost to speak only by signs, that the sound of his voice might excite no suspicion, the departed Jeronymo appeared in the dress of a Moorish slave, with a deep wound in his neck. [...] I asked the ghost, whether there was any thing in this world which he still considered as his own, and whether he had left any thing behind that was particularly dear to him? The ghost thrice shook his head and lifted up his hands towards heaven. Previous to his retiring, he dropped a ring from his finger, which was found on the floor after he had disappeared; Antonia took it, and looking at it attentively, she knew it to be the wedding-ring she had presented to her intended husband.”<sup>412</sup>

The Sicilian claims the ring he used was a counterfeit, but it seems likely that he used the real item, given to him by Lorenzo himself. Whatever the case, Antonia was eventually persuaded and the family officially announced the death of Jeronymo, simultaneously beginning preparations for the wedding between Antonia and Lorenzo. The ceremony took place regularly and the old Marquis resigned his estates and title in favour of Lorenzo. The subsequent banquet, however, was ruined by the arrival of an uninvited Franciscan monk – the Armenian – who cast an aura of gloom and anxiety on all the guests, and especially on the newly-weds. The situation rapidly worsened when the monk proposed a toast to the defunct Jeronymo:

“Lorenzo changed colour. My own hair almost stood erect on my head. In the mean time the monk approached a sideboard. He took a glass of wine, and bringing it to his lips,—‘To the memory of our dear Jeronymo’, said he: ‘every one who loved the deceased will follow my example’. [...] Never, I believe, was any toast less heartily received. ‘There is one glass left’, said the Marquis. ‘Why does my son Lorenzo refuse to pay this friendly tribute?’ Lorenzo tremblingly received the glass from the hands of the monk,—tremblingly he put it to his lips.—‘My dear beloved brother Jeronymo!’ The name trembled on his tongue, and being seized with horror, he replaced the glass unemptied. ‘That is the voice of my murderer!’ Exclaimed a terrible figure, which appeared instantaneously in the midst of us, covered with blood, and disfigured with horrible wounds.”<sup>413</sup>

At this point the Sicilian claims he cannot remember anything else about that night because he and the other guests fainted after the appearance of the bloody ghost. He only reports what happened to the family after those shocking events:

When we recovered, the monk and the ghost had disappeared. Lorenzo was in the agonies of death. He was carried to bed in the most dreadful convulsions. No person attended him but his confessor and the sorrowful old Marquis, in whose presence he expired; — the Marquis died a few weeks after him. Lorenzo's secret is concealed in the bosom of the priest who received his last confession, and no person ever learned what it was. Soon after this event, a deep well was cleaned in the farm yard of the Marquis's villa. It had been disused many years, and the mouth of it was almost closed up by shrubs and old trees. A skeleton was found among the rubbish. The house where this happened is now no more; the family del M—— is extinct, and Antonia's tomb may be seen in a convent not far from Salerno.”<sup>414</sup>

<sup>412</sup> Schiller, Friedrich (1831), pp. 46-7.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-1.

Knowing that the Armenian is an impostor as well, it seems plausible that also the second apparition was nothing more than a trick, though no precise information is given on how it had been created. Coleridge wisely dropped this part altogether<sup>415</sup>, choosing to adapt only the first part of the story. His *Remorse* transposed the action into sixteenth-century Granada, during the reign of Philip II, and told a very similar story centring around the bitter rivalry between two brothers of the Spanish nobility, Alvar, the outcast hero, and Ordonio (Osorio in the previous version of the tragedy), the usurping brother, sons of the Marquis Valdez. Both are in love with their beautiful foster-sister Donna Teresa, an orphan heiress brought up by the Marquis. Similarly to what happens in *Der Geisterseher*, when Teresa is about to marry Alvar, Ordonio devises a Machiavellian plan to get rid of his older brother by hiring an assassin and subsequently spreading the news that he perished in a shipwreck. However, unlike Jeronymo in Schiller's novel, Alvar is still alive and well, unbeknownst to anyone. The tragedy opens with his return to Granada after six years of absence, disguised as a Moor and willing to force Ordonio to feel remorse for his terrible actions. Meanwhile, Ordonio is trying to convince Teresa that his former lover Alvar will not return and that she is free to marry him in accordance with the will of the Marquis. Hence he proposes to his accomplice, the Christianised Moor Isidore (the man who was supposed to kill Alvar but did not complete the task when he learned that he was Ordonio's brother), to perform a fake conjuration of Alvar's ghost, taking advantage of Teresa's superstitious mind in order to break down her resistance (just as Rudigere does in Baillie's *Orra*):

In blunt terms, you can play the sorcerer.  
 She hath no faith in Holy Church, 'tis true:  
 Her lover school'd her in some newer nonsense!  
 Yet still a tale of spirits works upon her.  
 She is a lone enthusiast, sensitive,  
 Shivers, and can not keep the tears in her eye:  
 And such do love the marvellous too well  
 Not to believe it. We will wind up her fancy  
 With a strange music, that she knows not of—  
 With fumes of frankincense, and mummery,  
 Then leave, as one sure token of his death,  
 That portrait, which from off the head man's neck  
 I bade thee take, the trophy of thy conquest.<sup>416</sup>

Isidore refuses and reveals that Alvar still lives and knows about his criminal conduct. Ordonio nevertheless decides to go on with the plan and resolves to employ an alleged Moorish wizard to

<sup>415</sup> Echoes of the Armenian's shocking intrusion at the banquet can nevertheless be found in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in which the spectral Mariner stops a young man on his way to a wedding, frightening him. Also Melmoth, the eponymous anti-hero of Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, interrupts a wedding feast and disturbs one of the guests (namely the priest, who dies out of fear as soon as he sees this demonic preternatural being).

<sup>416</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Remorse*, London: W. Pople (1813), p. 20.

fulfil the task, ignoring that he is actually the disguised Alvar, anxious to catch this opportunity to 'rouse a fiery whirlwind' in his brother's conscience<sup>417</sup> and save Teresa from marrying a would-be murderer. The solemn conjuration takes place at the beginning of Act 3 in a 'Hall of Armory, with an Altar at the back of the stage' and ethereal music played by 'an Instrument of Glass or Steel' (presumably a harmonica, the most characteristic Romantic instrument and a staple of Robertson's phantasmagoria shows, among other things). Alvar addresses his own ghost as if it were a spirit of heaven, evoking less Gothic imagery than Platonic notions of the stars being homes for souls, the Pythagorean music of the spheres and echoes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Soul of Alvar!  
 Hear our soft suit, and heed my milder spell:  
 So may the Gates of Paradise, unbarr'd,  
 Cease thy swift toils! Since haply thou art one  
 Of that innumerable company  
 Who in broad circle, lovelier than the rainbow,  
 Girdle this round earth in a dizzy motion,  
 With noise too vast and constant to be heard:  
 Fitliest unheard! For oh, ye numberless,  
 And rapid Travellers! what ear unstunn'd,  
 What sense unmadden'd, might bear up against  
 The rushing of your congregated wings?

[*Music.*]

Even now your living wheel turns o'er my head!

[*Music expressive of the movements and images that follow.*]<sup>418</sup>

During the performance Alvar does everything possible to stir to the utmost Ordonio's pangs of conscience by hinting at the attempted murder, but it is Teresa who, unable to bear the emotional tension provoked by the unholy rite, abruptly leaves the room. At last the moment of the ghost's actual summoning arrives, and it is certainly not what Ordonio expected:

The spell is mutter'd—Come, thou wandering Shape,  
 Who own'st no Master in a human eye,  
 Whate'er be this man's doom, fair be it, or foul,  
 If he be dead, O come! and bring with thee  
 That which he grasp'd in death! But if he lives,  
 Some token of his obscure perilous life.

[*The whole Music clashes into a Chorus.*

CHORUS

Wandering Demons! Hear the spell!  
 Lest a blacker charm compel—

[*The incense on the altar takes fire suddenly,  
 and an illuminated picture of ALVAR's  
 assassination is discovered, and having  
 remained a few seconds is then hidden by*

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>418</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1813), pp. 34-5.

*ascending flames.*]<sup>419</sup>

The deception, however, backfires because the Dominican Monviedro and other agents of the Inquisition suddenly interrupt the performance ('[w]isely the audience was allowed no time to reflect on the credibility of the scene'<sup>420</sup>) and arrest Alvar for necromancy. Ordonio later meets Isidore in a cavern and, suspecting him of treachery, hurls him down onto a chasm after a violent struggle. Meanwhile, Alvar, imprisoned in a dungeon, is visited by Teresa, who hopes to speak to the wizard Moor and clear her doubts on her fiancée's fate. After having ascertained that the girl is still faithful to him, Alvar reveals his true identity. The two are reached by Ordonio, who however is struck by a fit of paralysing terror when he recognises his brother and realises he has killed an innocent. The repentant villain is then stabbed to death by Alhadra, Isidore's widow, and cries 'ATONEMENT!' before breathing his last breath. The curtain falls on Valdez giving his blessing to the rejoined lovers Alvar and Teresa.

Although the ending is less tragic than that of the Sicilian's story in *Der Geistesheer*, the influence of Schiller is very conspicuous. The conjuration itself is strikingly similar to that performed by the Sicilian, including the reliance on spectral music, burning incense and portraits to reproduce the phantasmagoric image (obtained through a transparency effect) of the scene of Alvar's murder. Interestingly enough, Schiller seems not to have been identified as a source in contemporary reviews of the play<sup>421</sup>. Coleridge composed it in 1797, shortly after the publication of the first English translation of *Der Geisterseher*, but it is likely that its techno-supernaturalism was more resonant in the 1810s than it was 15 years earlier, before the arrival of phantasmagoria shows in England. The elaborated complexity and suggestiveness of the scene betrays the author's attention to spectacularity and his desire to produce a largely successful Gothic blockbuster, as well as a tragedy of a superior intellectual class. In this respect, the techno-supernatural allowed him to have the cake and eat it too, using the special effects the audience so eagerly wanted while simultaneously introducing a delicate topic such as necromancy according to his own poetic agenda<sup>422</sup>, and therefore hedging himself against uncomfortable comparison with the Gothic playwrights that he abhorred. Nonetheless, the work's reception proved problematic.

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<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38

<sup>420</sup> Ranger, Paul (1991), p. 78.

<sup>421</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor* claimed the plot 'is adopted from a romance entitled the *Ring and the Well*'. *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 2 (February 1813), p. 60. The reference is to an anonymous novel called *The Ring and the Well; or, The Grecian Princess* (1808), in which a princess uses a magic ring to raise the spirit of her murdered lover.

<sup>422</sup> George Erving, for example, reads the conjuration less as a (techno-)Gothic effect than a sign of Coleridge's youthful Unitarian sympathies, noting how Alvar's language in the scene 'echoes that of "Preternatural Agency" and "Religious Musings", Coleridge's most ambitious Unitarian poems'. Coleridge had actually abandoned Unitarianism in 1805, but traces of this theological movement's influence are still visible in the revised *Remorse*. Erving, George, 'Coleridge as Playwright, in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2009), p. 400.

*Remorse* had a pretty decent run of 20 performances, a good result but probably not what Coleridge had hoped in his wildest dreams. Most relevantly, the tragedy did not receive much critical praise, further fuelling his aversion to the theatre world (as demonstrated by his later attack against Maturin's *Bertram*, chosen instead of his own play *Zaploya*). Coleridge's desire to revive the fame of the high tradition of Elizabethan theatre clashed with the comments of reviewers, which generally regarded *Remorse* more or less in the same way as the Romantic tragedies of this period, namely as a good but not excellent work, regrettably unable to resurrect the fortunes of legitimate drama. And what is worse, precisely the sham conjuration came to be regarded by many as the play's principal flaw, possibly indicating that its multi-layered complexity proved quite irksome to most spectators. This was partly due to some incongruities that were too obvious to be ignored, like the fact that the characters recognise the phantasmagoric picture of Alvar, but not the real Alvar who stands and speaks in front of them wearing only a Moorish habit. Moreover, the scene was regarded as a gross violation of moral and religious propriety, thus ironically aligning Coleridge with an author like *Monk Lewis*:

The incantation scene, on which the business of the piece so materially depends, exhibits a singular combination of profaness and absurdity. To address the throne of heaven in solemn mockery; to assume the language of devotion, while his thoughts are intent on artifice; to fall in prostrate adoration before his maker while he is exulting in the anticipated triumph, of successful artifice, was reserved for the dramatic hero of Mr. Coleridge. He addresses the host of heaven, while falsehood mingled with impiety trembles on his lips, and calls upon God to become the partner and the witness of his deception.<sup>423</sup>

*The Monthly Review*, unable to really decipher the scene, wrote that 'there is something so strange, and at the same time so ludicrous, in this incident of mock-magic, on which the whole piece turns, that we cannot but consider it as a capital and insurmountable defect in the story'<sup>424</sup>, while *The Christian Observer* ventured so far as to condemn it precisely because it did not depict a real supernatural event:

We are afraid [...] that the sorcery and conjuration, on which the intrigue of this piece so much depends, will be denounced by the severe censor as below the tragic dignity. It is true that the magic is represented as deceptive merely: but it is exactly for this reason that we consider it as a paltry agent. Were we introduced to a real magician, the scene is laid in times remote enough perhaps to countenance the fiction. We do not revolt at the witches in *Macbeth*: but had Shakespeare thought proper to represent them as designing women successfully practising on the credulity of the usurper, the tragic error of the piece had been in a great measure lost, and its whole effect deteriorated.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 2 (February 1813), pp. 61-2.

<sup>424</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 71 (May 1813), p. 85.

<sup>425</sup> *The Christian Observer*, vol. 12 (April 1813), quoted in Jackson, J. R. de J. (ed.), *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Critical Heritage Volume 1, 1794–1834*, London and New York: Routledge (2002 [1968]), p. 149.

The harshest judgement came, however, from *The Critical Review*:

Of the machinery, the scene of the murder of Isidore in the cavern, is gloomy and terrible, but nothing can be conceived more outré and ill-placed, nothing less calculated to produce any effect in point of interest or pathos, than the clumsy and unnecessary contrivance of the mock incantation. It tends to no end or purpose whatever; and Macbeth's three Witches have just as much to do with the progress and denouement of the plot, as this silly and puerile piece of spectacle. The author was aware of the nakedness of the plot he had chosen, but knew not how to remedy the radical evil. After this, it is evident that in our opinion the whole reputation of this piece must hereafter rest upon its merits in respect of poetical sentiment and expression; and (in this point of view only) we think it will always maintain a respectable station on the shelves of a dramatic library, long after it shall have ceased to figure on the boards of a theatre.<sup>426</sup>

*The Critical Review* regarded the mock conjuration as an example of spectacle for spectacle's sake, treating it like the genuine supernatural scenes in the plays of Boaden and Lewis, namely as inappropriate and basically pointless. And even worse, the remark that the play was better for the closet than the stage sounded like a death sentence for Coleridge's ambitions, a frustration he came to share with other great Romantic writers. In another stinging passage, *The Theatrical Inquisitor* dismissed *Remorse* as ultimately unworthy of being a tragedy:

Had not this production aspersed the dignity of tragedy, but appeared under the form of *spectacle* or a *melo-drame*, it might have been regarded, by the impartial critic, as somewhat superior in its construction to many of its predecessors. The incantation scene would have been sufficiently effective in a piece of three acts [...]. But as it is, Mr. Coleridge is neither so entertaining as Reynolds, nor so correct or poetical as many unfortunate bards, who attempted to attain the honours of tragic excellence, long before the Committee of Drury undertook the superintendance of the drama.<sup>427</sup>

Legitimate drama seems therefore to have failed to properly deal with the techno-supernatural and its multifaceted nuances. This attempted compromise satisfied nobody.

The debacle of the techno-supernatural became even more obvious in *Montoni; or, The Phantom* (Covent Garden, 1820), an unconventional three-act Gothic tragedy by Irish playwright Richard Lalor Sheil, who in the late 1810s produced some notable regular dramas for the Covent Garden, such as *The Apostate* (1817), *Bellamira; or, The Fall of Tunis* (1818) and *Evadne; or, The Statue* (1819). This plot, vaguely inspired by Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, tried to follow the steps of Baillie and Coleridge in remodulating the supernatural on the basis of recent scientific and technological breakthroughs. It unfolds in Calabria (like *Urania*), where a Baron, Roderic, has been reportedly killed by his older brother's son Sebastian. The real murderer, however, is the late lord's younger brother Montoni (played by great Shakespearean actor William Charles Macready), who now lives in isolation in a dreary palace, surrounded by sinister rumours of the ghost of the former

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<sup>426</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 3 (January 1813), p. 404.

<sup>427</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 2 (February 1813), p. 63.

Baron appearing at night ‘wrapp’d in the folds of its sepulchral robe’<sup>428</sup>. In great Gothic fashion, the curtain rises on a moonlight night, where a gathering of knights, monks and nuns is taking place in the cemetery of a ruined monastery on the seashore. A sepulchre appears at the centre of the stage, with ‘Roderic’ written upon it. It is a prayer ceremony organised by Gregorio, the abbot of the monastery of St. Catherine, who wishes to ‘lay the horrible spirit’ and restore peace to the country. Also Montoni arrives and engages in a conversation with Gregorio, who suspects him to be the real murderer of Roderic. In order to see his reaction, the abbot gives a detailed and emphatic description of the ghost that he claims to have seen himself:

A white-robed shape, with all  
Death's stilly and majestic circumstance,  
Moved down yon moonlight vistas; in its hand  
Shone the pale radiance of a lurid night.  
As with a slow and solemn gliding on,  
It trod the vaulted church-yard; from its lips  
That did not, by their movement, seem to frame  
The cold articulation, came such sounds,  
That every stiffen'd artery lost its function,  
And mine iced blood stood still. You tremble.

This description does something to Montoni's soul and Gregorio, who sees his agitation as a confirmation of his suspicions, proposes to conjure up the troubled ghost of Roderic in front of everyone to make it pronounce the name of the murderer. Montoni is initially very reluctant, but eventually gives in to Gregorio's pressure and consents to take part in the ritual. The clock tolls one and, as the tension mounts to an almost unbearable level, Gregorio summons the ghost ‘with the voice of holy conjuration’. His words recall the typical entrancing use of the verbal medium by phantasmagorists and showmen alike:

You stand beside the sepulchre of him  
Who bore the self-same blood within his heart;  
Whose lips from the same mother pressed the food  
Of his young life, and who was early knit  
In nature's honest friendship to your soul.  
He was your brother, and you apprehend  
That sweet word's tender sanctity. Montoni,  
He was your brother, and upon your head,  
When with a younger's portion you were left,  
In listless arm-encumbered idleness,  
To count the marbles of his halls, he flung  
His boundless bounty; now, my lord, beside  
The sepulchre that holds in its cold breast  
His relics of mortality you stand.—

<sup>428</sup> All quotations from the text are from Sheil, Richard Lalor, *The Phantom*, in John Larpent Plays, The Huntington Library, San Marino: California. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Eighteenth Century Drama [Last accessed: 20 July 2020].

But hold; the hour is near—soon will the clock  
Summon the dead, that to the living peals  
A warning that they shall not long be so:  
The moment comes; the sepulchre begins  
To heave its ponderous masses from the earth,—  
Behold the spectre rises!

(*The clock tolls one—MONTONI recoils.*)

Terrified and in the throes of ecstasy, Montoni imagines to see a ‘giant phantom’ in Roderic's unfolded grave (while all those present – and the audience – do not see anything in it) and tries to follow it, but he falls senseless into the arms of his attendants. Gregorio and the knights thus definitively understand that Montoni is not unrelated to the murder as he claims. This imaginary phantasmagoria is, therefore, a further development of the false ghost scenes in *Orra* and *Remorse*, an externally induced hallucination that serves to unveil the deepest recesses of the murderer's mind. As in the other techno-Gothic plays, also in *Montoni* ‘human emotion takes on an almost supernatural power, since it can, with the support of only the flimsiest of illusions, corrode otherwise rational minds’<sup>429</sup>. There is also a further fascinating aspect in that, in the end, the ghost that supposedly haunted Roderic's grave is revealed to be Montoni himself, unconsciously suffering from sleepwalking<sup>430</sup>. As his vassal Calatro tells him: ‘You are the very spectre that you feared’. Curiously, Montoni's nocturnal wanderings closely resemble the apparitions of the Bleeding Nun's ghost:

*The Clock of the Castle tolls.*

*Montoni enters with a lamp, and dress'd in a long white robe – his hair is uplifted on his head – his face is livid - his lips and eyes motionless – a dagger is in a loose girdle round his waist – he lays the lamp upon the grave.*

Faced with the truth, Montoni cannot bear the pain and commits suicide. In this play, therefore, the psychologisation of the supernatural is brought to the extreme level, with ghost and ghost seer being one. Gregorio's phantasmagoria show does not need special effects but only the suggestive power of words, as the apparitions are already present in the killer's superstitious and remorseful mind. Unfortunately, the audience did not respond well, and *Montoni's* first night was also its last. Reviewers ruthlessly dismissed it as a piece good only for an illegitimate theatre, implicitly comparing it to those productions that employed the real supernatural: *The London Literary Gazette* unflatteringly called it ‘a melo-dramatic thing’ brought out ‘[i]n rivalry to the theatres of the outskirts’<sup>431</sup>, whereas *The European Magazine* thought it was ‘not suited to the English taste, or the Covent-garden stage and ‘in plot, only fit for a second rate *Parisian Theatre du Spectacle*, or a

<sup>429</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N., and Gamer, Michael (2003), p. xx.

<sup>430</sup> ‘Somnambulism and other nocturnal deceptions frequently lend their aid to the formation of such *phantasmata* as are formed in this middle state, betwixt sleeping and waking’. Scott, Walter (1830), p. 8.

<sup>431</sup> *The London Literary Gazette* (6 May 1820), p. 302.

*moving* melo-drame at Sadler's Wells, where the New River is happily close at hand to throw cold water on its horrors'<sup>432</sup>.

At this point, the difficulties that the authors faced in bringing the psychological or techno-Gothic onto legitimate stage are more than evident. As Robert F. Geary suggested, this direction 'was not taken by enough writers of talent to keep the Gothic mode vital; and when, belatedly the Gothic supernatural was decisively psychologized, the resulting transformation was so radical as to end the Gothic as a distinctive mode'<sup>433</sup>. This is why Shiel's *Montoni* can be considered not only the last techno-Gothic drama, but the last full-fledged Gothic drama<sup>434</sup>. Apparently, the general public had failed to appreciate the deeper psychological, scientific and even meta-theatrical implications of the techno-supernatural. As *The Theatrical Inquisitor* remarked,

In considering the subject of this play, too much of its theatrical effect is made to depend upon *impression*, an expedient which can never be used as the basis of a popular drama. The philosophy of *Montoni's* conception in act I., at the tomb of Roderic, may be capable of proof, but the minds of an audience are not among those we should select to receive its illustrations.<sup>435</sup>

Shiel's subtle manipulation of techno-Gothic formulas went completely lost on an unsophisticated audience who was hardly capable of distinguishing the various levels of supernaturalism they saw on stage<sup>436</sup>. And if they did, they seemed more prone to prefer those purely fantastic and entertainment-driven, profit-oriented pieces, especially melodramas, where straightforward supernaturalism was given free rein. This was indeed the only aspect of the Gothic that survived and continued to evolve in the following decades, making the fortune precisely of the illegitimate theatres, to the detriment of the patent stages' legal and aesthetic primacy.

The concept of phantasmagoria itself soon lost its ostensible didactic and rationalising purpose to become associated with the phantasmagoric flights of the Romantic poetic imagination and, ultimately, with unrestrained and unchecked uses of the supernatural. Suffice it to recall *Fantasmagoriana, ou Recueil d'Histoires d'Apparitions, de Spectres, Revenans, etc.* (1812) the French title of Johann August Apel and Friedrich Laun's *Das Genspensterbuch*, a collection of German ghost stories famously read aloud by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, John Polidori and Claire Clairmont during their legendary sojourn at the Villa Diodati near Geneva

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<sup>432</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 77 (May 1820), p. 429.

<sup>433</sup> Geary, Robert F. (1992), p. 84.

<sup>434</sup> 'After 1820 the gothic drama tended to dwindle at the patent houses and the remaining spasmodic entertainments of the genre were given in such theatres as the Olympic, the Royal Coburg and the Lyceum'. Ranger, Paul (1991), p. 146.

<sup>435</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 16 (June 1820), p. 307.

<sup>436</sup> This had also been the original problem with Schiller's *Der Geisterseher*: as a critic of *The Monthly Mirror* observed, 'the structure of the history is too exclusively *German*, for the approbation of English readers, to whom the work, in general, will, we fear, prove tedious and incomprehensible'. *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 9 (May 1800), p. 285.

in the summer of 1816<sup>437</sup>. Intriguingly, a review of the work in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* steadily defended the untrammelled use of the supernatural in literature and rejected the assumptions of scientists like John Ferrier that apparitions are nothing more than optical illusions and hallucinations, affirming the inherently anti-rational principle that not everybody was willing to see Gothic terrors being entirely dispelled by science and technology:

The empire of imagination was some time ago exposed to all the horrors of an invasion, which appeared destined to wrest the sceptre of one of its most extensive and fertile provinces for ever from the grasp of its sovereign. What other effect could possibly have been predicted to ensue from an essay, written by a physician, at the commencement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the avowed design of affording an easy practical solution at once applicable to all cases of spectral appearances, invisible spiritual agency, and magical delusion, past and to come? We would by no means be thought to undervalue the advantages of so great a discovery, of so valuable a conquest. To be enabled to cross a church-yard, planted with yew-trees, “in the very witching time of night,” of a cold, damp, gusty, gloomy December, without any *worse* apprehension than that of mere mortal rheumatism or asthma—or to descend from the highest to the lowest apartments of an ancient family mansion alone, when all the rest of the house is asleep, without a candle, under the persuasion that one runs no *greater* risk than that of breaking a neck or a leg over the staircases—this indeed were a blessing, the full extent and magnitude of which we are far from being so philosophically hardy as to deny. But then, when we came to reflect on all that must be sacrificed for the attainment of such beatitude, supposing it to be attainable,—the thrilling delight of a ghost-story by a Christmas fire-side,—the more exalted sense which a lurking tendency to superstitious apprehension adds to our relish of the sublime in poetry,—nay, the very pleasure which in some unaccountable manner mingles itself with the real terrors which situations such as above described are calculated to engender,—we found ourselves necessarily driven to the conclusion, that the exemption, which before appeared so enviable, might be too dearly purchased.<sup>438</sup>

A few pages later, the reviewer, who professes himself a supporter of ‘*anti-ferriarism*’, reiterates the concept even more clearly, in what appears as a total rebuttal of Enlightenment rationalism:

For the sake of that noble faculty of our souls, the imagination, we are not ashamed to confess, that we take greater pleasure in hearing of one story of the sort which defies the attempt of a probable natural solution, than twenty of which the physician or moralist may pique himself upon being to finish the explanation. There is too much philosophy stirring in our days, and has been for this last century at least; too much for the free indulgence of our poetical power. Nay, we are not sure but we may call the whole world at present a world of accountants and botanists, with at least as much injustice as Bonaparte used to call this nation a nation of shopkeepers. We cordially wish, for the happiness of the rising generation, that some things at least may still remain unexplained for their forces to work upon.<sup>439</sup>

It does not come as a surprise then that the original technological meaning of phantasmagoria ‘seemed to drop away altogether’<sup>440</sup>, with the Romantic episteme seeking to protect the nocturnal

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<sup>437</sup> In one of the tales, Friederich Schulze's ‘The Death's Head’, a real ghost suddenly interrupts a necromantic spectacle (although only the conjurer can see it), in a scene that somehow subverts the techno-supernatural of Schiller's *Der Geisterseher*.

<sup>438</sup> *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 3 (August 1818), pp. 589-90.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 595.

<sup>440</sup> Castle, Terry (1995), p. 144.

side of life from the all-encompassing light of science. This attitude was accompanied by a growing dissatisfaction with what a writer of *The Critical Review* called ‘pseudo-marvellous’, questioning the poetic appropriateness of such a device: ‘What should we think of the play of Hamlet, if the ghost proved in the end to be the image of a magic lanthorn?’<sup>441</sup> In fact, years after the first craze for phantasmagorias had subsided, this device came to be employed in unpatented theatres to represent genuine ghostly apparitions like those of the Flying Dutchman's ship, its original purpose thus being ironically turned upside down. While science kept progressing, on stage the techno-supernatural undoubtedly lost its battle against the real supernatural, anticipating the way in which legitimate theatres lost their battle against the illegitimate.

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<sup>441</sup> Appendix to *The Critical Review*, vol. 7 (January – April 1806), p. 522.

### 3. The rise of melodrama and the fantastic mode

#### 3.1 *Melodrama's Gothic roots*

Melodrama first emerged at the close of the eighteenth century and soon established itself as the most characteristic genre of the Romantic theatre, dominating the following century like no other dramatic form. It was, in many ways, the natural culmination of all the changes that had been taking place in the European theatre for several decades, with England being at the forefront. Melodrama presented itself as a kind of highly sentimental drama in which dialogues were accompanied by an evocative, emotionally-charged orchestral music that punctuated the various phases of the dramatic action, like a soundtrack *ante litteram*. As an early reviewer noted, '[t]he composer tells the story as well as the author'<sup>442</sup>. Instead of singing, as in opera, the actors spoke in ordinary, non-literary language. In addition to this, early melodrama borrowed several key elements from pantomime, such as a sustained use of mute gesture, wordless action and acrobatic feats. The typical melodramatic plot aimed at stirring the audience's emotions through exaggeration and sensationalism, relying on a series of codified situations and stock characters: the *dramatis personae* habitually included a noble and brave hero (often in trouble – oppressed orphans were initially very common), a cunning and wicked villain of aristocratic origins (usually the best developed character, the one that best embodies the essentially violent conflicts of melodrama), a persecuted young beauty, a faithful servant (who assists the hero or the heroine and serves the purpose of comic relief, establishing a close link with the audience) and a (sometimes clownish) accomplice of the villain. The story usually unfolded as a clash between neatly defined forces of good and evil that always culminated in a happy ending where virtue triumphed over vice and justice over injustice. Its climax usually coincided with a last-minute rescue of the heroine from a situation of extreme danger or an exciting scene in which the villain meets retribution. Fast-moving episodes, physical disaster, graphic violence and moral pathos all concurred to keep the audience on its toes. Visual spectacle was of course an essential ingredient: melodramas often relied on spectacular stage effects, complex mechanical devices and new technologies that were used, among other things, to reproduce sensational natural phenomena (storms, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, forest fires, floods and so on) as well as jaw-dropping otherworldly appearances (ghosts, goblins, fairies, fiends, demons and so on). The climatic moments of melodramas were often musical dumbshows representing exciting combats, violent acts or breathtaking supernatural manifestations or conflicts<sup>443</sup>. Indeed, one of the defining devices of melodrama was the *tableau vivant*, that is a

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<sup>442</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 14 (November 1802), p. 338.

<sup>443</sup> In a period in which theatrical audiences were very noisy and unruly, to the point that performances often

static representation (usually occurring at the beginning or at the end) in which actors literally froze on stage, holding their pose to crystallise an intense emotion into a stage picture that visually summarised the ongoing narrative or symbolically enhanced the impact of a certain scene or action<sup>444</sup>.

Rather than a new genre, therefore, melodrama appeared as a hybrid entity, a motley assemblage of different dramatic forms and tactics that questioned traditional genre divisions<sup>445</sup>. In its proudly exhibited irregularity and vitality, melodrama embodied a reaction against the rusty schemes of Enlightenment Neoclassicism, aspiring less to artistic greatness than box-office success. With regard to subject matter, melodrama offered stereotyped narratives and cheap thrills that could easily appeal to urban working-class and lower-middle-class audiences that wished to be entertained without too much thinking. In his groundbreaking book *English Melodrama* (1965), Michael Booth explained the allure of melodrama thus:

Essentially, melodrama is a dream world inhabited by dream people and dream justice, offering audiences the fulfilment and satisfaction found only in dreams. An idealization and simplification of the world of reality, it is in fact the world its audiences want but cannot get. Melodrama is therefore a dramatization of this second world, an allegory of human experience dramatically ordered, as it should be rather than as it is. In this world life is uncomplicated, easy to understand, and immeasurably exciting. [...] The world of melodrama is thus a world of certainties where confusion, doubt, and perplexity are absent; a world of absolutes where virtue and vice coexist in pure whiteness and pure blackness; and a world of justice where after immense struggle and torment good triumphs over and punishes evil, and virtue receives tangible material rewards. The superiority of such a world over the entirely unsatisfactory everyday world hardly needs demonstration, and it is this romantic and escapist appeal that goes a long way to explain the enduring popularity of melodrama. [...] Audiences could enjoy crime and villainy and horror in the full knowledge that the bright sword of justice would always fall in the right place, and that the bags of gold would always be rewarded to the right people. Evil can only destroy itself, no matter how hard it tries.<sup>446</sup>

It is perhaps superfluous to emphasise how closely the narrative patterns and thematic motifs of

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degenerated into loud quarrels and violent brawls, pantomimic moments had the rare ability to fix spectators' attention and hold them in silent suspense. As playwright Thomas Dibdin wrote in his *Harlequin Hoax; or, a Pantomime Proposed* (Lyceum, 1814), only pantomimes had the power to keep the audience 'very silent and attentive'. Quoted in Nicoll, Allardyce, *A History of English Drama 1660-1900*, 6 vols., vol. 4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1965-7), p. 10. This was even truer during silent supernatural moments such as those in *Hamlet* or *The Castle Spectre*, during which the audience seemed to be caught up in an ecstasy.

<sup>444</sup> Such static representations were somehow akin to the *poses plastiques* in Andrew Ducrow's popular equestrian shows at Astley's Amphitheatre, one of London's most famous illegitimate playhouses.

<sup>445</sup> According to Franco Marucci, 'the key words of the aesthetics of melodrama might be the following: *popular* as a genre, *hybrid* as for structure, mixing tragedy, comedy, pantomime and spectacle; *sensational* in plot; *conventional* in its characters; *sentimental*, *pathetic* and *optimistic* as to type, since it closes happily with virtue rewarded and vice punished'. Marucci, Franco, *Authors in Dialogue: Comparative Essays in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century English Literature*, Peter Lang: Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, New York, Wien (2020), p. 162.

<sup>446</sup> Booth, Michael R., *English Melodrama*, London: Herbert Jenkins (1965), p. 14. Another fundamental study of the genre is Brooks, Peter, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New York: Columbia University Press (1985).

melodrama resemble those of Gothic fiction<sup>447</sup>. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of different types of melodrama, such as romantic, oriental, sensational, domestic, nautical, military, historical and so on (though sometimes a single work combined different styles and features and could not be easily ascribed to only one category), but all have in common the fact that they emerged out of Gothic fiction. As a matter of fact, the Gothic constitutes a strong link between English theatre and melodrama's homeland, namely France. The play commonly regarded as the earliest example of melodrama is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (written in 1762 and first performed in Lyon in 1770), a short 'Scène lyrique' with music composed by talented amateur musician Horace Coignet to underline the story's change of moods. Rousseau himself defined his work as a 'mélo-drame', although the word 'melodramma' had already been used in seventeenth-century Italy for revivals of ancient Greek tragedies (the term 'melodrama' itself comes from the Greek *melos*, meaning song or music, and the Greek *drama*, signifying action)<sup>448</sup>. In *Pygmalion*, spoken dialogues were alternated with orchestral music and mime, with actors verbally communicating what had just been expressed non-verbally in a way that clearly anticipated the typical tactics of melodrama. However, it was in the 1790s – exactly the same period when the Gothic became a major international phenomenon – that the genre really exploded in France. Translations of famous English Gothic novels and the so-called *romans noirs* and *romans frénétiques*, their French equivalents, furnished the emerging melodrama with the ideal subjects and themes for a rude, largely illiterate audience looking for visceral excitement and naive entertainment. In particular, Gothic melodrama became the main reason behind the huge popularity of *fin-de-siècle* French minor theatres, where thrilling action, emotional agony, gory violence and supernatural hideousness were part of the commonplace repertoire.

It is important to remark that in Paris there was a patent system similar to that in force in London, with the Comédie Française having the monopoly on the performance of all spoken drama in French (while the Académie Royale de Musique and the Comédie-Italienne had the monopoly on opera and Italian comedy, respectively)<sup>449</sup>. In January 1791, the National Assembly passed a law

<sup>447</sup> With some notable differences, as Jeffrey N. Cox pointed out: 'Where the Gothic offered the potentially radical pattern of confinement giving way to liberation, of static order of church, lord, and patriarch opening up to the young lovers, the melodrama enacts the restoration of traditional order. The melodrama no longer stages the erotic combat between lovers and a villain-hero. It turns to orphan girls, deaf and disguised fathers, and blind boys; and it stages the discovery of lost domestic bonds, the reunification of families. Its villains are no longer the deeply ambivalent figures of the Gothic but instead clear-cut heavies who thus help to dispel the moral ambiguities the Gothic explored': Cox, Jeffrey N., 'Ideology and Genre in the British Antirevolutionary Drama of the 1790s', in *British Romantic Drama: Historical and Critical Essays*, Terence Allan Hoagwood and Daniel P. Watkins, London: Associated University Presses (1998), p. 98.

<sup>448</sup> Pisani, Michael V., *Music for the Melodramatic Theatre in Nineteenth-Century London and New York*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press (2014), p. 14.

<sup>449</sup> There was, however, a notable difference between London's patent theatres and Paris's Royal theatres as regards their legal status: 'Officially both were extensions of the royal court – created to entertain their monarch but authorised to perform to a paying public – but the London Theatres Royal had always enjoyed greater autonomy

that dismantled this long-standing system of privilege and removed all legal restrictions regarding the opening and running of public theatres<sup>450</sup>. Minor theatres such as the Théâtre de la Gaîté, the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique and the Théâtre Patriotique thus acquired more and more prominence and engaged in keen competition. These venues were mostly located on the Boulevard du Temple (a street that extended from the Place de la République to the Place Padeloup), later infamously nicknamed 'Boulevard du Crime' due to the sensational blood-and-thunder pieces usually performed there<sup>451</sup>. This soon became the city's centre of popular entertainment. As in London, the smaller theatres had learned to creatively circumvent the pre-Revolutionary ban on speech and became fecund ground for dramaturgical experiments. Their signature genre was pantomime, which at the end of the century turned from being a primarily comic form to embrace more serious (and after the Revolution more political) tones and themes, ultimately encompassing the rising Gothic mode<sup>452</sup>. At one point, it even became vocal: spoken parts had been introduced as early as the 1780s, but it was after the 1791 law that pantomimes developed into the so-called *pantomimes dialoguées*, the most direct precursors of melodrama:

There were played for several years in Paris, under the bizarre title of *pantomimes dialoguées*, an assemblage of crude scenes, abortive and monstrous; they were as disorderly as a riot, as mysterious as a conspiracy, as loud and murderous as a battle. They always contained spectres, caverns, dungeons, and marvels, in short, all that is peculiar to an art form in its infancy.<sup>453</sup>

The form was eventually re-elaborated by René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, the most talented playwright of the boulevard theatres, who blended pantomime techniques and operatic features to

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than those of Paris, because Charles II granted the patents as a form of property rather than privilege. [...] This also meant that questions of disputed ownership were settled in law courts rather than by direct appeals to the king or to the head of his household, the Lord Chamberlain'. Taylor, George (2000), p. 25.

<sup>450</sup> This chaotic situation lasted until 1807, when Napoleon signed a decree at Moscow reducing the number of licensed theatres to eight, four state-supported primary theatres (the Comédie Française, the Opéra, the Odéon and the Opéra-Comique) and four secondary theatres (the Ambigu-Comique, the Gaîté, the Vaudeville and the Variétés), each with a peculiar repertoire. The Ambigu-Comique and the Gaîté held the monopoly over melodrama, which thus obtained legal status as a genre. Later, after Napoleon's deposition and the disruption of the Moscow decree, also other venues, such as the Porte Saint-Martin and the Gymnase Dramatique, were granted special licenses for specific types of exhibition (though regulations remained rather tight). See Pao, Angela C., *The Orient of the Boulevards: Exoticism, Empire, and Nineteenth-Century French Theatre*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1998), pp. 23-4.

<sup>451</sup> Stuart, Roxana, *Stage Blood: Vampires of the Nineteenth-Century Stage*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press (1994), p. 43.

<sup>452</sup> As Frank Rahill illustrates, starting from the late 1770s pantomime underwent a true reform: 'At the end of that decade costumes were varied and elaborate; dank dungeons, towering castle keeps, and wild, mountainous landscapes were being reproduced with some measure of realism; storms and tempests were counterfeited after a fashion; the assault of fortresses went forward with brilliance; machines were called into play for the manipulation of various magical effects in fairytale spectacles; "Sieur" Torrè introduced fireworks in pantomime; and military evolutions climaxed by pitched battles alternated with ecclesiastical processions and tournaments in full chivalric panoply. It was thanks largely to these eye-filling stage settings, this bustle and variety, that pantomime—and melodrama after it—won and held the patronage of Boulevard audiences'. Rahill, Frank, *The World of Melodrama*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press (1967), p. 23.

<sup>453</sup> Nodier, Charles, Introduction to Pixérécourt's *Théâtre Choisi*, trans. quoted in Mabary, Judith A., *Contextualizing Melodrama in the Czech Lands: In Concert and on Stage*, Abingdon: Routledge (2020), no page numbers.

create the first true melodrama, *Victor; ou, l'Enfant de la Forêt* (Théâtre de l'Ambigue-Comique, 1797), a close adaptation of François-Guillaume Ducray-Duminil's eponymous *roman noir* of 1796, in turn inspired by Radcliffe's romances and Schiller's *Die Räuber*<sup>454</sup>. It was the first of a long series of *mélo-drames* (though the genre eluded unique definition – *Victor* itself was originally advertised as a ‘drame, en trois actes, en prose et à grand spectacle’) that drew massive audiences and with time also gained critical respect, maturing into an independent form with a well-defined identity. The Boulevard du Temple affirmed itself as the official home of melodrama and Pixérécourt, nicknamed the ‘Corneille of the Boulevard’, went on to become one of the most successful and prolific authors of his day. Of the over 120 plays he produced (either alone or in collaboration), 59 were melodramas. Among his most applauded efforts in this genre, it is worth mentioning *Rosa, ou l'Hermitage du Torrent* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1800), *Coelina, ou L'Enfant du Mystère* (Théâtre de l'Ambigue-Comique, 1800), *Le Pèlerin blanc, ou les Orphelins du Hameau* (Théâtre de l'Ambigue-Comique, 1801), *L'homme à Trois Visages, ou le Proscrit de Venise* (Théâtre de l'Ambigue-Comique, 1801), *Tékéli, ou, le Siège de Montgatz* (Théâtre de l'Ambigue-Comique, 1803), *La Forteresse du Danube* (Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, 1805), *Le Solitaire de la Roche Noire* (Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, 1806) and *L'Ange tutélaire, ou le Démon femelle* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1808), many of which had hundreds of performances<sup>455</sup>. Two of his plays, *Le Château des Apennins, ou le Fantôme vivant* (Théâtre de l'Ambigue-Comique, 1798) and the unacted *Le Moine, ou la Victime de l'Orgueil* (1798), are outright adaptations of two famous English Gothic novels, respectively Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*.

As a matter of fact, English Gothic novels were important sources for early French melodramatists, who ‘showed themselves far more mettled in their sensationalism than the English theatre’<sup>456</sup>. Given that there were very few talented French Gothic writers, translations and adaptations from the English appeared in great numbers and were generally aimed at emphasising the genre's most

<sup>454</sup> The troubled history of the play's conception is described by Rahill: ‘*Victor* was planned and written as a musical drama or *drame lyrique* with a score composed by another Nancy citizen, one Solié. As such it was accepted at the Favart and had got as far along as rehearsal at this musical house when the manager suddenly decided to lay it aside in favor of another version of the Ducray-Duminil romance of the same name from which it had been taken. Thereupon the indignant Pixérécourt took his script to the Ambigu where it was mounted as a *drame en prose et à grand spectacle* without any change save the suppression of the songs. *Victor* made an acceptable melodrama as it would have made an acceptable musical drama’. Rahill, Frank (1967), p. 28.

<sup>455</sup> Pixérécourt's melodramas ‘were to set such a high standard of popularity that when, as in the case of *Christophe Colomb* (1815), a play did not survive one hundred and fifty performances, it was adjudged a failure. Five hundred was average. [...] At times, Pixérécourt's name could have been seen on the billboards of as many as three Parisian theatres simultaneously’. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>456</sup> Summers, Montague (1968), p. 230. The supernatural was fully embraced by the Boulevard melodramatists: ‘Ghosts and demons, however, were eagerly seized upon by the rank and file of melodramatists, the gothic school and the Germans providing material and inspiration. Redactions of various spine-chilling tales and legends followed one another on stages along the “Boulevard du Crime”—the werewolf, the bleeding nun of Lindenburg, the doppelgänger, the diabolic Duke of Normandy (whence came Scribe's libretto for *Robert le diable*), and others’. Rahill, Frank (1967), p. 59.

extreme aspects in order to please the bloodthirsty French public<sup>457</sup>. *The Monk*, in particular, proved an absolute favourite, with at least eight stage renditions produced between 1797 and 1800 (Pixérécourt's own version was rejected precisely because there already were too many dramatisations of the novel performing in Paris<sup>458</sup>). As to its diabolic supernaturalism, boulevard theatres had none of the scruples and limitations of London's patent theatres, where *The Monk* was considered basically unrepresentable in its original form. In the French capital, instead, rather faithful adaptations of it continued to be staged for decades. The first in chronological order was M.C. Camaille Saint-Aubin's *Le Moine* (Théâtre de l'Émulation, 1797), which curiously opened a few days after *The Castle Spectre*'s London premiere. This work is particularly emblematic of the subtle but important distinction between Gothic drama and melodrama. It was a five-act comedy with pantomime parts by César Ribié and music by M. Froment which, however, 'proved to be too extravagant and grotesque'<sup>459</sup> and utterly failed. As a standard drama, it was excessively outrageous in every aspect: among its oddities there was the insertion of a ballet in a dungeon scene and a concluding spectacle meant to represent Milton's Hell. Years later, in 1802, Saint-Aubin refurbished the play as a three-act melodrama for the Théâtre de la Gaieté, and in this version the piece had a considerable success. The nightmarish ending remained unchanged, in keeping with boulevard melodrama's great liberty with respect to the supernatural:

*Matilde, montée sur un char figurant un monstre dont les griffes enlèvent le moine par les cheveux: le théâtre change; et représente l'enfer: le moine tombe dans un gouffre de feu: des diables le regardent avec avidité: il est apporté sur un char enflammé; les diables s'en saisissent, le tourmentent, ils agitent des torches, se groupent, et une pluie de feu dévore le moine.*

[*Matilde, on a chariot depicting a monster whose claws grab the monk's hair: the scene changes; and represents Hell: the monk falls into an abyss of fire: some devils greedily look at him: he is brought into a flaming chariot; the devils take possession of him, torment him, wave some torches, gather together, and a shower of fire devours the monk.*]<sup>460</sup>

Another diabolical melodrama inspired by *The Monk*, which adapted only some parts of the novel, was Cuvelier de Tyre's box office knockout *C'est le diable, ou la Bohémienne* (Théâtre de

<sup>457</sup> Frederick S. Frank explained that '[i]mported English Gothic titles seem to have held a special attraction for the French, whose national imagination had been conditioned for the horrors of the high Gothic by the bloody excesses of the Revolution. While French novelists and playwrights furnished the revolutionary public with their share of romans noirs, the mainstream of Gallic Gothicism may be seen in the torrent of translations that flowed from the pens of both aristocrats and citizens'. Frank, Frederick S. (1981), p. 9. The Englishness of the genre was recognised in Louis François Marie Bellin de La Liborlière's parodic novel *La Nuit anglaise* (1799), the 'portrayal of a bourgeois enriched by the Revolution turning to Gothic novels for excitement and distraction'. Hall, Daniel (2005), p. 38.

<sup>458</sup> Pixérécourt, however, did not relent and went on with the production of *La Forêt de Sicile*, a two-act lyric drama in prose staged at Théâtre des Jeunes-Associés in 1798. Summers, Montague (1968), p. 231.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>460</sup> Saint-Aubin, M. C. Camaille, *Le Moine*, mélo-drame en trois actes, à spectacle, terminé par 'L'Enfer de Milton', Paris: Théâtre de la Gaieté (1803), p. 44. Translation mine.

l'Ambigue-Comique, 1798), a true ‘carnival of horrors’<sup>461</sup>, as Frank Rahill appropriately described it, with a series of apparitions redolent of *Hamlet* and *Richard III*. Also in this case the most shocking scene was saved for the end, when Ulric, the attendant of the murderous Count Munster, turns out to be none other than Lucifer himself, condemning the assassin to everlasting tortures in Hell:

(Le théâtre change et représente une caverne infernale, sur les rochers rougis par le feu, on voit grimper des lézards et des dragons, des animaux effrayans pendent du haut de la voûte. (Les démons amènent Munster, dont les mains sont chargées de chaînes rougies et brûlantes, ils le forcent d'adorer Lucifer; Munster semble poursuivi et déchiré par les remords, en voyant les Ombres ensanglantées de son père et de sa mère, les démons secouent autour de lui leurs serpens; après plusieurs tableaux effrayans, les Ombres disparaissent. Lucifer fait un signal, on apporte un livre enflammé, on force Munster à y lire ces mots qui sont sa propre condamnation: ASSASSINAT, INCESTE, PARRICIDE; à un second signal, un énorme dragon ailé sort de terre; à cet aspect Munster est épouvanté, on l'entraîne, on le reverse sur le dos du dragon, les démons s'y groupent avec lui et ils s'engloutissent tous à travers les flammes dans le fond des enfers.)

[(The scene changes and depicts an infernal cavern, lizards and dragons climb on the fire-reddened rocks, frightful animals hang from the vault. (The demons bring Munster, whose hands carry red and incandescent chains, and force him to adore Lucifer; Munster seems haunted and lacerated by remorse when he sees the bloody Shades of his father and mother, the demons wave their snakes around him; after many dreadful tableaux, the Shades disappear. Lucifer gives a signal, he is brought a flaming book and Munster is forced to read these words that represent his sentence: MURDER, INCEST, PATRICIDE; after a second signal, an enormous winged dragon emerges from the earth; Munster is scared by this apparition, he is dragged and dumped onto the back of the dragon, the demons gather around him and all are engulfed in flames at the bottom of Hell.)]<sup>462</sup>

Gothic themes continued to freely abound in French melodramatic productions well into the nineteenth century, as testified by titles such as Jean-Baptiste-Augustin Hapdé's *Les visions de Macbeth, ou, les Sorcières d'Écosse* (unacted, 1817<sup>463</sup>), Charles Nodier's *Le Vampire* (Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, 1820) and Victor Ducange's *Élodie, ou la Vierge du monastère* (Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, 1822). Eventually, Louis-Marie Fontan's ‘drame fantastique’ *Le Moine* (Théâtre de l'Odéon, 1831, and later at the Porte Saint-Martin), another adaptation of *The Monk*, went so far as to give a sympathetic portrayal of the protagonist Ambrosio and to include Satan himself in the *dramatis personae*, giving him a significant speaking role (whereas in the other versions he appeared only in dumb-show scenes). At boulevard theatres, supernatural horror simply never fell out of fashion; in fact, it became more and more audacious<sup>464</sup>.

<sup>461</sup> Rahill, Frank (1967), p. 27.

<sup>462</sup> De Trye, Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier, *C'est le diable ou la Bohémienne*, Paris: Barba (1798), p. 38. Translation mine.

<sup>463</sup> With regard to this play's complicated history see Toepfer, Karl (2019), pp. 551-2.

<sup>464</sup> Also English commentators noted this phenomenon with amazement. As a critic of *The New Monthly Magazine* asked himself: ‘Where are the descendants of the Encyclopedists and the worshippers of the goddess Reason, when Parisian readers and audiences are running mad after “loups-garoux” and “apparitions nocturnes,” “cadavres mobiles,” &c., all “puisees dans les sources reeles”?’ Thirty years ago, what book-seller in the Palais Royal would

### 3.2 Melodrama at the legitimate theatres, between Gothic and 'realism'

Melodrama officially arrived in England at the dawn of the nineteenth century thanks to Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*, an adaptation of Pixérécourt's *Coelina, ou l'Enfant du Mystère* produced at Covent Garden in 1802. This work not only established the new genre firmly on English soil but also signalled the beginning of a larger trend. If the 1790s were characterised by a frenzied circulation of German or Germanised works, the new century marked a gradual shift in interest towards French literature. Theatre was especially affected by this change, and as a result 'the French almost completely supplanted the German drama in the minds and hearts of English dramatists'<sup>465</sup>. Apart from a few exceptions, German works almost wholly disappeared from the London stage in favour of French ones, to the point that '[f]ully one-half of the plays written between 1800 and 1850 must have been suggested by Parisian models, and many were literally adapted by English authors'<sup>466</sup>. The proliferation of plays – mainly melodramas – translated from or inspired by French sources of course generated a certain degree of scepticism and anxiety within the still over-conservative (at least in theory) London theatrical establishment. Melodrama, in particular, was denigrated by the great majority of critics as a populist form of entertainment with little or no cultural value, possessing considerable theatrical power in terms of vitality and innovation but hardly rising above mediocrity as serious literature.

An illegitimate dramatic form immediately catapulted onto London's legitimate stage, melodrama soon came to be considered as an inferior and spurious genre that embodied the worst tendencies that were thought to plague the theatre of the time. As a matter of fact, melodramas basically contradicted all the Neoclassical principles that still prevailed in English theatrical criticism, starting from their unconventional mixture of tragic and comic. Their short scenes and two- or three-act structure made them ideal afterpieces, but the fact that they were more popular than the tragedies and comedies at the time offered by Drury Lane and Covent Garden generated discontent. Moreover, the genre's preponderant reliance on songs, music and sound effects questioned the absolute supremacy of the spoken word (actually, music was also deployed in regular tragedies, but 'sparingly and judiciously'<sup>467</sup>) and made it disturbingly akin to the hybrid, non-verbal illegitimate

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have risked the conflagration of his whole stock by exposing for sale any of these superstitious treasures drawn from sacred legends and monkish impositions?'. *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, vol. 7 (1823), p. 140.

<sup>465</sup> Allardyce, Nicoll, (1930), p. 85.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>467</sup> Pisani, Michael V., (2014), p. 43.

forms of the unpatented minor theatres, contributing to blur the boundaries between the two worlds<sup>468</sup>. Predictably, therefore, the multifaceted aspects embodied in the word ‘mélo-drame’ generated considerable confusion. Writing in 1825, James Boaden recalled that ‘no precise idea seemed attached to the compound’<sup>469</sup> (even as regards its spelling there was no general agreement), subtly implying that each author tended to interpret the genre at his own convenience. Indeed, early English melodramas were also alternatively called melodramatic romances, musical romances or even melodramatic operas, a definition that playwright Walley Chamberlain Oulton considered a ‘ridiculous tautology’<sup>470</sup>. A famous cartoon included in the December 1817 issue of *The Satirist* depicted melodrama as a horrible hydra-like monster meant to represent its generic hybridity and promiscuousness. The creature's four heads are those of Richard Brinsley Sheridan (who had died the year before), John Philip Kemble (who retired a few months earlier due to the worsening of his asthma), Joseph Grimaldi (a popular clown) and Harlequin (the most popular character of pantomimes), while under its body some prominent melodramatists of the time – including Thomas Holcroft, Matthew Lewis, Lumley St. George Skeffington, Frederic Reynolds and William Dimond – suckle from its multiple teats. The monster disrespectfully tramples on two scrolls bearing the inscriptions ‘*Shakespear's work*’ and ‘*Regular Drama*’, in what is too obvious a metaphor to need explaining. To an extent, melodrama is depicted as the bastard son of the legitimate theatre, the product of an illicit union<sup>471</sup>. Especially during a time when Napoleon's illegitimate rise to power threatened the whole of Europe, every manifestation of illegitimacy, every real or perceived disruption of the pre-established order acquired considerable political and moral weight and could trigger unpredictable responses<sup>472</sup>. That melodrama found its roots precisely in France of course only added to the ambiguity.

And yet, melodramas never came to be despised as those German and Gothic dramas frequently accused of Jacobinism, immorality and blasphemy. Certainly they never became a rigid taboo as Shakespeare was in the ultra-patriotic France of the same period. This was due to several factors that are often not easy to explain. In particular, critics of yesterday and today still ask themselves

<sup>468</sup> ‘What is especially disturbing [...] is the introduction of incidental music, extensive pantomime and powerful spectacle into what was in the first instance a form of patent house spoken drama’. Cox, Jeffrey N., ‘The Death of Tragedy; or, The Birth of Melodrama’, in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2007), p. 168.

<sup>469</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 331.

<sup>470</sup> Oulton, Walley Chamberlain, *A History of the Theatres of London, 1795-1817*, 3 vols., vol. 2, London: G. Chapple (1818), p. 183.

<sup>471</sup> According to Jane Moody, ‘the grotesque maternity depicted [in *The Satirist's* cartoon] implicitly presents melodramatic authorship as a form of quasi-incestuous sexual deviance’. Moody, Jane (2000), p. 55.

<sup>472</sup> The notorious Old Price Riots at Covent Garden in 1809 were significantly accompanied by a loud protest against foreign works and genres. See Saglia, Diego, ‘Continental Trouble: The Nationality of Melodrama and the National Stage in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, in *The Melodramatic Moment: Music and Theatrical Culture, 1790-1820*, ed. Katherine Hambridge and Joanathan Hicks, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press (2018), p. 46.

whether melodrama is to be considered a radical or conservative genre, or a bit of both. In terms of artistic innovation and effect on traditional theatre-making rules, melodrama was truly 'revolutionary', but at the strictly political level its attitude is more complex to decipher. Although many commentators (notably Charles Nodier) thought that it encouraged liberal democratic views and flirted with the spirit of the Revolution, in early nineteenth-century England melodrama seems to have been implicitly digested as a genre fostering an essentially conservative, even reactionary world-view (in spite of the fact that its first importer Holcroft had a clearly established radical reputation), as Jeffrey N. Cox suggests:

Imported from Napoleonic France, the melodrama becomes a key form of reaffirming the legitimacy of the British monarchical and patriarchal orders, with Revolutionary and especially Napoleonic France being depicted as a threat to both sexual morality and political stability.<sup>473</sup>

As a matter of fact, one might assume that the public enjoyed the vivid, pseudo-Revolutionary thrills of melodrama so much precisely because they knew that, in the end, evil would be punished, violence would end and peace would be restored. The utter rejection of unhappy endings was arguably instrumental to the genre's widespread popularity during a period of intense social upheaval and warfare since they made the audience 'leave the theatre with a sense of justice done, a stronger belief in the universal triumph of good'<sup>474</sup>. In a way, therefore, melodrama epitomised a conservative political agenda and acted as a new moral point of reference in a world where even belief in God was no longer comforting (whereas Gothic drama was often deemed amoral, or even immoral). It was given the fundamental function of entertaining and guiding a disoriented audience, 'exalt[ing] the happiness of a society founded on hierarchical order in the family, religion, and society, and reject[ing] in toto the ideals of the Revolution'<sup>475</sup>. At times it was even explicitly used for patriotic propaganda, as in the case of Richard Cumberland's *A Melo-Dramatic Piece, Being an Occasional Attempt to Commemorate The Death and Victory of Lord Viscount Nelson* (Drury Lane, 1805).

Furthermore, experimentation and hybridisation between genres had been really commonplace in English theatre for quite some time. Melodrama thus probably seemed the natural and inevitable culmination of a process long in the making, a process that in France had been more rapid only because of more favourable conditions:

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<sup>473</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N. (2007), p. 169.

<sup>474</sup> Lacey, Alexander, *Pixérécourt and the French Romantic Drama*, Toronto: Toronto University Press (1928), p. 14.

<sup>475</sup> Przyboś, Julia, *L'Enterprise mélodramatique*, Paris: José Corti (1987), pp. 72-3, English translation in Hunt, Lynn, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, London: Routledge (1992), p. 186. The quasi-spiritual function of melodrama was even stronger in France, as first highlighted by Charles Nodier, who thought that theatre-going had to some extent taken the place of religious worship during a period in which Christianity was banned from public life, even contributing to the lowering of crime rate. Cox, Jeffrey N. (2007), p. 164.

Much of the subject matter of early English melodrama was originally French, and the influence of French melodrama was immense, but it must be stressed that English melodrama was by no means a French product, nor did the French antedate the English. While it is true that the full flowering of melodrama in Paris occurred a few years earlier than in London, with the inevitable imitation of the former by the latter, this is largely because there was no French equivalent of the Licensing Act operative in the early years of the Revolution to prevent a rapid multiplication of theatres presenting whatever they liked.<sup>476</sup>

In England, the movement towards a fully developed form of melodrama was more gradual but no less inexorable. Musical accompaniment started to become increasingly relevant in serious drama since Garrick introduced soft music in the scene of Lear's re-awakening in his production of *King Lear* (1781)<sup>477</sup>, staged at Drury Lane in the same year of Robert Jephson's Gothic piece *The Count of Narbonne*, which in turn was 'in everything but name [...] a melodrama'<sup>478</sup>. In particular, many plays performed during the 1780s and 1790s can be retrospectively seen as pure proto-melodramas, though ostensibly designated as tragedies, comedies, operas and so on. In fact, many of these works are now openly – but technically anachronistically – referred to as melodramas by critics, notwithstanding the fact they did not exactly comply with the genre as it was later understood. John Philip Kemble's *Lodoiska* (Drury Lane, 1794), a pastiche of various French sources, appeared for example as a Gothic 'musical romance' uncertainly hovering between opera and melodrama, with music conveying the agitation of Baron Lovinski's mind in the scene of the Tartar attack on his castle. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Stranger* (Drury Lane, 1798) and *Pizarro* (Drury Lane, 1799), two adaptations of sentimental dramas of Kotzebue's, 'foreshadowed respectively the domestic and historical types of the new form'<sup>479</sup>, while George Colman The Younger's series of Gothic-oriented pieces *The Iron Chest* (Drury Lane, 1796), *Blue-Beard; or, Female Curiosity!* (Drury Lane, 1798) and *Feudal Times; or, The Banquet Gallery* (Drury Lane, 1799) were more or less fortunate attempts to write serious musical dramas that already displayed out-and-out melodramatic features. Matthew Lewis's own *The Castle Spectre* (Drury Lane, 1797) and *Adelmorn, the Outlaw* (Drury Lane, 1801), with their overplayed emotionalism and pantomimic supernatural scenes accompanied by solemn music, were to all intents and purposes thinly disguised melodramas of the same type as those offered on the stages of Paris's Boulevard du Crime. Though styled as tragedies, these works retained very little of tragedy as traditionally intended. The same, of course, goes for the many genre-bending dramatic forms blossoming in the illegitimate playhouses,

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<sup>476</sup> Booth, Michael (1965), p. 45.

<sup>477</sup> Pisani, Michael V. (2014), p. 3.

<sup>478</sup> Dye, William S., Jr., *A Study of Melodrama in England from 1800 to 1840*, State College: The Nittany Printing and Publishing Company (1919), p. 13.

<sup>479</sup> Rahill, Frank (1967), p. 104. Kotzebue could in turn be regarded as the first German melodramatist in that his plays are 'improbable and untrue to nature'. Dye, William S., Jr. (1919), p. 20.

clearly embryonic forerunners of melodrama. Holcroft's importation, therefore, was crucially timely because it gave an official name to something that already existed under various guises. As Bertrand Evans noted,

Pixérécourt adapted English materials under a French label; Holcroft and other British playwrights took over the label and attached it to plays of a kind which had existed for more than thirty years, and which, carried piecemeal to France, had evolved the *mélodrame* to "the complete formula".<sup>480</sup>

The Gothic was the main vehicle for these exchanges, although in rather surprising ways. In order to steer clear of any possible controversy, early English melodramatists tended to ban the most troubling excesses typical of the German Gothic mode in order to be more 'acceptable'. One of these excesses was, of course, the free-wheeling employment of unexplained supernaturalism and demonism which had caused the Gothic plays of the 1790s and early 1800s to be sternly attacked. A controversial theological subject like ghosts, in particular, was difficult to reconcile with productions that aimed at distinguishing themselves from a certain type of horror-oriented fiction and drama as well as the new phantasmagoria shows that ambiguously flirted with the English public's ravenous Gothic appetites. It must be remembered that, in a period when national identity became increasingly grounded in religious affiliation, England firmly held on its Protestantism in stark opposition to France, where Napoleon restored Catholicism in 1801. The (implicitly Catholic) ghosts of the Gothic were therefore not entirely welcome in a genre that sought to avoid any kind of political or religious ambiguity. If regular drama resorted to the pseudo- or techno-supernatural, legitimate melodrama had to find other alternative solutions, at least initially.

Curiously, the first English writer of bona fide melodramas was Thomas Holcroft, an author specialised in comedy who knew French theatre very well but had practically no experience in Gothic writing, if we exclude his drama *The Inquisitor* (Haymarket, 1798), which derived from a French version of Johann Christoph Unzer's *Diego und Leonore* (1775) but also greatly indebted to Radcliffe's *The Italian*<sup>481</sup>. Even more relevantly, Holcroft was a highly controversial figure because of his cultural and political affiliations: along with Robert Bage, Charlotte Smith, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Inchbald, among others, he belonged to a circle of reformist writers that were dubbed as Jacobin by their detractors, and his works, especially his radical novels *Anna St. Ives* (1792) and *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor* (1794-7), had attracted the hatred of the government as well as of a considerable sector of the public opinion because of their alleged affinity to Revolutionary philosophies and democratic sentiments. In 1794 he was even arrested and

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<sup>480</sup> Evans, Bertrand, *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press (1947), p. 164.

<sup>481</sup> Frank, Frederick S. (1981), p. 84.

indicted for high treason, spending eight weeks in Newgate prison before being declared not guilty<sup>482</sup>. However, the infamous stigma he carried ended up affecting his profession and reputation for the rest of his life. Although all charges against him happened to be false, Holcroft started to receive increasingly violent attacks from the conservative pro-Tory press and his plays often met with preventive censorship and the public's loud disapproval. In point of fact, in the preface to his *Knave, or Not?* (Drury Lane, 1798), the author lamented 'the unrelenting opposition which [his] productions [...] have experienced for several years'<sup>483</sup>.

After the hostile reception of *Knave, or Not?*, Holcroft decided to leave England. He spent the years between 1799 and 1802 mostly between Hamburg and Paris. In the French capital he had a true epiphanic theatrical experience that changed his fortunes as a dramatist: he was struck by a performance of Pixérécourt's *Coelina, ou l'Enfant de Mystère* seen at the Ambigu-Comique and immediately decided to bring it to England. His version, the two-act afterpiece *A Tale of Mystery*, subtitled 'A Melo-Drame', opened at Covent Garden on 13 November 1802. The year is not a detail: as Michael Gamer has noted, Holcroft's importation of French melodrama 'occurs during the only window of peace—the Peace of Amiens—of an otherwise solid wall of twenty-three years of warfare'<sup>484</sup>. The genre was the ideal medium to conjugate his political agenda and necessity to find artistic redemption, allowing him to take advantage of the short period in which hostilities between Britain and France had ceased to introduce 'a potentially radical theatrical form that would in the end serve culturally reactionary purposes'<sup>485</sup>. Pixérécourt's *Coelina*, in particular, proved perfect for this purpose since it 'expresse[d] the spirit of the Treaty of Amiens'<sup>486</sup> for the way it seemed to reject the violence of the revolution and support law-and-order values. Simply put, melodrama was a chance for Holcroft to cleanse his reputation and rehabilitate his name with the public. His personal take on the Gothic mode, therefore, goes precisely in this direction.

Actually, Holcroft had already made a sort of dry run with the historical drama *Deaf and Dumb; or, the Orphan Protected* (Drury Lane, 1801), a translation of another French source, Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's *L'abbé de l'Épée* (Théâtre-Français, 1800). It is a sentimental, vaguely Gothic piece about

<sup>482</sup> Holcroft always denied any accusation of championing a bloody revolution in England and claimed that his works were never meant to fuel social divisions. Far from being a dangerous conspirator, he was rather a utopist who advocated peaceful changes to fulfil his idealistic view of a society driven by morality and virtue, with absolutely no interest in spreading violence and unlawfulness. For him, the theatre was nothing more than 'a place where the lower classes would be educated in the behaviours and attitudes that would allow them to function usefully in a rapidly changing society'. Hoeveler, Diane Long, *Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780–1820*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press (2010), p. 136.

<sup>483</sup> Quoted in Holcroft, Thomas, *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself, and Continued to the Time of His Death from His Diary, Notes, and Other Papers*, ed. William Hazlitt, 3 vols., vol. 2, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown (1816), pp. 212-3.

<sup>484</sup> Gamer, Michael (2003), p. 148.

<sup>485</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N., *Romanticism in the Shadow of War: Literary Culture in the Napoleonic War Years*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2014), p. 39.

<sup>486</sup> Hoeveler, Diane Long (2010), p. 153.

Julio (played by Maria Theresa De Camp), a deaf mute orphan – actually the last heir of the noble house of Harancour – abandoned in the streets of Paris by his uncle Daelemont, who is eager to steal his title and possessions. The boy is welcomed into an asylum for handicapped children led by the Abbot Charles-Michel De L'Épée (a real historical figure here impersonated by John Philip Kemble), who understands that the child belongs to a rich family and was deceived by some usurping relative. After a long journey, they finally arrive at Thoulouse, where Julio recognises the palace of his family and De L'Épée helps him to recover his lawful rights as Count of Harancour. The plot develops a skilful mix of rational proceedings (the search for evidence of Julio's identity) and tamed Gothic thrills, proving quite original. The supernatural is basically absent, even if in the very first scene the guilt-stricken Dupré asserts that he saw Julio's 'whole-length portrait' – a prop situated at the centre of the stage – 'start from his frame, and stand before me [...] I believe, it was only a dream.—Perhaps he lives'<sup>487</sup>. The typical Gothic motifs of the haunted portrait and the premonitory dream evoke here a latent supernaturalism that would never actually manifest itself, but that clearly links the play to the tradition of Gothic fiction. Diane Long Hoeveler has commented that

[t]he recourse to a device used in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* suggests not simply the gothicness of the drama, but also its employment of the uncanny, the doubling of the rightful heir with his simulacra or counterfeit, the painting that can walk and exact vengeance on the guilty Dupré much as the ghost of the portrait of Prince Manfred's grandfather does in *Otranto*.<sup>488</sup>

By invoking the well-known repertoire of animated portraits and ghostly relatives, Julio is initially presented as a possibly supernatural figure, although the story evolves then in a totally different direction. In one of his rare attempts to write a non-humorous play, Holcroft tried therefore to reconcile the current vogue for exciting Gothic drama and the need to be morally inoffensive as well as ideologically unassailable. The key role played in the story by the good lawyer Franval is a manifesto of Holcroft's belief in earthly justice, a justice that for him is 'a combination of social benevolence and habitual distrust of appearances'<sup>489</sup> that does not need any paranormal intervention in order to be attained. In his *Memoirs*, Holcroft described the play as 'one of the most beautiful and affecting stories that ever was exhibited on any stage'<sup>490</sup>. It was acted 24 times and kept being popular in subsequent years, also inspiring several chapbook editions. And for the first time in years, reviews were positive.

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<sup>487</sup> Holcroft, Thomas, *Deaf and Dumb; or, the Orphan Protected*, London: J. Ridgway (1801), p. 1.

<sup>488</sup> Hoeveler, Diane Long (2010), p. 145.

<sup>489</sup> Myers, Victoria, 'Law and On-Stage Trial', in *The Encyclopedia of Romantic Literature*, ed. Frederick Burwick, Nancy Moore Goslee and Diane Long Hoeveler, 3 vols., vol. 1, Oxford: Blackwell (2012), p. 783.

<sup>490</sup> Holcroft, Thomas, vol. 3 (1816), p. 173.

The inaugural English melodrama, *A Tale of Mystery*, offered a similar Gothic narrative of stolen inheritance and punishment which, like the original source, dispenses with supernatural devices. The protagonist is again an orphan, the dumb Francisco, who, years before the beginning of the play, was severely injured by assassins and rescued from certain death by the old servant Fiammetta. Years later, he is received by the powerful Bonamo family and reveals he is of noble origins, albeit refusing to give details about his family. The treacherous Count Romaldi and his servant Malvoglio, however, recognise him (they actually are the criminals that threatened his life in the past) and try to kill him, but their machinations fail. After a series of shocking revelations, Romaldi is revealed to be Francisco's brother and the man who originally attempted on his life, which leads to his capture. The melodrama ends with Francisco mercifully shielding Romaldi with his body to protect him from the archers, suggesting a possible reconciliation between the two. Charles Farley's touching interpretation of the dumb Francisco was the most successful part of the piece and became the paradigm for all speechless characters of subsequent melodramas<sup>491</sup>. In a way, the virtuous and highly sensitive disabled character returning from the past took the place of the supernatural revenant coming from the grave as the necessary 'alien' element that disrupts the narrative and brings about the re-establishment of the rightful hierarchical and moral order. Significantly, at the beginning of the play Fiammetta ambiguously describes the returning Francisco as an 'apparition'<sup>492</sup>, whose sudden and unexpected arrival changes the course of events. As for Julio in *Deaf and Dumb*, it is subtly suggested that Francisco is the equivalent of the Gothic figure of the ghost, although his nature is entirely human. His only preternatural powers are his uncommon sensitivity and mercifulness.

*A Tale of Mystery* was positively received by the public and was acted 37 times during the first season, holding the stage for several years thereafter. As Matthew Buckley has noted, in England, like in France, audiences 'were not merely entertained by the play: they were – in a manner that seemed strange, inexplicable, and unquestionably new – riveted by it, gripped and absorbed by it, moved and terrified by it, emotionally and sensationally *intoxicated* by it'<sup>493</sup>. Rarely or never had an afterpiece created such an addictive emotional bond with spectators. Reviewers generally appreciated its freshness and sensed the new genre's potentially enormous appeal: *The Critical*

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<sup>491</sup> In a way, the figure of the mute boy metaphorically embodies the nature of melodrama itself. In *A Tale of Mystery*, even more than in Pixérécourt's source play, the spoken word loses importance in favour of frenetic action and expressive music (by composer Thomas Busby), which alone define the characters and the emotional ups and downs of the plot. As a matter of fact, Holcroft cut many of the original dialogues and substituted them with 'the silent dramaturgy of pantomime', making the play's affinity with the peculiar speechlessness of certain forms of popular theatre more obvious. Moody, Jane (2000), p. 90.

<sup>492</sup> Holcroft, Thomas, *A Tale of Mystery*, London: R. Phillips (1802), p. 6.

<sup>493</sup> Buckley, Matthew, 'Early English Melodrama', in *The Cambridge Companion to Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2018), p. 12.

*Review*, for example, wrote ‘that beside the charm of novelty, this entertainment exhibits a combination of every thing that is calculated to please the eye and the ear and [...] to gratify the taste, and powerfully to interest the feelings of the public’<sup>494</sup>. Later commentators such as Walley Chamberlain Oulton<sup>495</sup>, James Boaden<sup>496</sup> and John Genest<sup>497</sup> all agreed that *A Tale of Mystery* was not only the first example of English melodrama, but also the best, or ‘the best of the bad’<sup>498</sup>, as *The Monthly Mirror* sardonically defined it. Most importantly to Holcroft, nobody accused him of promoting dangerous ideologies through this work. In 1803 war broke out again between Britain and France, but melodrama had now officially taken firm root in the English theatre.

Holcroft's second and last attempt at melodrama was *The Lady of The Rock*, which opened at Drury Lane on 12 February 1805. The plot, drawn from an anecdote in Sarah Murray's *A Companion and Useful Guide to the Beauties of Scotland* (1799), is rather simple and recalls many Gothic stories of family feuds<sup>499</sup>. Its highlight was a thrilling scene in which a courageous fisherman saved a lady confined onto a high rock in the midst of an impressively realistic sea storm (which brought on stage ‘total darkness, sheets of rain, and dreadful peals of thunder’<sup>500</sup>), in what seemed an attempt to further explore the genre's aptness for visual spectacle. However, if the scenery and machinery of the maritime scenes attracted admiring comments, the same cannot be said of the rest of the play, totally smashed by critics. The production lasted only nine nights. For Holcroft, however, the biggest disappointment must have been hearing the loud disapprobation that accompanied the fall of the curtain on the night of the premiere. His last play, the comedy *The Vindictive Man* (Drury Lane, 1806), was another failure that met with a torrent of groans and hisses. He eventually died in 1809 at the age of 63, without obtaining the full public rehabilitation he craved for.

Holcroft sensed that melodrama could be the best dramatic form to test the new technological developments of theatre and to offer a kind of entertainment that could be commercially appealing, albeit relinquishing the supernatural chicanery and wild improbabilities of the Gothic. With melodrama, Holcroft was well aware of playing with fire since he was introducing to England an illegitimate genre of foreign extraction that was at the crossroads between verbal and non-verbal drama, patent and unpatented drama. For this reason, Holcroft took care to approach the Gothic with kid gloves and soften its sharpest edges. As a matter of fact, Holcroft's melodramas seemed to turn the theatrical Gothic into a kind of heightened realism, more real than reality itself, abandoning

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<sup>494</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 14 (November 1802), p. 338.

<sup>495</sup> Oulton, Walley C. (1818), p. 105.

<sup>496</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 331.

<sup>497</sup> Genest, John, *Some Account of the English Stage, from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, 10 vols., vol. 7, Bath: Carrington (1832), p. 579.

<sup>498</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 4 (October 1808), p. 256.

<sup>499</sup> The same story was later dramatised by Joanna Baillie in *The Family Legend*.

<sup>500</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 5 (May 1805), p. 106.

all sorts of ‘German’ absurdities in the process<sup>501</sup>. As Jeffrey N. Cox notes, *A Tale of Mystery* ‘struck audiences as natural, realistic’<sup>502</sup> (of course considering the standards of the time), and the utter dismissal of the supernatural was certainly instrumental to this impression of true-to-lifeness which would be so influential to later developments of the genre. Pixérécourt himself carefully avoided deviations into fantastic and magical territories. As Rahill noted, the inventor of melodrama wrote ‘in the tradition of Gallic rationalism, eschewing the supernatural in his dramas’<sup>503</sup>, including of course his adaptation of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Le Château des Apennins*, ou *le Fantôme vivant*, where the ghost is ‘naturalised’ as usual<sup>504</sup>. Similarly, his adaptations of *The Monk* did not indulge in the most revolting and satanic contents of the original source. This probably explains why his melodramas were regarded favourably also by detractors of the Gothic. No wonder, then, that Holcroft found in Pixérécourt the perfect model not only for his melodramatic style but also for his peculiar handling of the Gothic mode. Curiously, a few years later, in 1798, Matthew Lewis himself scolded Holcroft, halfway between the serious and the sarcastic, by writing a bizarre epilogue to his comedy *Knave, or Not?* that included a series of tips concerning the current tastes of the public:

Your hold on the public opinion is weak;  
 For your canvas presents neither Dæmons nor Witches; [...]  
 Now let me advise you your subject to change,  
 For something that's showy, terrific, and strange.  
 That his play must succeed, may the Bard safely boast,  
 Who opens the piece with a Song by a Ghost;  
 But in popular plaudits unbounded he revels,  
 If he follows the Song with a Dance by two Devils. [...]  
 Give us Lightning and Thunder, Flames, Daggers and Rage;  
 With events that ne'er happened, except on the Stage:  
 When your Spectre departs, through a trap-door ingulph her,  
 Burn under her nose too some brimstone and sulphur;  
 Let Magicians and Monsters be poured on our view;  
 And stick on your Villains a beard of blue pale!<sup>505</sup>

Lewis then resignedly reports Holcroft's opposition to his suggestions:

<sup>501</sup> This reveals a neat difference between France and England: if in Paris's illegitimate theatres Pixérécourt's melodramas were the first true manifestations of the Gothic, which from then on became more and more outrageous and daring, in London's Royal theatres the French author instead represented a more controlled and sober kind of Gothicism that could do without the ‘German’ repertoire of spectral and demonic horrors. As a result, early English melodramas were probably somewhat perceived as low-fi versions of previous Gothic productions such as *The Castle Spectre* or *Blue-Beard*, which unsurprisingly took a firmer hold on the public's imagination.

<sup>502</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N., ‘Melodrama’ in *The Encyclopedia of Romantic Literature*, vol. 1 (2012), p. 847.

<sup>503</sup> Rahill, Frank (1967), p. 59.

<sup>504</sup> As a further confirmation of the Royal theatres' early nineteenth-century attempt to limit the gratuitous introduction of Gothic ghosts, John Baylis's translation of Pixérécourt's melodrama, entitled *The Mysteries of Udolpho; or, The Phantom of the Castle*, appeared in print in 1804 but never found its way to the stage. Summers, Montague, *A Gothic Bibliography*, London: Fortune Press (1940), p. 142.

<sup>505</sup> Holcroft, Thomas, *Knave, or Not?*, London: G.G. and J. Robinson (1798), p. vii.

My remonstrance was vain—He asserts, you can be  
Well-pleased, when good-sense, myrth, and nature you see,  
Though his Play should not leave you half dead with affright:  
And I heartily pray, that the man may be right.  
As for me (though I'm sorry, my part won't permit  
Me to squall at a Spectre, and frighten the Pit),  
I hope you'll allow this performance has merit,  
And though without Ghost, think 'tis not without spirit.<sup>506</sup>

The distance between the two authors could not be greater. Purposely ignoring the nature of the play, Lewis basically ridiculed it for its sobriety and, more relevantly, for the lack of horrible supernatural effects. In doing so, he made a list of the Gothic ingredients that, according to his experience, were required in order to achieve popular success, making clear references to his own *The Castle Spectre* and Colman The Younger's *Blue-Beard*. Holcroft, however, was reluctant to pander to the vogue of the day and wished to avoid any possible controversy. To him, the rejection of Gothic excesses (including imaginative excesses like the supernatural) was part of his attempt to protect his already precarious reputation as a writer<sup>507</sup>.

However, early English attempts to produce melodrama along Pixérécourtian lines were mostly unfocused, and their results mixed. Holcroft's own plays did not even come close to match the tremendous success of Pixérécourt's, whose *Coelina*, for instance, was performed hundreds of times in Paris and in the Provinces<sup>508</sup>. In general, the first melodramatic experiments of Holcroft and his numerous imitators – notably Frederic Reynolds, Theodore Edward Hook, James Kenney and William Dimond – failed to gain consensus. Probably with the sole exceptions of *A Tale of Mystery* itself, which maintained a certain degree of popularity and critical respect, Hook's *Tekeli; or, The Siege of Montgatz* (Drury Lane, 1806) and Dimond's *The Foundling of The Forest* (Haymarket, 1809), which fared remarkably well (though they were more Romantic than Gothic), the kind of melodramas inspired by Pixérécourt's model soon showed signs of repetitiveness and unoriginality. Most of them failed resoundingly and fell into oblivion, like the anonymous *The Mountain Robbers; or, the Terrific Horn* (Drury Lane, 1806), which according to *The Monthly Mirror* ‘frightened all the people out of the theatre before the conclusion’<sup>509</sup>. If in France melodramas had

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<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>507</sup> As Christoph Houswitschka explains, ‘[i]n post-revolutionary Britain, Gothic horror had become either entertainment and its political meaning was not discussed, or it was rejected altogether. Conservatives rejected it because it was said to undermine moral standards; reformers such as Holcroft avoided it because it did not represent the principles of benevolence’. Houswitschka, Christoph, ‘The Political Reception of German Drama in Great Britain in the Period of the French Revolution’, in *Anglo-German Theatrical Exchange: “A sea-change into something rich and strange?”*, ed. Rudolf Weiss, Ludwig Schnauder and Dieter Fuchs, Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi (2015), p. 189.

<sup>508</sup> Marrinan, Michael, *Romantic Paris: Histories of a Cultural Landscape, 1800-1850*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2009), p. 252.

<sup>509</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 21 (June 1806), p. 412.

been the first theatrical manifestations of the Gothic, in England the situation was different. It could be argued that the reason of their significantly inferior impact was that early English Gothic melodramas were relatively low-fi productions in comparison to the Gothic dramas of the preceding decade (as well as those flamboyant shows performed in the minor playhouses of both London and Paris, where arresting supernatural melodramas popped up continuously). None of them could really compete with favourite hits like *The Castle Spectre* or *Blue-Beard*. Surely the Gothic, which had already begun its downward trend, was increasingly devitalised and dehydrated in a genre that began incorporating more obvious mundane concerns and political subtexts. Realistic faithfulness was now pursued not only in scenery and costume but also in the conduct of the plot. In this respect, Isaac Pocock's *The Miller and his Men* (Covent Garden, 1813) probably marked a turning point for the melodramatic genre as it ostensibly adopted a conventional Gothic overstructure only to explore more local and rural subject matters<sup>510</sup>, inaugurating nineteenth century's gradual turn to realism. Though remaining the genre's primitive driving force, the Gothic was progressively substituted by the strong hyper-realism denoting new forms of melodrama (national-historical, military, domestic, crime and so on), more and more focused on topical themes and credible representations of common life and the down-to-earth concerns of ordinary people, chiefly in humble urban and rural contexts, in a slow movement from the Gothic pseudo-medieval dream world to the actual contemporary world. This trend will lead to the development of domestic melodrama, the predominant variant of the genre from the early 1820s, with William Thomas Moncrieff's *The Lear of Private Life; or, Father and Daughter* (Coburg, 1820) being an exemplary text in this regard, to the early 1870s<sup>511</sup>.

The Gothic and the supernatural, however, did not disappear. A new branch of melodrama immediately moved in a parallel but opposite direction to that of sensational realism in order to intercept Romantic audiences' growing desire for theatrical escapes to marvellous, purely visionary worlds that could make them forget the grim reality in which they lived. Managers, playwrights and actors understood very quickly that the malleable nature of melodrama allowed them to experiment with the unprecedentedly wide possibilities offered by the genre as well as to give free vent to their imagination as had not been done from time immemorial in spoken theatre. Their main subject of representation however was not the much-hated 'German' supernaturalism that had inspired the loathsome Gothic mania of the 1790s but a lighter, less disturbing supernaturalism derived from romanticised fairy tales, folk tales and legends, considered more appropriate for the public. As a

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<sup>510</sup> In fact, already James Kenney's *Ella Rosenberg* (Drury Lane, 1807) and *The Blind Boy* (Covent Garden, 1807) show traces of a more domestic turn, retaining only a feeble Gothic backbone.

<sup>511</sup> Cross, Gilbert B., *Next Week-East Lynne: Domestic Drama in Performance: 1820–1874*, London: Associated University Presses (1977), p. 17.

consequence, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century a new plethora of fairies, elves, daemons, dwarfs, nymphs, giants, genii and other strange fey creatures invaded the English stage and arguably contributed to reformulate the Gothic as a multifaceted mode that could encompass all things supernatural and marvellous; in short, a category for everything that the rationalism of the Enlightenment had suppressed. The magical worlds of fairy tales, in particular, proved perfect for the purpose since they provided occasion for densely imaginative and commercially remunerative shows that nevertheless presented clear moral and conservative values to a proudly unpretentious audience of all ages and social backgrounds. Horror and terror were thus mostly replaced by wonder and enchantment. The template was less the ghostly machinery of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* than the fairy enchantments of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. This new theatrical supernaturalism better captured the era's wider interest in the fantastic, 'the characteristic mode of Romantic expression and thought'<sup>512</sup>. In fact, through melodrama the supernatural completed its return to the realm of spoken theatre, where it finally established itself on a permanent basis. Popular fantastic-themed melodramas penned by authors such as Thomas Dibdin, Charles Farley, Sir Lumley Skeffington and Matthew Lewis himself can, therefore, be considered as innovative, game-changing productions that not only filled the coffers during a time of deep crisis for the theatre but also started a trend toward the development of a full-blooded English fantastic genre, exerting an influence that extended well beyond the early years of the nineteenth century. These often critically neglected artists quickly understood that in melodrama they could dare more without being accused of contaminating the purity of legitimate drama, while critics, who did not fully understand the rules and the limits of the new genre, seemed more tolerant towards its irregularities and extravagances. Therefore, if on the one hand a strain of melodrama pursued sensational realism and domestic themes, another strain, which might be defined the fantastic strain of melodrama, provided an alternative for lovers of the supernatural. The origins of this binary division can be traced precisely in France, where melodrama had similarly split into two main trends that closely mirrored those that simultaneously emerged in England.

### 3.3 *The fairy kind of melodramatic writing*

To misquote John Dryden, it could be said that the early nineteenth century saw the rise of a 'fairy kind of melodramatic writing' that gradually moved from the haunted territories of the Gothic towards more enchanted lands. Fairy tales are something of a 'missing link' between the Gothic

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<sup>512</sup> Sandner, David, *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic, 1712-1831*, Farnham: Ashgate (2011), p. 3.

tradition and melodrama. In fact, they are a crucial component of the great amalgam of literary and cultural influences that generated the Gothic and its theatrical ramifications. The two genres have a self-evident ontological similarity: both rely on (sometimes strikingly similar) stock types, limited locations and recurrent situations or topics or themes, thus making recognisability and even predictability essential traits of their language<sup>513</sup>. Their rich use of symbols and archetypes meets the need of providing universal forms of entertainment that do not hide their moral and cautionary aims, and supernatural agency is frequently introduced when this double effect can be more successfully achieved. Even endings, usually featuring a providentially inspired return to order and justice, are ontologically similar in fairy tales and Gothic fiction. What mainly changes is the target audience: as Patrick Bridgwater puts it, ‘the Gothic novel/tale is essentially a literary fairytale for adults’<sup>514</sup>. A valid example of this strict connection is Horace Walpole's inaugural Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*, a ‘goblin tale’ whose structure and themes appear heavily indebted to fairy tales, Oriental tales and old folk romances<sup>515</sup>. Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis themselves seem to have had a certain familiarity with the language of fairy tales. One of the principal sources for the famous Lewisian character of the Bleeding Nun, for example, was Johann Karl August Musäus's ‘Die Entführung’ in *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (1782-6), translated in 1791 as *Popular Tales of the Germans* by Thomas Beddoes, father of *Vathek*'s author William Beckford<sup>516</sup>. Outside England, an emblematic case was that of Benedikte Naubert, a pioneer writer of historical-Gothic novels (the most famous being the secret society novel *Hermann von Unna*, whose 1794 English translation likely influenced Radcliffe's *The Italian*<sup>517</sup>) who produced the remarkably influential fairy tales collection *Neue Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (1789-92), in which the otherworldly and the mundane are seamlessly juxtaposed (her story was another important source for Lewis). Gothic fiction and fairy tales entered therefore the nineteenth century hand-in-hand, and these parallel paths

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<sup>513</sup> Specifically, ‘[t]he basis or starting point of both the folktale and the Gothic romance is the breaking of a pre-existent pattern, that is, the breakdown of pre-existent order, and accordingly the presence of something (e.g. villainy) that ought to be absent and/or the absence of something that ought to be present, loss followed by loss made good. In both genres loss of control is the trigger, transgression the motor of the plot. That the protagonists in the Gothic novel and tale typically find themselves in an invasive, intrusive, hostile, destructive otherworld, often, as in fairy tales, involving loss of freedom, does not need elaboration’. Bridgwater, Patrick, *The German Gothic Novel in Anglo-German Perspective*, Amsterdam: Rodopi (2013), pp. 581-2.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 582.

<sup>515</sup> Devendra P. Varma devotes particular attention to the influence of fairy and wonder stories on *The Castle of Otranto*. See Varma, Devendra P. (1957), pp. 50-4. In 1785 Walpole also published his collection of *Hieroglyphic Tales*, which whimsically imitated fairy and Oriental tales.

<sup>516</sup> Bridgwater, Patrick (2013), p. 465. See also Hushahn, Helga, ‘*Sturm und Drang* in Radcliffe and Lewis’, in *Exhibited by Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*, ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani and Peter Davidson, Atlanta: Rodopi (1995), p. 95.

<sup>517</sup> Hale, Terry, ‘French and German Gothic: The Beginnings’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2002), p. 68. Bridgwater brings them in close association by affirming that ‘Benedicte Naubert and Ann Radcliffe are writers of a comparable type of Gothic Märchenroman, the tale of terror with a happy ending’. Bridgwater, Patrick (2013), p. 143.

converged on melodrama, which became the theatrical meeting place of these cross-contaminating worlds. Also in this context, France constituted a key point of reference: throughout the long eighteenth century, French collections of fairy tales enjoyed wide circulation in Europe and especially in England, where they became fashionable readings that triggered literary and critical speculation, also with regards to their possible didactic and pedagogical function. As an article of *The European Magazine* recognised, '[t]he Fairy Tales of this country are superior to those of every other'<sup>518</sup>. Among the most famous translated collections were Countess d'Aulnoy's *Tales of the Fairies* (1699), Antoine Galland's *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* (1706-21, also known as *The Thousand and One Nights*) and Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose*<sup>519</sup> (1729), all of which achieved international popularity. The golden age of French fairy tales culminated in Charles-Joseph de Mayer's monumental 41-volume omnibus collection *The Fairies' Cabinet; or, Select Collection of Fairy Tales and Other Marvelous Tales* (1785-9). Stories such as 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Puss in Boots', 'Cinderella' and 'The Sleeping Beauty' thus exerted enormous influence on English literature, and consequently on Gothic literature as well. Mme d'Aulnoy's fairy tales, for instance, widely resonate in Ann Radcliffe's works<sup>520</sup>, whereas a story like Perrault's 'Bluebeard' features 'a virtual catalogue of conventions familiar in Gothic narratives from Walpole to the present'<sup>521</sup>. Towards the end of the century, the development of circulating libraries and inexpensive formats such as chapbooks boosted the diffusion of printed editions of fairy tales, legends and fables among middle and lower classes, the same target public of Gothic fiction.

This unprecedentedly ample proliferation inevitably came to affect also the realm of theatre, especially musical theatre (above all opera), which was traditionally more open to magic and supernatural themes. From the mid-eighteenth century, France and Italy – two countries with a strong fairy-tale tradition – were the epicentres of a trend of fairy-tale theatre which also came to influence English theatrical repertoires, at least with regard to non-spoken genres<sup>522</sup>. In France, in particular, this phenomenon led to the birth of a dramatic form specifically based on fairy tales, the *féerie*, approximately translatable as 'fairy play'. Originally emerging in the popular fairground

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<sup>518</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 78 (November 1820), p. 395.

<sup>519</sup> Mother Goose, an imaginary author of fairy tales and nursery rhymes, later became a popular character in English pantomime, notably appearing in Thomas Dibdin's *Harlequin and Mother Goose, or The Golden Egg* (Covent Garden, 1806).

<sup>520</sup> Bridgwater, Patrick (2013), pp. 564-6.

<sup>521</sup> Williams, Anne (1995), p. 38.

<sup>522</sup> Fairy plays also appeared in Germany, although this was not the kind of supernatural typically associated with this country in the late eighteenth century. As Shawn Jarvis notes, the German stage initially relied heavily on translations of popular comedies and dramatized *contes de fées*, although an indigenous literary tradition began with such plays as *Mägera, die fürchterliche Hexe* (*Megeira, the Terrible Witch*, 1763); *Das Donauweibchen* (*The Maid of the Danube*, 1798); *Hulda, das schöne Wasserfräulein* (*Hulda, the Beautiful Water Maiden*, 1799). Jarvis, Shawn, 'Drama and Fairy Tales', in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 2nd ed., ed. Jack Zipes, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2015), p. 164.

theatres of the immediate pre-Revolutionary period (notably those at the Saint Germain and Saint Laurent fairs), this partly comic, partly allegorical hybrid genre blended pantomime<sup>523</sup>, music, dance, acrobatics and various sorts of ingenuous visual grotesqueries, as was customary in Paris's vibrant travelling fairground circuit. With the advent of melodrama, *féeries* added the spoken word and became a more fantastic and light-hearted variant of the genre in opposition to the strand of serious Gothic-Romantic melodramas in the style of Pixérécourt. This should come as no surprise since *féeries* shared the same black-and-white moral frame carried to the extreme and the same desire to provide visceral satisfaction to the public as melodramas. But if Pixérécourtian melodrama's primary objective was to thrill and move the audience, the *féerie* was a more frivolous kind of entertainment that heavily relied on childish and ethereal atmospheres in order to provide a kaleidoscopic feast for the senses whose principal aim was that of amusing spectators. These melodramas were typically made up of sequences of independent scenes (with rapid shifts of scenery occurring in full view of the audience) that eventually led to the so-called apotheosis, the spectacular closing tableau. Playwrights let their imagination run wild by creating dream-like worlds replete with bizarre figures (witches, wizards, nymphs, gnomes, ogres and of course fairies), magical items (wands, amulets, talismans, and so on) and miraculous events (flying people, bizarre metamorphoses, appearances, disappearances, animation of objects, etc.). The thinness of the scripts – either original or derived from classic fairy tales – was counterbalanced by the preponderant use of magnificent scenery, opulent decorations, lavish dresses, mechanical stage tricks and other technological devices which over the years became more and more sophisticated. Like melodrama, the *féerie* owed much to pantomime<sup>524</sup>, with which it also shared one its most defining features,

<sup>523</sup> Dumb acting was an essential trait of fairground shows that partly survived in later melodramas: as John McCormick notes, '[u]p to the 1840s many melodramas contained pantomime roles, where no speech is involved, and in which a character has to express himself or herself exclusively by sign language (usually helped along by commentary from other characters)'. This is of course also true of early English melodramas. McCormick, John, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth-Century France*, London and New York: Routledge (1993), p. 136.

<sup>524</sup> The model was more the English pantomime, with its typical transformations and harlequinades, than the legitimate French pantomime or ballet-pantomime or ballet-d'action (as it was frequently stylised), which had gradually emancipated itself from *commedia dell'arte* buffoonery in order to adopt more serious and even tragic tones. Other, less obvious precursors to the *féerie* might be the fairy plays of eighteenth-century Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi, the great rival of Carlo Goldoni and the author of marvellous pieces such as *L'amore delle tre arance* (*The Love of Three Oranges*), *Turandot*, *Il corvo* (*The Crow*), *Il re cervo* (*The King Stag*), *Il mostro turchino* (*The Blue Monster*) and *La donna serpente* (*The Serpent Woman*), all contained in his *Fiabe Teatrali* (*Fairy Tales for the Theatre*), composed between 1761 and 1766 for the Sacchi company. A lengthy 1865 newspaper article devoted to Gozzi recognised his pioneering role as an author of fairy-tale theatre: '[*The Love of Three Oranges*] is a fairy tale exactly of the kind by which the Countess d'Aulnoy made herself immortal. The notion of putting such a tale on the stage probably originated with Gozzi, and he may therefore, in the absence of further evidence, be regarded as the originator of those fairy melodramas which were occasionally brought out at our large theatres towards the beginning of this century, and of which perhaps the best-remembered is *Bluebeard*. It is almost an impertinence to remark that Gozzi's use of the supernatural has nothing in common with that of our Elizabethan dramatists. There is every reason to believe that the magical transformations in the *Three Oranges* were executed with great skill, for throughout the whole of his fiabe Gozzi writes like a man who has an eye, not only to stage effect, but to the mechanical means of producing it'. The article noted that Gozzi's treatment of the supernatural had nothing to do with comedy and satire and reflected his serious approach to the subject: '[Gozzi] goes to his fairy lore with a

namely the transformation scene, usually propitiated by a character possessing magic powers. As a matter of fact, the *féerie* principally characterised itself as a kind of show that strongly emphasised the supernatural as long as it was of an innocent, playful sort, without any of the disturbing qualities of the Gothic:

Characters in fairy plays resemble dream figures. As they pursue never-ending endeavours, they change clothes, transform or fall down and break, only to be put back together again in the next scene. Like puppets or machines, they are comic in the Bergsonian sense. Even the Devil, a frequent participant in *féeries*, performs evil acts with cheerful good humour.<sup>525</sup>

The prototype of the form was Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier de Trie and Jean-Baptiste-Augustin Hapdè's *Le Petit Poucet, ou l'Orphelin de la Forêt* (Théâtre des Jeunes Artistes, 1798), that appeared one year after Pixérécourt's *Victor; ou, l'Enfant de la Forêt*, with which it curiously shared a similar subtitle. Following on the heels of its outstanding success (over 200 performances in the next two years), the fashionable *féeries* or *mélodrame-féeries* ('fairy melodramas'), as they were often labelled initially, became the rage of Paris's secondary theatres. Notable examples include Louis Charles Caignez's *La Forêt Enchantée, ou La Belle Au Bois Dormant* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1799), Cuvelier de Trie's and André-Jacques Coffin-Rony's *Le Nain Jaune, ou la Fée du Désert* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1804), César Ribié and Maurin de Pompigny's *La Lampe Merveilleuse* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1804), Alexandre Fursy Guesdon and Forgeaux Constant's *Cendrillon, ou la Petite Pantoufle de verre* (Théâtre des Jeunes Elèves, 1806), César Ribié and Alphonse Martainville's *Le Pied de Mouton* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1806) and *La Queue du Diable* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1807) and Antoine Jean-Baptiste Simonnin and Nicholas Brazier's *La Belle aux Cheveux d'Or* (Théâtre des Troubadours, 1806). The vogue continued unabated in the following decades; curiously, Pixérécourt himself came to write several *féeries*, the most famous of which was *Ondine, ou La Nymphe des Eaux* (Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1830), devoted to the myth of Undine. Sometimes the genre fascinatingly crossed paths with the Gothic, as in the case of Jean-Toussaint Merle and Antony Béraud's *Le Monstre et le Magicien* (Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, 1826), inspired by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Anicet Bourgeois and Julien de Mallian's *La Nonne sanglante* (Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, 1835), another adaptation of the Bleeding Nun tale.

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gravity as perfect as that with which an Athenian tragedian approached the myths of Hellas. Zobeida, one of the most fantastic of his fiabe, was actually intended for a tragedy, and audiences were expected to weep at the sufferings of a noble lady whose tyrannical husband threatened to transform her into a cow. At one period of his life he was even afflicted with a monomania which caused him to believe in the reality of the fantastic beings to which he had so often given a local habitation and a name. This is sufficient to show how little he had in common with those wits who invariably approach the supernatural in a spirit of badinage'. *The Saturday Review*, vol. 20 (30 September 1865), p. 429. As Gozzi himself revealed in the preface of a 1772 volume containing four of his *Fiabe*, at one point he was even asked permission to have his plays translated into English and performed in London, but he denied it. Gozzi, Carlo, *Opere del Co: Carlo Gozzi*, 8 vols., vol. 2, Colombani: Venezia (1772), pp. 4-5.

<sup>525</sup> Kovács, Katherine Singer, 'Georges Méliés and the *Féerie*', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Autumn 1976), p. 6.

As the century progressed, both *féerie* and melodrama became more and more distinct genres with very different target audiences, and new varieties such as pantomime-féeries, opéra-féeries, féerie-vaudevilles and ballet-féeries. After having briefly fallen out of favour during the late 1850s and 1860s, *féeries* enjoyed a second wave of popularity towards the end of the century, thanks to the revival of old classics such as *Le Pied de Mouton* and *Le Monstre et le Magicien* and the emergence of new stories influenced by early science fiction, as testified by the success of the féerie adaptations of Jules Verne's novels. Eventually, the genre was absorbed into other media, notably motion picture films, with George Méliès's *Cinderella* (1889) inaugurating the cinematic *féerie*, and, by extension, fantasy cinema itself.

The *féerie* officially arrived in England during the mid 1820s, when playwright James Robertson Planché combined it with pantomime to create the so-called extravaganza, a whimsical fantastic genre usually performed at Christmas and Easter that proved very popular through the 1850s<sup>526</sup>. Yet, it would be short-sighted to overlook the fact that a sort of English equivalent of the *mélodrame-féerie* had already been present for a while. There seems, indeed, to be a remarkable resemblance between the French *féerie* and the many fantastic-themed melodramas performed at the Royal theatres at the beginning of the century, particularly in the way they tended to be an alternative to the realist orientation, so to say, of Holcroftian melodrama. Although in England there was never such a clear division ('melodrama' remained the main term for all the genre's variants), it is certainly possible to identify a type of visionary melodramas, inspired by fairy tales of the French tradition and with an obvious relation to the pantomime world, that seemed to replicate the mechanisms of *féeries*. In point of fact, toward the end of the eighteenth century subjects taken from *Tales of Mother Goose* and *Arabian Nights* started to be employed on a frequent basis in the pantomimes (and other minor genres) performed at the Royal theatres, subsequently influencing the first English rudimentary efforts in the melodramatic mode. In this respect, George Colman The Younger's *Blue-beard; or, Female Curiosity!* started new ground as an embryonic melodrama that sought a synthesis between Gothic and fairy play. However, the title of first English fairy melodrama undoubtedly belongs to Thomas Dibdin's *Valentine and Orson* (Covent Garden, 1804), which offered a crucial blueprint for the commercial fare of English theatre in the following years and the development of a Romantic fantastic mode on stage.

### 3.4 Valentine and Orson, *the first fairy melodrama*

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<sup>526</sup> Extravaganzas by Planché and his contemporaries retained the main features of *féeries* (including transformation scenes) and often drew their plots from mythological themes and classic French fairy tales. Planché himself was an important translator of fairy tales during the Victorian era.

The play that officially started the English thread of fairy melodrama, Thomas Dibdin's two-act 'Grand Serio-Comic Romantic Melodrama' *Valentine and Orson*, has a clear link with France, starting with Joseph Jouve, the play's French composer. The plot is founded on a late medieval French romance associated to the Carolingian cycle. It is set in the eighth century and centres on the ever alluring motif of abandoned children who grow up in the wilderness and are reared by animals. The titular characters, reminiscent of Romulus and Remus and other legendary pairs of twins, are two brothers of royal blood who were left in a wood near Orléans shortly after birth. They met with very different fates: Valentine was found and adopted by the King of France Pepin, becoming a valiant knight at his court. Orson was instead raised by a she-bear and remained a creature of the forest. Incapable of speech and believed to be a monster, the bear child terrorises the neighbouring country until King Pepin sends Valentine to fix the situation. The knight, unaware of his identity, eventually subdues Orson and makes him his slave. The two soon become close friends and together they prove invincible warriors, embarking on a series of exciting adventures all over the world in the course of which they also discover their blood relationship. In one of the legend's most famous episodes, the two manage to rescue their mother, Belisant (sister to Pepin and wife of Alexander, the Emperor of Greece, who had banished her on a false accusation of illicit love), when Orson uses a magic shield to defeat the evil giant that has been keeping her captive. In the end, the wild man learns to speak and is finally accepted into human society.

The legend had been known in England since at least the early sixteenth century, when the French source romance was translated by Henry Watson and published by Wynkyn de Worde<sup>527</sup>. Its popularity during the Elizabethan period is testified by various stage adaptations<sup>528</sup> and more or less explicit allusions in Shakespeare, Spenser and Sidney. The tale continued then to be transmitted in both oral and written form, confirming a 'powerful and enduring hold on English readers and storytellers'<sup>529</sup>. During the late eighteenth century, in coincidence with Britain's revived interest in medieval literature and especially after Thomas Percy's inclusion of a ballad on the theme in *Reliques of English Poetry* (1765), the romance was reprinted in several chapbook editions. Crucially, in June 1794 Thomas Dibdin himself adapted it into a pantomime called *Valentine and Orson; or, the Wild Man of Orleans* staged at Sadler's Wells, an unlicensed suburban theatre in north London where Dibdin began his career as a playwright. The play succeeded enormously and came

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<sup>527</sup> Leitch, Megan G., *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the War of the Roses*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2015), p. 183.

<sup>528</sup> Mulready Cyrus, "'Asia of the One side, and Africa of the Other': Sidney's Unities and the Staging of Romance", *Staging Early Modern Romance: Prose Fiction, Dramatic Romance, and Shakespeare*, ed. Mary Ellen Lamb and Valerie Wayne, London: Routledge (2009), pp. 50-1.

<sup>529</sup> Wiseman, Susan, *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance, 1550-1700*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2014), p. 167.

to the attention of Royal theatres. Dibdin, who from the late 1790s had substituted James Cross as Covent Garden's official pantomime maker, received the suggestion to produce the work from John Philip Kemble<sup>530</sup>, who had recently taken over managership of the theatre and wished to create a powerful opposition to the rival Drury Lane (at the time led by famous comedian John Bannister). At the same time, there was a desire to explore the wide possibilities offered by the new genre recently imported by Thomas Holcroft. Dibdin's transformation of an illegitimate pantomime into a legitimate melodrama for Covent Garden can therefore be taken as the perfect example of the latter genre's peculiar in-between status, which facilitated the intense process of cross-contamination between different dramatic forms, between patented and unpatented theatres as well as between France and England that characterised these culturally explosive years. Intriguingly, *Valentine and Orson* was presented during the Easter festivities, that is when theatres were most crowded, a choice that reveals the intention of taking full advantage of the wide-ranging appeal of the tale. In a way, this visionary, imaginative work, so distant from the 'Gothic realism' of *A Tale of Mystery*, was more coherent with the nature of Covent Garden, traditionally more committed to light-hearted comedies and pantomimes (whereas Drury Lane was the main venue for high tragedy), and represented an important opportunity to give variety and freshness to the theatre's programmes. Even more importantly, *Valentine and Orson* showed that there was a new generation of playwrights, actors and stage artists ready to take over the English theatrical scene and save it from its apparently irreversible crisis, at least at a commercial level. Thomas Dibdin, in particular, is now remembered as the author of several hundred plays (mainly pantomimes and melodramas) performed in both Royal theatres and minor playhouses, and can undoubtedly be considered a key figure of the early nineteenth-century theatre. An illegitimate son of Charles Dibdin the Elder (a famous actor, dramatist and composer of late Georgian theatre, especially renowned for his beautiful sea songs) and Harriet Pitt (a well-known actress and dancer at Covent Garden), Dibdin had theatre in his destiny. In 1775, a four-year old Dibdin made his stage debut alongside Sarah Siddons, who insisted to have him play the part of the little god Cupid in a revival of Garrick's *Shakespeare Jubilee* at Drury Lane (Garrick had been Dibdin's godfather). As a boy, he toured Britain and obtained several short acting engagements in the provincial theatres, where he gained notability also as an excellent scene-painter. His career truly skyrocketed in the mid 1790s, when he was engaged as a writer of pantomimes, burlettas and ballets of action at Sadler's Wells. His serious pantomimes, including *Death of David Rizzio* (1795), *Ruins of Paluzzi; or, Black Penitent* (1796), *Alonzo and Imogene; or, the Bridal Spectre* (1796) and of course *Valentine and Orson*, can be regarded as interesting experiments with Gothic themes and proto-melodramatic techniques that

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<sup>530</sup> Dibdin, Thomas, *The Reminiscences of Thomas Dibdin*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: Henry Colburn (1837), p. 363.

were trying to creatively compensate for the theatre's legal impossibility to perform spoken drama. After various unsuccessful attempts to obtain an engagement in a patent theatre, in 1798 one of his farces, *The Jew and the Doctor*, was finally accepted by Thomas Harris, thus marking the beginning of a long partnership. At the turn of the century, Dibdin became Covent Garden's house dramatist and wrote a series of comedies, comic operas, farces and Christmas pantomimes that granted the theatre high profits. *Valentine and Orson* belongs to this happy time of his career<sup>531</sup>. Just like the Sadler's Wells' pantomime (which at some point even used a real bear<sup>532</sup>), Dibdin's melodrama proved largely popular and continued to be performed for several years in England and, even more frequently, in North America, where it remained in repertoire well through the 1830s.

The casting of the play also proved perfect: the role of Valentine, for example, was played by the extremely versatile actor Charles Farley, who had masterfully impersonated the dumb Francisco in *A Tale of Mystery* in what was the most interesting link to Holcroft's melodrama. Farley also acted as superintendent of the play (especially for the pantomime parts), to the point that Dibdin dedicated it to him as a 'feeble, though sincere, acknowledgement of his professional exertions, unremitting zeal, attention, and assiduity, in the stage-arrangement of the following bagatelle'<sup>533</sup>. The role of the savage Orson was instead given to Jean Baptiste Dubois, long considered as one of the best buffoons in London, who had already played the character at Sadler's Wells. His interpretation met with 'unequivocal applause'<sup>534</sup>, but on 9 October 1806 the role was taken up by Joseph Grimaldi, who thus made his debut on the boards of Covent Garden. Unanimously considered the most talented pantomime actor of the nineteenth century, Grimaldi had gained great notoriety by playing the clown at Sadler's Wells, turning it from supporting role to absolute protagonist of the harlequinades (he famously popularised the typical whiteface make-up which clowns still use today)<sup>535</sup>. Farley was firmly convinced that Grimaldi could play the role better than Dubois, despite

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<sup>531</sup> All biographical information on Dibdin's life and career are taken from Dibdin, Thomas (1837).

<sup>532</sup> Arundell, Denis Drew, *The Story of Sadler's Wells, 1683-1964*, New York: Theatre Arts Books (1965), p. 101.

<sup>533</sup> Dedication 'To Charles Farley' in Dibdin, Thomas, *Valentine and Orson*, London: Barker and Son, 1804. In point of fact, Farley had an uncommon creative talent that made him a specialist in arranging and directing also other authors' productions. Besides acting in hundreds of plays, he was the superintendent of countless pantomimes and melodramas up to his retirement from the stage in 1834. He personally took care of every aspect of the production process, from coreography to dance numbers, from stage machinery to special effects. His best work in this role prior to *Valentine and Orson* probably was Dibdin's own pantomime *The Magic Oak; or, Harlequin Woodcutter* (Covent Garden, 1799), whose tremendous success made both of them prominent names in the theatrical landscape of the time.

<sup>534</sup> Grimaldi, Joseph, *Memoirs of Grimaldi, A New Edition, with Notes and Additions*, ed. 'Boz', revised by Charles Whitehead, London: G. Routledge & Co. (1853), p. 176.

<sup>535</sup> Grimaldi inextricably linked his name to Sadler's Wells, where he acted until his death in 1837. There he debuted at the age of three as a little dancer in *The Wizard of the Silver Rocks; or, Harlequin's Release* (1781). His first appearance on a patent stage was on Boxing Day 1782, when he played a little clown in Drury Lane's Christmas pantomime *The Triumph of Mirth; or, Harlequin's Wedding*. At Drury Lane, where both his parents had worked, young Grimaldi became a welcome presence behind the curtains. He was in the cast of important productions such as *Lodoiska* and *Blue Beard* and occasionally played clown parts. At the same time, he continued to act at Sadler's Wells, where initially he mostly played animals (monkeys, bears) and small supernatural creatures (demons, fairies,

his reluctance due to fears that his detractors would leap at the chance of accusing him of being a mere imitator of the French actor. Farley, however, reassured him and helped him to prepare what he knew was Grimaldi's most difficult role to date, but also the one that could definitely boost his career. The enthusiastic response of the audience proved that Farley was right, and the play continued to be performed until it had to be withdrawn to make way for the 1806 Christmas pantomime, Dibdin's own *Mother Goose; or, the Golden Egg*, where Grimaldi was also involved<sup>536</sup>. Grimaldi's interpretation did justice to the complexity of the character of Orson, on whose overflowing physicality and expressive body language the whole piece was founded. He managed to convincingly convey the numerous nuances of a character that could be frightening, moving and funny within the space of a single scene, in tune with melodrama's characteristic changing moods<sup>537</sup>. In this respect, his version of Orson established a template that would be followed by actors playing similar roles and that made Grimaldi an authentic star of his day, also allowing him to enjoy personal revenge given that in 1805 he had left Drury Lane because of that theatre's lack of confidence in giving him important roles<sup>538</sup>. The supernatural *personae* were no less intriguing: the antagonist of the play, the cruel Green Knight (a figure that nominally recalls the monster from the medieval romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, possibly the most famous Arthurian legend), was impersonated by John Peter Bologna (better known as Jack Bologna), another famous

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spirits). He also appeared in *Valentine and Orson* as a dwarf. His interpretations of the hag Morad in Thomas Dibdin's *The Talisman; or, Harlequin Made Happy* (Sadler's Wells, 1796) and of Pero in Charles Delpini's *Robinson Crusoe* (Drury Lane, 1796) received rave reviews, allowing him to rise through the ranks. The true turning point, however, came when Grimaldi successfully interpreted one of the two clowns (the other being Dubois) in Dibdin's *Peter Wilkins; or, Harlequin in the Flying World* (Sadler's Wells, 1800). His popularity grew incessantly, as testified by Charles Dibdin Jr's *Harlequin and the Alchemist; or, The Philosopher's Stone* (Sadler's Wells, 1801), where Grimaldi and Dubois were pitted one against the other in a mock duel to establish the best clown, in what was to all intents and purposes a test to find out the audience's preferences. Grimaldi triumphed and in the next pantomime, Charles Dibdin's *Harlequin Benedick; or, the Ghost of Mother Shipton* (Sadler's Wells, 1801), he was given the role of the lead clown, whereas Dubois played a minor character. Biographical information from Grimaldi's life and career are from Boz's *Memoirs of Grimaldi* and 'Joseph Grimaldi', in *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, ed. Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans, vol. 6: Garrick to Gyngell, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (1978), p. 403-11.

<sup>536</sup> In *Mother Goose*, another joint collaboration between Farley and Dibdin inspired by the well known fairy tale, Grimaldi probably gave his greatest interpretation as a clown, opposite to Bologna's harlequin. This pantomime had an impressive run of 92 nights and kept being highly popular also in the following years, becoming the longest-running pantomime in history. Grimaldi, however, reportedly did not have a high opinion of the play and 'always declared his own part to be one of the worst he ever played'. Grimaldi, Joseph (1853), p. 180.

<sup>537</sup> 'The part of Orson was in Grimaldi's opinion the most difficult he ever had to play; the multitude of passions requiring to be portrayed, and the rapid succession in which it was necessary to present them before the spectators, involving an unusual share both of mental and physical exertion upon the part of the performer. [...] The effect produced on the audience by his personification of this character was intense: it enhanced his reputation greatly, bringing him before the public in quite a new line. The compliments and congratulations which he received from persons ranking high in his own profession, in literature, and in the fine arts, bore high testimony to the merit and striking character of this singular performance'. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-8. Curiously, Grimaldi's father, Giuseppe, had played the quintessential literary 'savage', Friday, in Sheridan's pantomime *Robinson Crusoe; or, Harlequin Friday* (Drury Lane, 1781).

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

pantomimist of illegitimate playhouses who made his return on the Covent Garden stage after a two-year hiatus<sup>539</sup>. All these artists and performers, often good friends, used their experience in the illegitimate circuit to transform the legitimate theatrical scene, using melodrama as a vehicle. *Valentine and Orson* was, therefore, their calling card and revealed to the English public the boundless potential of the new form when applied to more fantastic and visionary subjects. An analysis of the play will serve to further highlight its intrinsic ontological kinship with the French *féerie*.

The piece begins with King Pepin's triumphant entrance into Orléans after the victory over the Saracens, mainly achieved thanks to the extraordinary warrior skills of Valentine. The inhabitants of the city beg the King to help them get rid of the mysterious wild man that is causing them serious trouble, and Valentine himself swears to capture him. Along with his coward armourer Hugo, Valentine goes into the woods and eventually finds Orson in company with the she-bear that raised him (the animal was probably played by an uncredited actor in furs). In the long pantomimic scene that closes the first act, Valentine and Orson engage in a fierce combat that ends with Orson turning himself in to the enemy in an effort to protect his beloved animal mother. In the most heart-wrenching moment (which was entirely the brainchild of Dibdin), Orson accepts wine from Valentine and offers it to the she-bear, thus inadvertently causing her death. Valentine consoles and caresses the desperate Orson, who, surprised by this unexpected act of kindness, surrenders himself. Act 2 proceeds at a faster pace and tries to condense various episodes of the original romance (sometimes in a confusing manner)<sup>540</sup>. It opens with another long dumb show in which Orson is brought to Pepin's court, where he is struck by the beauty of Princess Eglantine, Valentine's fiancé, who however is aghast at the sight of the ugly savage. Meanwhile, the Duke of Aquitaine arrives at the palace to seek help because the cruel Green Knight has kidnapped his daughter Florimonda in order to force her into marriage. The jealous Eglantine, afraid that Valentine might fall in love with Florimonda during the mission, decides to wear his armour and go fight with the Green Knight herself, knowing the prophecy that asserted that no *man* nursed by woman can defeat him. Valentine discovers Eglantine's plan and immediately goes into the woods. Orson follows his new friend and saves him from an ambush by Pepin's illegitimate sons. Meanwhile, the Green Knight, who turns out to be the Saracen sorcerer Agramant, returns to his hiding place and threatens Florimonda. The scene takes place in an eerie location that introduces the supernatural element in the story:

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<sup>539</sup> Bologna was often the harlequin to Grimaldi's clown both at Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden. He was also renowned for his work as machinist and dance director (especially at the Royal Circus) as well as for the 'Phantascopia', a phantasmagoria show he produced at the Lyceum in the early 1800s. 'John Peter Bologna' in Burnim, Kalman A., Highfill, Philip H., and Langhans, Edward A. (eds.) (1973), p. 191.

<sup>540</sup> The second act is replete with exciting action and features very few dialogues, to the extent that *Valentine and Orson* could easily be considered the most pantomimic of the early melodramas produced at the patent theatres.

*The Encampment and Pavillion – on one Side a large Oak Tree, on which several Knights in shining Armour, are seen hanging — on the other Side is a Tree, to which a Shield, marked with magical Characters, is suspended, and guarded by a Saracen Priest.*<sup>541</sup>

Eglantine suddenly arrives to challenge Agramant to a duel, but the Green Knight quickly overcomes her. As he is about to finish her, Valentine providentially intervenes and defies the villain. Agramant, however, provocatively challenges him to pull down the enchanted shield from its tree, although the Saracen priest that guards it warns him that it can only be used by ‘a prince not nursed by a woman’. Valentine fails and is wounded by the Green Knight's axe. Orson arrives then to challenge Agramant, and Valentine, remembering that his friend had been nursed by a bear (therefore not by a woman), bids him to try to seize the shield. At this point, something truly magical happens:

*ORSON [...] approaches the shield, and it flies into his hand—the Green Knight, forewarned of his fate, rushes on ORSON in savage desperation—but every weapon breaks on the enchanted shield—ORSON strikes AGRAMANT to the ground—VALENTINE's soldiers rush on, and vanquish the Saracens—thunder is heard, and the Genius PACOLET is seen descending on a flying horse—he alights, comes forward, and addresses the characters.*

Pacolet, the Genius<sup>542</sup> of the shield, announces the defeat of Agramant and gives Valentine a mysterious ring, inviting the two brothers to follow him with a wave of the hand (a typical pantomime gesture that signalled some kind of magic occurrence) and the promise that they will know more about their identity. The scenery changes suddenly and the following scene takes place directly in the castle of the Giant Ferragus, where Valentine and Orson are received by two ugly Fiends that immediately attack them:

*They rush on VALENTINE and ORSON, are overthrown and sink—as VALENTINE and ORSON are proceeding, a Lion enters, VALENTINE presents the magic ring, and the Lion disappears—PACOLET is seen in place of the monster, and conducts VALENTINE and ORSON into the Giant's dwelling.*

In the next scene, the heroes find a magic chamber where Ferragus is menacingly waiting for them with a massive club. Pacolet, however, ‘waves his hand, the club changes to a heavy chain, encircling the arms of the giant’, thus allowing Orson to easily subdue him. Eglantine, Florimonda and the Empress of Greece Belisanta, who had been long held captive in the castle, are finally released. Pacolet touches then a golden head positioned on a pillar (another key element of the original romance) which magically starts to speak. The oracle reveals that Valentine and Orson are brothers and that their mother is none other than Belisanta herself. At this point ‘*the head falls, and*

<sup>541</sup> All quotations from the play are from Dibdin, Thomas, *Valentine and Orson*, London: Barker and Son (1804).

<sup>542</sup> The genii were spirits or demons peculiar to Oriental mythology, roughly similar to English fairies.

*the giant sinks*’, leading to a happy ending:

ORSON approaches FLORIMONDA, she still rejects him, he looks at his uncouth figure and dress, and rushes out, followed by PACOLET, but immediately returns, splendidly dressed—he again presses his suit to FLORIMONDA, she is pleased with him—the Empress joins the hands of VALENTINE and ORSON with EGLANTINE and FLORIMONDA.

Curiously, unlike the Orson of the original story and unlike most of other mute characters in contemporary melodramas, Orson never regains his voice, and his official acceptance into mankind is signalled only by a change of dress. Then the setting shifts again: ‘PACOLET changes the scene, mounts his winged horse, and flies up, while the transformation is making from the Mystic Chamber to the last scene’, which consists merely of a grand pageant in which King Pepin, the Emperor and Empress of Greece, Valentine, Eglantine, Orson, Florimonda and their followers parade across a splendidly decorated hall, taking leave of the audience. Especially in the second act, it is evident how the piece shares many features in common with *féeries*, such as a pronounced pantomimic quality, an ample display of magical objects and flying machines (with actors ascending and descending mechanical clouds or animals), fast scene shifts and the final, supernaturally induced transformation scene.

Though pointing to its mediocre dialogues, critics generally praised *Valentine and Orson* as an extremely enjoyable piece of entertainment, with Charles Farley receiving an honourable mention for his production work. *The European Magazine* considered the piece ‘one of the most splendid and interesting spectacles that have been exhibited for many years’<sup>543</sup>. *The Sporting Magazine* used similar enthusiastic tones, adding a prophecy that would eventually prove right:

The music, scenery, decorations, machinery, and dresses, deserve the highest commendation. The piece is in many places uncommonly interesting, and successfully produces the various emotions of the mind. [...] In short, we hesitate not to affirm, that Valentine and Orson will become a great and deserved favourite with the Public.<sup>544</sup>

*Valentine and Orson* deserves indeed to be remembered as a pioneering work that exploited the great malleability of melodrama by incorporating and re-elaborating much of the drama of the previous years, including the Gothic. Like *Deaf and Dumb* and *A Tale of Mystery*, it fully belongs to what William S. Dye termed ‘foundling plays’, that is plays

in which, for the purpose of plot, and in order to secure the necessary suspense, the identity of one of the principal characters is not disclosed at the opening of the play. In each case, the character in question, either does not know the secret of his birth, or else he is a “long lost brother” whose death is supposed to have been brought about by some foul means, or who, for

<sup>543</sup> *The European Review*, vol. 45 (April 1804), p. 297.

<sup>544</sup> *Sporting Magazine*, vol. 24 (April 1804), p. 49.

other reasons, has disappeared.<sup>545</sup>

And like Holcroft's melodramas, *Valentine and Orson* employs a number of traditional Gothic motifs, and, although the play does not strictly pertain to the Gothic genre as commonly understood, it is clearly linked to that tradition, in fact it is an evolution of it. The beginning, for example, is strangely disquieting: the stage is dark and the only visible lights are those coming from the windows of a convent, creating an eerie transparency effect. As the curtain slowly rises and dawn reddens, a procession of friars and nuns crosses the stage while singing solemnly to the accompaniment of organ music. As Hugo explains, the chant is a requiem in memory of King Pepin's allegedly departed sister Belisanta, therefore immediately suggesting that something terrible has happened. Another macabre set piece is the Green Knight's secret encampment, situated near an oak tree with the hanging corpses of the knights that failed to beat him. Orson himself, similarly to the lost children of Holcroft's plays, is initially described with quite unearthly terms (in the first act two credulous citizens debate on him being 14 or 13 and a half feet tall), and also his first appearance in the wood 'with a dead animal in his grasp' as bestial howls are heard in the background might have elicited shivers. It is indeed not easy to imagine Orson's impact on early nineteenth-century theatregoers. During the Middle Ages, the character played on fears about the existence of monstrous feral men completely deprived of humanity and prone to unspeakable atrocities, a popular bugbear that appears in many, mostly fictional narratives:

Orson metamorphoses into that medieval bogeyman, 'the wild man'. Such wild men haunted the woods of medieval and Renaissance romance: irrational, carnivorous, dangerous, untamed. They lived and died out in the wild woods, far from the sound of church bells; hairy as demons, or sometimes leafy; always solitary; moving alone through the wilderness; sometimes snatching children or, more often, women from the beleaguered villages; marauding, angry, violent, though (if tamed) useful and loyal servants to the wandering knights given up to adventure in the trackless forests. They were without speech.<sup>546</sup>

With the Enlightenment, this iconic monster figure was ideally substituted by the noble savage, who, especially after Rousseau's famous philosophical speculations on the subject in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, 1755), captured the collective imagination as a symbol of

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<sup>545</sup> Dye, William S., Jr. (1919), p. 27.

<sup>546</sup> Newton, Michael, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children*, New York: Picador (2002), pp. 22-3. Jane Moody has noted that in later monster melodramas, such as James Robinson Planché's *The Vampyre* (English Opera House, 1819) and Edward Fitzball's *The Flying Dutchman* (Adelphi, 1826), 'the figure of the wild man provided an iconographic blueprint for the dramatisation of supernatural terror. Like the wild man, Vanderdecken and the Vampire display corporeal agility, tender solicitude and mute expressiveness, especially under the influence of music'. Moody, Jane (2000), p. 93. The same can also be said of early theatrical incarnations of Frankenstein's monster, similarly characterised with mute, pantomime-like gesture. Interestingly, even after the early nineteenth-century loosening of rigid generic restrictions, silentness and taciturnity remained distinctive traits of (most) supernatural figures at both legitimate and illegitimate theatres.

man's harmonic integration with nature<sup>547</sup>. The noble savage started then to become an emblem of Romantic naturalism, that is the 'peculiar form of naturalism which arises from a desire to find the supernatural within the natural, or, in other words, to achieve an emotionally satisfying fusion of the real and the unreal, the obvious and the mysterious'<sup>548</sup>. In reviving the story of Valentine and Orson ten years after the Sadler's Wells pantomime, Dibdin and Farley seemed therefore to have perfectly understood the persisting topicality and allure of this medieval epic, but they also wanted to capitalise on its implicit Gothic appeal. Described as 'a true phantasmagoria of the real and the unreal, the natural and the supernatural, the possible and the impossible'<sup>549</sup>, *Valentine and Orson* came to symbolise the typical larger-than-life sense of wonder that defined the melodramatic genre while simultaneously exploring a new way of representing those barbarous and superstitious Gothic times with which English culture had something of a love-hate relationship. Actually, *Valentine and Orson's* main selling point, apart from the extraordinary character of Orson, was its visual ostentatiousness and untethered imagination, which brought onto stage fantastic characters and settings as had not been seen in spoken drama in a long time. Dibdin chose to incorporate as many supernatural figures and tropes of the original romance as possible, including an enchanted ring, a magical shield, a genius, a sorcerer, a giant and various fiends. And yet, no one complained about this as it happened with the shocking apparitions in Gothic dramas because *Valentine and Orson's* world is a dream otherworld whose exceedingly fabulous nature created the necessary distance from

<sup>547</sup> Moreover, at the time of *Valentine and Orson's* performance the story of the 'wild boy of Aveyron' was still fresh in the audience's mind. It was the case of an abandoned (and possibly autistic) child of about 12 years who appeared to have spent most of his life wandering naked in the woods of South-Central France, relegated to a solitary existence and incapable of human language and understanding (he had probably suffered from violence and abuse, as the scar on his throat testified). The child was first sighted by local peasants on the edge of the forest near Lacaune, in the district of Aveyron (near Toulouse). In the subsequent three years he was repeatedly captured but always managed to escape, until he was eventually caught by a dyer on 9 January 1800. This feral child was considered a pure human being who embodied the idealistic primitive state of nature advocated by Rousseau, an uncorrupted creature that did not know human meanness. Named Victor, the boy was brought to Paris in order to be studied by doctors, but never became civilised. His case inspired a host of philosophical, pedagogical, psychological and anthropological debates in the whole of Europe, ultimately raising questions about the very nature of the human condition. It also gave a further impetus to contemporary melodramatic representations of deaf-mute characters. The boy's own name was probably inspired by the title character of Pixérécourt's melodrama *Victor; ou l'Enfant de la Forêt* (based on François-Guillaume Ducray-Duminil's eponymous 1796 novel), which was still performed in three Parisian theatres when Victor was brought to the capital. See McDonagh, Patrick, *Idiocy: A Cultural History*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press (2008), pp. 51-78.

<sup>548</sup> Fairchild, H. N., *The Noble Savage. A Study in Romantic Naturalism*, New York: Columbia University Press (1928), p. 1. The renewed interest in the figure of the human savage was probably an important factor pushing Kemble to revive *The Tempest* in December 1806. While still retaining much of the backbone of the Dryden-Davenant Restoration version, Kemble restored considerable bits of Shakespeare and depicted Caliban (played by John Emery) as a tragic, almost malignant creature, abandoning the mostly unambiguous comic interpretation of the character that had survived for more than a century (and omitting Sycorax, sister-monster to Caliban, introduced by Dryden and Davenant). Shakespeare, William, *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 69. Frederick Burwick has suggested that the dynamic between Emery's Caliban and Kemble's Prospero may have served as a model for later Frankenstein plays. Burwick, Frederick, 'Six Characters in Search of Their Lost Playwrights', in *The Lost Romantics: Forgotten Poets, Neglected Works and One-Hit Wonders*, ed. Norbert Lennartz, London: Palgrave Macmillan (2020), p. 23.

<sup>549</sup> Daniel, George, 'Remarks' to *Valentine and Orson*, London: John Cumberland (1831), p. 5.

the audience, avoiding the risk of someone taking it too seriously. It is less a horror than a fairy-tale kind of supernaturalism: if it frightens, it likely does it softly, as fairy tales usually do, with no interest in arousing the almost unbearable emotional (and intellectual) shocks provoked by ‘German’ Gothic spectres<sup>550</sup>. As a matter of fact, the play was billed as a ‘Serio-Comic’ piece and some scenes – such as Orson's interactions with Hugo – possess a clear humorous quality that lightens the atmosphere in several parts. That the play was treated on a par with traditional holiday pantomimes is testified by Oulton's claim that ‘[t]his splendid entertainment [...] highly delighted juvenile spectators’<sup>551</sup>, which speaks volumes about the willingness to reach the largest possible audience. In point of fact, ‘Valentine and Orson’ appeared to be one of the favourite stories for children, just like ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ or ‘Jack The Giant Killer’ (both of which would be later dramatised by Dibdin). *The Monthly Mirror* confirmed that ‘the particulars of the story [were] so well known that every infant [could] lisp them’<sup>552</sup>, and this is confirmed by its extensive proliferation in bookshops and circulating libraries, in line with the existing vogue for chapbook editions of fairy tales, nursery rhymes and myths<sup>553</sup>. Also with regard to the supernatural, therefore, patent melodrama initially needed to find a compromise between Gothic luridness and pantomimical fantasy: the best way to do so was to explore both the fairy-tale side of the Gothic and the Gothic side of fairy tales.

### 3.5 Beautiful fairies, magical transformations and other Gothic enchantments

<sup>550</sup> Dibdin himself did not appear to be in his element with the conventional Gothic mode: for example, his introduction of a ghost in *The Bride of Lammermoor; or, the Spectre at the Fountain* (Surrey, 1819), a melodramatic adaptation of a historical novel by Walter Scott, reportedly did not meet with the public's favour. See White, Henry Adelbert, *Sir Walter Scott's Novels on the Stage*, vols. 76-8, New Haven: Yale University Press (1927), p. 75. He probably felt more comfortable poking fun of the idiosyncrasies of the genre in blatant parodies like *Harlequin's Habeas; or, the Hall of Spectres* (Covent Garden, 1802), a Christmas pantomime that featured special appearances by *Hamlet's* Ghost, *The Castle Spectre's* Evelina, Bluebeard and other famous Gothic icons. Also his second melodrama for Covent Garden, *Bonifacio and Bridgetina; or, the Knight of the Hermitage; or, the Windmill Turret; or, the Spectre of the North-East Gallery* (1808), based on a French play and ironically labelled as a ‘New Grand Comick, Tragick, Operatick, Pantomimick, Melodramatick Extravaganza’, was an obvious satire of Gothic theatre which nevertheless the audience did not fully understand. The ‘Comic, Heroic, Operatic, Tragic, Pantomimic, Burletta-Spectacular Extravaganza’ *Don Giovanni; or, A Spectre on Horseback!* (Surrey, 1817) followed the same path, offering a hilarious take of the ghost scenes. In the mid 1820s, when German and Gothic supernaturalism enjoyed a powerful revival (see next chapter), Dibdin was manager of the Sadler's Wells and wrote a number of amusing horror burlesques, including *The Devil's in Doctor Faustus; or, Mephistophilis in Town* (1825), *The Enchanted Girdles; or, Winkie the Witch and the Ladies of Samarcand* (1825) and *All a Fetch; or, Ghosts and Apprehensions* (1826).

<sup>551</sup> Oulton, Chamberlain Walley (1818), p. 121.

<sup>552</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 27 (April 1804), p. 273.

<sup>553</sup> A chapbook edition of the tale entitled *The Famous History of Valentine and Orson, or, the Wild Man of Orléans* was published in 1804 in the wake of the melodrama's success. In the same year, bookseller Benjamin Tabart included the romance in his three-volume *Collection of Popular Stories for the Nursery; Newly Translated and Revised from the French, Italian and Old English Writers* along with other famous fairy tales accompanied by illustrations inspired by recent theatrical adaptations. Lathey, Gillian, *The Role of Translators in Children's Literature: Invisible Storytellers*, New York and London: Routledge (2010), p. 57.

As a response to Covent Garden's *Valentine and Orson*, on 6 December 1805 Drury Lane launched a melodramatic adaptation of 'The Sleeping Beauty', a well known fairy tale that centres on an ethereal love story filled with fairies, charms and assorted magical paraphernalia. The theme dated back to an anonymous fourteenth century prose romance entitled *Perceforest* (set in pre-Christian England)<sup>554</sup>, but it was Charles Perrault's rendition (1697), itself a reworking from Giambattista Basile's 'Sole, Luna e Talia' from his collection *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634), that defined some of the most characteristic elements of the plot, notably the evil spell that causes the titular princess to fall into a hundred-year sleep. Drury Lane's 'Grand Legendary Melo-drama', the first recorded English theatrical adaptation of the tale, was penned by Sir Lumley St. George Skeffington, a rather modest playwright who so far had only composed a couple of mediocre comedies. An *ante litteram* dandy, Skeffington was a high society celebrity especially renowned for his courteous manners and bizarre extravagances, such as the habit of dressing like a Robespierre complete with wig and face make-up<sup>555</sup>. *The Sleeping Beauty* proved a huge one hit wonder that significantly contributed to his literary fame<sup>556</sup>. The play was never published (only John Addison's acclaimed musical score appeared in print), so the only version available is the Lord Chamberlain's manuscript copy belonging to the Larpent Collection at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. The plot diverges from Perrault's tale in many aspects and displays a rather noteworthy inventiveness. As a review in *The European Magazine* highlighted, '[t]he foundation rests, indeed, upon an old story; but the superstructure and the order are all new, striking, and eccentric. They furnish proofs of original genius, finished taste, and fruitful fancy'<sup>557</sup>.

Curiously set in fourteenth-century England, the piece opens with a knight errant, Aldibert, who, along with his adventuring companion Oswin and his esquire Launcelot, arrives on the threshold of a thick forest that arouses mysterious feelings of terror. A village girl, Emma, informs them that the forest is enchanted, and that in the centre of it there is an ancient castle in which a beautiful lady has been sleeping for 100 years. Then the three meet Ellen, a woman allegedly 117 years old who claims to know the whole story. She reveals that the forest had been the site of a supernatural incident when the wicked fairy cast an evil spell on Ethelinde, the daughter of the late earl Egbert. The spell was supposed to kill Ethelinde, but the Fairy of Benevolence Melzarina (played by Mlle

<sup>554</sup> *Perceforest* is also mentioned in Lewis's *The Monk*. Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *The Monk*, ed. Nick Groom, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2016), p. 104. Scholars have also noted the similarity between the Sleeping Beauty motif and the episode in the Old Norse Völsunga saga where the dragon slayer Siegfried awakens the warrior maiden Brynhild from the enchanted slumber imposed on her by the god Odin. O' Donoghue, Heather, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths*, London-New York: I.B.Tauris (2007), p. 140.

<sup>555</sup> Gronow, Rees Howell, *Reminiscences of Captain Gronow, formerly of the Grenadier Guards*, 2nd ed., London: Smith, Elder and Co. (1862), pp. 86-7.

<sup>556</sup> The work also earned him a mention in Lord Byron's satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809).

<sup>557</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 48 (December 1805), p. 460.

Parisot, a French singer and dancer) managed to soften its effects and contrived to place the lady in a castle where she fell into a century-long sleep together with her guards, pages and attendants, never growing old. Only her father and mother were allowed to visit her every nine months, but at their death the reign was usurped by the malicious Baron Ethelred. According to Ellen, Ethelinde ‘will never be awakened but by a courageous knight, who never felt the passion of love’<sup>558</sup>. Aldibert is excited by the prospect of a new adventure and, along with his party, decides to enter the wood in spite of bad omens (before their departure a violent flash of lightning sets some trees on fire). There the adventurers get lost and Aldibert soon finds himself alone, when an extraordinary supernatural event takes him by surprise:

*Soft music – A cloud descends – rolls forward – returns leaving in its place the Fairy Melzarina accompanied by two attendants – illuminated letters appear in the cloud*

*“The Fairy Melzarina, aids the cause of Aldibert.”*

*After a short time the letters disappear – Aldibert bows obediently – Melzarina by actions encourages him.*

*Aldibert: I must be her deliverer! – An animating fire till now unknown, profuses all my faculties. (Music)*

*Melzarina appears satisfied with this declaration – dances – is joined in the dance by her two attendants.*

*Aldibert: Bright Being! I condescend – and let me hear thy lips pronounce Encouragement. (Music)*

*Illuminated letters appear in the cloud*

*“Melzarina speaks not to a mortal.”*

*Aldibert bows submissively – Melzarina takes leave of him – with the attendants disappears in the cloud which brought her.*

Aldibert rejoins his two fellow companions and together they resume their enterprise as the trees magically open to reveal a distant view of the sleeping beauty's castle.

The first scene of the second act takes place inside a dark Gothic gallery in which the three adventurers are searching in vain for the princess's apartment. They notice that all residents of the castle are still sleeping in the same state in which they were 100 years before. In a saloon Oswin and Launcelot find the page Edward, who still holds in his bosom a paper containing a love ballad which he wrote for his old fiancée Ellen. In a very tender moment, Oswin reads the first lines of the ballad and the sleeping Edward begins singing it, as if by magic. Meanwhile, Aldibert finally finds Ethelinde's hidden room. He breaks its folding doors with his sword to reveal an elegant apartment

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<sup>558</sup> All quotations from the text are from Skeffington, St. George Lumley, *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* (1805), in John Larpent Plays, The Huntington Library, San Marino: California. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Eighteenth Century Drama [Last accessed 24 June 2020]. Minor graphic adjustments have been made to facilitate reading and comprehension.

featuring a magnificent curtained bed surrounded by a balustrade as well as several of Ethelinde's friends and attendants lying asleep on the bed's steps. At this point

*[t]he symphony of the waking commences. The balustrades and the curtains open of themselves. Ethelinde is discovered in a sumptuous dress sleeping on the bed.*

*Aldibert: O Ethelinde! My life! My love! Awake! It is Aldibert who calls – Aldibert – whose heart is all thy own. He approaches the bed – kneels in a respectful manner and takes Ethelinde's hand.*

*The several persons are at the same time emancipated from their enchantment – They gaze round and appear astonish'd on seeing the knight. Aldibert kisses Ethelinde's hand – She awakens by degrees – almost doubts she exists – She appears surprised and pleased at seeing Aldibert – he assists her in descending.*

Ethelinde and all the other people of the castle are slowly freed from the spell during what *The European Magazine* described as ‘the most magnificent scene, perhaps, ever produced upon a theatre’<sup>559</sup>. Songs and dances succeed and Aldibert vows his love to the princess, who, however, is saddened to learn that her parents have died of old age. Shortly after, Edward meets her beloved Ellen and is stunned to see that she has become an elderly, toothless woman. She therefore decides to release him from their love vows, but the page refuses and declares that his feelings for her have not altered. As a reward for his constancy, Ellen's appearance magically changes ‘from decrepitude to youth’, as if no time had passed.

Meanwhile, Ethelred and his troops penetrate the castle through a secret subterranean passage and the knights swear to protect Ethelinde at all costs. A violent combat ensues between the usurper and Aldibert, who eventually manages to prevail over the enemy. The battle happily concludes with the heroes' victory and the villains' capture. At this point, the fairy Melzarina materialises again and, just like the Genius Pacolet in *Valentine and Orson*, brings about the end of the melodrama through a sort of *féerie*-like transformation:

#### *A Change of Symphony*

*Clouds descend – in which Melzarina appears – She advances to the knight – illuminated letters appear in the cloud*

*“The malediction is defeated – Ethelinde is free.”*

*The clouds disperse – and in the place of the castle a magnificent saloon is discovered.*

*Ethelinde – surrounded by all the court of her attendants – Melzarina places herself between Ethelinde and Aldibert whose hands she takes and unites them.*

*Melzarina waves her hand – Sylphs and Fairies enter with garlands of flowers and coffers filled with gems and brilliant arms. The jewels are presented to Ethelinde and the arms to the knights.*

The piece concludes with a grand dance involving all the main characters, Melzarina, the sylphs, the

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<sup>559</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 48 (December 1805), p. 460.

fairies and the villagers, while a final chorus celebrates the beauty of virtuous love.

The premiere was a total success greeted by several cheers and continuous applause. The music and songs received unanimous praise and so did actors, with an honourable mention for Maria Theresa De Camp's interpretation of old Ellen. *The European Magazine* published an enthusiastic review in which it declared that 'much as may have been hoped from the taste and genius of that gentleman [Skeffington], the reality has far exceeded the most sanguine expectation'<sup>560</sup>. The journal particularly praised the absolute artistic autonomy the author enjoyed:

Mr. Skeffington has not intended to confine himself to the track of probability; but, giving the rein to his imagination, has boldly ventured into the boundless region of necromancy and fairy adventure. The valorous days of chivalry are brought to our recollection; and the tales which warmed the breasts of youth with martial ardour, are again rendered agreeable to the mind that is not so fastidious as to turn with fancied superiority from the pleasing delusion. [...] The Proprietors seem to have been fully confident of the effect of Mr. Skeffington's exertions, by the unparalleled liberality with which they have brought forward this piece. The costume is splendid in the extreme; and in point of scenic effect, we do not remember any thing by which *The Sleeping Beauty* has been surpassed.<sup>561</sup>

*The Monthly Mirror* put emphasis on how the special effects perfectly suited the story:

Mr. SKEFFINGTON has done ample justice to the subject he has chosen, has given all possible interest to the several incidents, and shewn himself to be a skilful adept in what is called *stage effect*:—that every mechanical aid, and every sort of embellishment which a stage, so admirably constructed for *spectacle*, is able to give, have been bestowed on the piece; and that crowded audiences are constantly attesting, by their applause, the pleasure their receive from the performance.<sup>562</sup>

Of course not all critics appreciated this kind of productions. The provoking ultra-conservative journal *The Satirist; or, Monthly Meteor*, for example, derided the author's personal eccentricities and dismissed *The Sleeping Beauty* as a 'soporific' and 'dull' work, albeit not 'a conclusive proof of a man's total deficiency of talent'<sup>563</sup>. *The Monthly Mirror* itself sardonically commented on how the public preferred dramatisations of fairy tales to serious drama:

The stories of the nursery possess a charm, which old age itself has no power to dissolve. Hence the universal attraction of these little fairy tales, when exhibited in action, assisted by the gorgeous dresses, magnificent scenery, and other splendid decorations, which of late years (we will not say with what advantage to our drama) have placed English theatres on a level with the Opera House. MOTHER GOOSE, of immortal memory, now the chief prop of the British stage, has opened, in *The Sleeping Beauty*, another mine of wealth for the managers of Drury-Lane. Shakspeare [*sic*] waves his magic wand in vain; Congreve is obsolete, Farquhar dull, and Otway unaffecting, but *Mother Goose*, blessings on her venerable head! *her* stores appear to be inexhaustible. Henceforth be her statue affixed, instead of that of Apollo, on the top of the

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<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.

<sup>562</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 20 (December 1805), p. 405.

<sup>563</sup> *The Satirist; or, Monthly Meteor*, vol. 2 (June 1808), pp. 542-3.

theatre; for she is, beyond a doubt, its tutelary genius.<sup>564</sup>

It would be indeed short-sighted to snobbishly underrate the value and impact of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Although now totally forgotten, Skeffington's piece deserves to be remembered not only as the earliest English theatrical version of a story that still holds a strong grip on the collective imagination but also as a surprisingly good and self-conscious one. The play skilfully alternates jokes and comical scenes (such as when Launcelot takes a bottle of wine from the hand of a sleeping officer) with some genuine Gothic shiver (mainly derived from eerie locations such as the enchanted castle and the dark woods, which according to *The European Magazine* resembled the haunted forest of the Armida episode in Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*<sup>565</sup>). Even the sudden pantomimic appearances of the diaphanous, quasi-angelic fairy Melzarina might have visually recalled those of the ghostly Evelina in *The Castle Spectre*, although her impact was self-evidently different. Actually, the fairy supernaturalism of *The Sleeping Beauty* was seamlessly accepted as unproblematic, in part due to the special creative freedom that characterised the new melodramatic genre, and in part to the fact that it was in many ways more akin to what the contemporary English audiences intended as their native Gothic heritage, in opposition to the spectral, pseudo-Catholic necro-horrors proper of the Walpolean Gothic school. As *The European Magazine* wrote, here the superstitious 'days of chivalry' were 'rendered again agreeable' since their re-evocation aimed to 'warm' the hearts, not to make them convulse<sup>566</sup>. Skeffington, therefore, succeeded in adapting a very famous fairy tale into a supernatural play that was obviously indebted to the Gothic tradition but at the same time turned in the direction of the rising fantasy genre, creating an intriguing hybrid perfectly suited to the multiformity of melodrama.

Unfortunately, the rest of Skeffington's theatrical career was marked by disappointments. His three-act drama *The Mysterious Bride* (Drury Lane, 1808) met with controversy since it was the translation of a French melodrama, Louis Charles Caigniez's *La Forêt d'Hermanstadt, ou La Fausse Épouse* (Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, 1805), which a few months later would have also been adapted by Thomas Dibdin under the title of *The Forest of Hermanstadt; or, A Princess and No Princess*, performed at the Haymarket by the Covent Garden company. Neither of these productions was particularly successful, and some critics mocked the two authors for quarrelling about such an unworthy subject<sup>567</sup>. The prologue to *The Mysterious Bride*, spoken by Mr Putnam,

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<sup>564</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 20 (December 1805), p. 405.

<sup>565</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 48 (December 1805), p. 460. A characteristic setting in both Gothic and fairy fiction, the forest is a supernaturally charged place of danger, intrigue and liminality, as established also by works as different as the Gilgamesh Epic, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Dante's *Inferno*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and folk tales such as 'Valentine and Orson' itself.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>567</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 4 (October 1808), p. 256.

reveals Skeffington's wish to turn to more elevated dramatic writing:

With anxious mind, with agitated breast,  
By ev'ry terror forcibly impress'd,  
Our bard to-night, exalted in his views,  
Resigns the comic for the serious muse; [...]  
Our bard no longer treads on Fairy land,  
Where Fancy, like a despot, holds command;  
No longer now endeavours to excite  
Ideal grief, and fabulous delight; [...]  
He simply offers, unadorned by art,  
One touch of Nature on a gen'rous heart,  
Though pageantry, though magic he forsake,  
Though "*Sleeping Beauties*" here no longer wake,  
Yet shall it still decidedly appear,  
That love, when noble, never slumbers here.<sup>568</sup>

The attempt, however, proved a complete disaster: Skeffington never really got rid of the shadow of his fairy masterpiece, as testified by the fact that he was given the humorous nickname of 'sleeping beauty'<sup>569</sup>. He eventually returned to deal with supernatural themes in *The Magic Bride* (Lyceum, 1810), though the mix of techno-Gothic and fairy tale devices was not exactly memorable (see previous chapter). Thomas Dibdin himself tried to replicate *Valentine and Orson's* vast success with less fantastic-oriented productions, but obtained poor results and soon moved to the illegitimate Surrey Theatre, helping it to become a serious contender to Drury Lane and Covent Garden. As seems evident, Royal theatres' melodramatists struggled to establish themselves as respectable authors, and when they tried their hands at more serious stuff, the audience's disappointment and the critics' derision came in to demolish their aspirations. There was no coming back from the magical realms of fairy melodrama for these authors, condemned to produce money-making hits one after the other in order to emerge in the ultra-competitive theatrical market of the time. Yet, these productions should not be dismissed as mere populist trash, as they are often considered in criticism of nineteenth-century theatre, because they displayed a remarkable artistic merit in the mise-en-scène of a large amount of as yet theatrically unexplored fantastic sources, made available to a broad audience on an unprecedented scale. As David J. Buch noted, the success of fairy tales' dramatic adaptations 'contributed to the broad dissemination of fantastic material and helped to define a national character'<sup>570</sup>. In England, like in France, fairy melodramas found themselves in the right place at the right time to capitalise the Romantic interest in folklore, myths, legends and popular narratives and introduce them into mainstream culture, where they survive to the present

<sup>568</sup> Quoted in *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 54 (October 1808), pp. 313-4.

<sup>569</sup> Stirling, A. M. W. (ed.), *The Letter-Bag of Lady Elizabeth Spencer-Stanhope*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: John Lane (1913), p. 128.

<sup>570</sup> Buch, David J. (2008), p. xxii.

day.

Theatrical managers soon realised that fairy melodramas provided the best antidote against lean profits and lack of originality. A few months after *The Sleeping Beauty*, Drury Lane presented to the public another spectacular production of this kind, entitled *Ali Baba; or, The Forty Thieves*. The piece, which debuted on 8 April 1806, was the product of a collaboration between the house owner Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who sketched the text's main body, and his father-in-law Charles Ward, who wrote the dialogues and was given complete creative control. Ward's final work, however, was deemed an unstageable mess, to the extent that George Colman the Younger was called in to fix the situation and rewrite the play extensively<sup>571</sup>. Still, it is particularly significant that Sheridan himself, one of the champions of legitimate drama, stooped to this kind of second-level plays (although he preferred not to appear as the principal author). Defined in the various printed editions alternatively as a 'Grand Romantic Drama', 'Musical Romance', 'Operatic Romance' and 'Grand Melodramatic Romance', *Ali Baba* actually was a genuine example of melodrama that could rely on some of the best stage artists of the time (Michael Kelly as musical composer, Alexander Johnston as machinist and Thomas Greenwood and Gaetano Marinari as stage painters). The subject was drawn from the popular fairy tale of 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves', in which a poor woodcutter incidentally discovers the magic phrase ('Open Sesame') to open the rocky entrance of a cave where 40 ruthless thieves have hidden their rich booty. The story was included in Antoine Galland's *Arabian Nights* and is probably to be considered the creation of the French scholar's own mind, although he always claimed to have heard it from a Syrian traveller he had met in Paris<sup>572</sup>. Drury Lane's melodrama, however, significantly diverged from Galland's version since it added several new elements, notably two interesting supernatural figures that do not appear in any of the story's previous sources. The splendid beginning immediately introduces one of these, Ardenelle (played by Harriet Siddons), the beautiful Fairy of the Lake:

*The grotto of the fairy—Procession of the fairy of the lake, who is drawn in a chariot by swans, and surrounded by fairies, sylphs, naiads, &c. &c.—Singing and dancing.*<sup>573</sup>

The Fairy announces her intention to battle against her greatest foe, Orcobrand, the wicked Genius of the Black Forest and the protector of the ferocious banditti that haunt the woods. She informs her

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<sup>571</sup> Genest, John, vol. 7 (1832), pp. 706-7.

<sup>572</sup> Razzaque, Arafat Abdur, 'Genie in a Bookshop: Print Culture, Authorship, and "The Affair of the Eight Volume" at the Origins of *Les Mille et une nuits*', in *The Thousand and One Nights: Sources and Transformations*, ed. Ibrahim Akel and William Granar, Leiden: Brill (2018), p. 97.

<sup>573</sup> All quotations from the text are from Colman, George The Younger; Sheridan, Richard Brinsley; Ward, Charles, *The Forty Thieves. A Grand Operatic Romance*, Philadelphia: M. Carey (1808). The play was not printed in Britain, but the American edition, very similar to the Larpent manuscript (except for some minor variants) and complete with information about the Drury Lane's production, is highly reliable as to the scenes here considered.

attendant spirit Gossamer that their leader, Abdullah, is about to threaten the good woodman Ali Baba and his son Ganem. In a marvellous moment once again reminiscent of pantomime and *féerie* techniques, Ardenelle

*[w]aves her hand—The centre of the grotto opens and presents a view of the forest, across which move the figures of Ali Baba with the ass, and his son Ganem, resembling their appearance in the next scene—Music as they pass—Grotto closes.*

The Fairy shows a transparency across which Ali Baba and Ganem's 'filmy, unsubstantial semblances' are seen, in a sort of magical preview of the following scene. She explains to her attendants why it is so important to protect such lowly beings and then she is '*drawn off in her car — surrounded by the nymphs, &c. — singing and dancing as before*'.

The terrible Orcobrand is instead presented at the beginning of the second act in a scene that ideally acts as a counterpoint to the first one, starting from the spectacularly opposite setting:

*The abode of Orcobrand—Dark rocks with caverns,—Rude throne and chair—Thunder and lightning—Lamps half down—Orcobrand is discovered on his throne—surrounded by demons, fiends, &c. attended by war, famine, fraud, and rapine.*

The whole scene inside Orcobrand's abode, by far the melodrama's darkest passage, is accompanied by terrific music, thunder and flaming torches. Orcobrand is visited by Hassarac, who has recently become the new captain of the banditti after the forcible deposition of Abdullah (guilty of having fallen in love with Zelig, the daughter of a lord they had tried to rob), and warns him that someone (Ali Baba) knows the secret of their cave, though the overwhelming power of the Fairy of the Lake prevents him from revealing his name. Hassarac is not intimidated and promises Orcobrand to capture the enemy.

These two scenes add a new supernatural framework to a plot which otherwise develops in a quite traditional way. After discovering the thieves' treasure, Ali Baba and Ganem return to their cottage with bags loaded with gold. Ali's rich brother Cassim, however, finds out the secret and he too decides to enter the cave. Once inside, Cassim forgets the magic words to get out and is eventually beheaded by the banditti (in a scene not shown on stage). His body is later found in the forest by Ali, who then inherits all his fortunes. Meanwhile, the leader of the banditti Hassarac obtains the information he seeks thanks to Mustafa, the cobbler who secretly sewed Cassim's head to his body in order to hide the tragic incident from the world (a touch of Gothic morbidity already present in Perrault's text). Disguised as a merchant, Hassarac manages to get admission into Cassim Baba's palace in Baghdad, where Ali now resides, at the price of 39 jars allegedly full of oil, in each of which, however, a robber is concealed. One of Ali's slaves, Morgiana, discovers the deception and,

having called for the Fairy of the Lake's help, pours a charmed liquid into the jars, thus instantly killing the robbers. Then, during a banquet organized by Ali in honour of Hassarac (who now presents himself as an old friend of Cassim's), Morgiana enters disguised as a dancer and, in the midst of a thrilling ball, prevents the villain from assassinating Ali, forcing him to plunge his dagger into his own heart. The forces of good celebrate victory but, suddenly, thunder and lightning shake the stage and the light goes out. The setting rapidly mutates (the influence of *féeries* is here again obvious) and the next scene takes place inside Orcobrand's abode, where a violent supernatural battle rages. The diabolical Genius rises through a grave trap and menaces Abdullah and his lover Zelig (actually Morgiana's long lost sister), who are chained to a rock. He then orders his demon attendants to seize Ali, Morgiana and the others, but the Fairy of the Lake providentially comes to the rescue:

*the rock opens above and discovers the fairy.—Thunder.*

*Fairy.* Detested wretch, forbear!

*Orco.* This is my triumph! and you shall witness it. Ha ! ha ! ha !—prevent it if you can—I defy you! You and your prophet!—

*Fairy.* That impious threat gives me the power that arms my hand.—Blasphemer, take the death you merit.

*Thunder.—Fairy darts a thunderbolt, which strikes Orcobrand dead. Zelig and Abdallah's chains drop off.—They come forward.—The Fairy descends as the scene vanishes, and advances in centre.—Orcobrand's body is borne off by fiends.—Lamps up.*<sup>574</sup>

The piece concludes with another enchanting change of setting:

*Fairy's palace.—At the end of which is seen a beautiful transparent lake—with temples, &c.—on the lake cupids, nymphs, &c. &c. are seen sailing to and fro, in various fanciful boats decorated with streamers, wreaths, and Garlands, &c. &c.*

*The characters kneel to the fairy—who blesses them, then leads them up the centre of the stage—nymphs, swains—fairies, sylphs, &c. &c.—enter from top on each side.*

#### A GRAND DANCE.

*Ali Baba* obtained a considerable success and in the following decades it was continuously revived at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden; the story of *Ali Baba*, like that of the *Sleeping Beauty*, went on to become one of the most popular theatrical subjects of the first half of the nineteenth century. Critics had to admit the piece's unquestionable merits: *The Monthly Mirror*, for example, observed that it was 'as pretty as *Cinderella*, as terrific as *Bluebeard*, as picturesque as the *Sleeping Beauty*,

<sup>574</sup> In the Larpent text, Orcobrand and his demons 'sink down in flames', but it might be possible that this explicit visual reference to Hell was later deemed unfit for this kind of performance. See Colman, George The Younger; Sheridan, Richard Brinsley; Ward, Charles, *The Forty Thieves* in John Larpent Plays, The Huntington Library, San Marino: California. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Eighteenth Century Drama [Last accessed 25 June 2020].

and as magnificent as any of them<sup>575</sup>; whereas *The European Magazine* wrote that the authors had fully achieved their objective because ‘notwithstanding the disadvantages naturally arising from the over-strained expectations raised by previous puffs direct and collateral, the success of *The Forty Thieves* was as complete as if its fascinations had burst wholly unexpected upon the Public’<sup>576</sup>. The main performers were all appreciated, especially Mrs De Camp, who, after the excellent interpretation of Ellen in *The Sleeping Beauty*, played Morgiana, the play’s heroine, with ‘truth and feeling’, while John Bannister ‘did ample justice’ to the character of Ali Baba<sup>577</sup>. Furthermore, *Ali Baba* showed that melodramas were getting better and better on the visual level and continued to raise the bar, especially as regards machinery, scenery and dresses, in what was a continuous (and increasingly expensive) challenge to surprise and delight the audience<sup>578</sup>. Predictably, however, the insertion of Ardenelle and Orcobrand, two figures extraneous to the original tale, raised some doubts. The *Monthly Literary Recreations* asserted that these ‘supernatural agents [...] destroy the simplicity which forms the chief charm of the source from which this afterpiece is drawn’<sup>579</sup>. In similar fashion, *La Belle Assemblée* complained that ‘the fable is pressed down by an incumbering [sic] machinery of fairies, genii, and hobgoblins’<sup>580</sup>. It seems obvious, however, that these additions, seen as superfluous by refined critics, were an excuse to employ those magical characters which the audience was so fond of, and the choice apparently paid off: on the premiere night, the visionary ending, created by the Italian scene painter and machinist Gaetano Marinari, ‘excited repeated exclamations of *Bravo! bravo!* which continued increasing, without interruption, till the piece was given out for a second representation amidst a universal tumult of applause’<sup>581</sup>. Also the opening scene in the grotto, featuring Ardenelle entering on a pasteboard car drawn by swans (usually represented by geese) amidst dancing sylphs and fairies, was described as a ‘scenic exhibition of unrivalled beauty’<sup>582</sup>. The introduction of the faery world in *Ali Baba* and other similar melodramas signalled its heady return to spoken drama, and therefore indirectly to legitimate culture, after decades of ostracism and ice-cold intellectual exercises that underplayed its exuberant and naive imaginative force. In keeping with the spectacularisation of the theatre, these works reflected England’s ongoing attempts to promote its own legitimate, culturally respectable Gothicness and

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<sup>575</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 21 (April 1806), p. 264.

<sup>576</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 49 (April 1806), p. 289.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>578</sup> According to *The European Magazine*, ‘every successive effort [...] displays a rapid progress in the art of scenic decoration; the public are thus improved in their taste’, and the reviewer hoped to soon see ‘the expense which in this, as well as other recent instances, had been lavished on *mummary*, employed hereafter in the ornament of some drama fraught with intellectual beauty’. *Ibid.*

<sup>579</sup> *Monthly Literary Creations*, vol. 1 (1807), p. 156.

<sup>580</sup> *La Belle Assemblée; or, Bell’s Court and Fashionable Magazine*, vol. 1 (April 1806), p. 170.

<sup>581</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 49 (April 1806), p. 289.

<sup>582</sup> *The Universal Magazine*, vol. 5 (April 1806), p. 326.

epitomised the renewed centrality that fairies and the like assumed in the Romantic imagination and in nineteenth-century culture at large.

### 3.6 *The Gothic and the fairy world*

During the Enlightenment, the fairy lore had been disallowed and repressed like all other folk superstitions, but in the late eighteenth-century the antiquarian rediscovery of the Gothic past excited the interest of historians, scholars, writers and artists in a topic which had inspired some of the nation's greatest literature (the works of classic English authors such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson and Milton are obviously imbued with fairy mythology) and inextricably belonged to its cultural history. As a result, the whole concept of Gothic supernaturalism became subject to reconsideration. Early Romantic essayist Nathan Drake, for example, explicitly addressed the fact that the horrific supernatural apparatus employed in many contemporary novels and plays and often too quickly dismissed as German absurdity was only a part of a larger Gothic heritage:

Of the various kinds of superstition which have in any age influenced the human mind, none appear to have operated with so much effect as what has been termed the Gothic. Even in the present polished period of society, there are thousands who are yet alive to all the horrors of witchcraft, to all the solemn and terrible graces of the appalling spectre. [...] And although this kind of superstition be able to arrest every faculty of the human mind, and to shake, as it were, all nature with horror, yet does it also delight in the most sportive and elegant imagery. The traditional tales of elves and fairies still convey to a warm imagination an inexhausted [*sic*] source of invention, supplying all those wild, romantic, and varied ideas with which a wayward fancy loves to sport.<sup>583</sup>

Drake stressed how this delightful fairy heritage is by no means foreign to English culture:

The Provençal Bards, and the neglected Chaucer and Spenser, are the originals from whence this exquisite species of fabling has been drawn, improved, and applied with so much inventive elegance by Shakspeare [*sic*]. The flower and the leaf of Chaucer is replete with the most luxuriant description of these preternatural beings.<sup>584</sup>

Drake thus distinguished between 'the awful ministration of the Spectre' (derived from 'Platonic Christianity') and 'the innocent gambols of the Fairy' (derived from 'the fictions of the East')<sup>585</sup>, which he considered as two sides of the same coin, namely Gothic superstition. But if the Gothic Spectre had become the symbol of a cheap and tawdry production of terror and horror fiction, the

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<sup>583</sup> Drake, Nathan, *Literary Hours; or, Sketches Critical, Narrative, and Poetical*, 3rd ed., 2 vols., vol. 1, London: T. Cadell and W. Davies (1804 [1798]), pp. 137-9.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Gothic Fairy represented a native folklore which was nostalgically and fondly recalled<sup>586</sup>. Indeed, the Gothic roots of the faery world had already been highlighted at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Sir William Temple, who, in keeping with the rational episteme of his times, pointed to its slightly alarming quality:

all the visionary tribe of *Fairies, Elves, and Goblins, of Sprites* and of *Bulbeggars* [...] serve not only to fright Children into whatever their Nurses please, but sometimes, by lasting Impressions, to disquiet the sleeps and the very Lives of Men and Women, till they grow to Years of Discretion; and that, God knows, is a Period of Time which some People arrive to be but very late, and perhaps other never. At least, this Belief prevailed so far among the *Goths* and their Races, that all Sorts of Charms were not only attributed to their *Runes* or *Verses*, but to their very Characters<sup>587</sup>

Some decades later, Samuel Johnson's mentioning of the 'Gothick mythology of fairies'<sup>588</sup> animating *A Midsummer Night's Dream* marked a further step in the eighteenth-century recognition of a barbarous but essentially English tradition ennobled by Shakespeare. Then, in 1803, Walter Scott noted that '[t]he word elf, which seems to have been the original name of the beings, afterwards denominated fairies, is of Gothic origin'<sup>589</sup>, thus identifying a clear Gothic line linking the English fairy tradition with the elves belonging to the ancient folklore of the Ostrogothic and Visigothic colonies in Scandinavia. Over the centuries, English fairies progressively lost the hideous and disquieting elements that denoted them especially during the Middle Ages and gradually assumed new features, characteristics and nuances that were mostly due to writers' personal re-interpretations. As Wendy Wall has noted, '[b]y the sixteenth century fairies began to be dissociated from the devil in popular tradition and instead portrayed as child-sized country pranksters who wore coarse clothing and busied themselves with fooling travelers and tinkering with household order'<sup>590</sup>. It is in the same period that the stereotypical image of fairies as delicate miniature creatures with a love for mischievous magic tricks took hold<sup>591</sup>. Walter Scott himself remarked how Elizabethan poets and playwrights fundamentally contributed to canonise the resplendent and dream-like

<sup>586</sup> It is no coincidence, for example, that Skeffington had no reservations about setting *The Sleeping Beauty* in Medieval England, whereas Gothic stories featuring horrid ghosts were rarely set in England.

<sup>587</sup> Temple, Sir William, *The Works of Sir William Temple, Bart.*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: A. Churchill, T. Goodwin, J. Knapton, R. Smith, B. Tooke, J. Round, J. Tonson, O. Lloyd, W. Meres, T. Woodward and F. Clay (1720), p. 244.

<sup>588</sup> Johnson, Samuel (ed.), Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare, with the Corrections and Illustrations of Various Commentators; to Which are Added Notes*, 8 vols., London: J. and R. Tonson, et al. (1765), p. xx.

<sup>589</sup> Scott, Walter, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 2nd ed., 3 vols., vol. 2, Edinburgh: J. Ballantyne (1803 [1803]), p. 175.

<sup>590</sup> Wall, Wendy, 'Why does Puck Sweep? Shakespearean Fairies and the Politics of Cleaning', in *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2002), p. 100.

<sup>591</sup> Although fairies were generally considered capable of moving through the air, it was Alexander Pope who introduced the trademark feature of the insect-wings to the fairies he described in *The Rape of the Lock* (1717). Thomas Stothard's engravings for a 1798 edition of the poem were the first to depict them as winged butterfly-like creatures and created an especially enduring visual motif. Bown, Nicola, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2001), p. 47.

fairyland that was still widely preponderant in the nineteenth-century collective imagination (at least in England<sup>592</sup>):

Many poets of the sixteenth century, and, above all, our immortal Shakespeare, deserting the hackneyed fictions of Greece and Rome, sought for machinery in the superstitions of their native country. "The fays, which nightly dance upon the world," were an interesting subject; and the creative imagination of the bard, improving upon the vulgar belief, assigned them to many of those fanciful attributes and occupations, which posterity have since associated with the name of the fairy. In such employments, as rearing the drooping flower, and arranging the disordered chamber, the fairies of South Britain gradually lost the harsher character of the dwarfs, or elves. Their choral dances were enlivened by the introduction of the merry goblin Puck, for whose freakish pranks they exchanged their original mischievous propensities. The fairies of Shakespeare, Drayton, and Mennis, therefore, at first exquisite fancy portraits, may be considered as having finally operated a change in the original which gave them birth.<sup>593</sup>

Scott illustrates here the common belief that the Elizabethans, and Shakespeare above all, were the ones responsible for the conception of fairies as ethereal, benevolent and often humorous beings, hovering between men and angels<sup>594</sup>. Melodramatically originated from the blending of different influences, Shakespearian fairies sing, dance and playfully meddle with human affairs (although the naughty Puck retained traces of the disturbing features of Robin Goodfellow, a knavish spirit of English folk belief), proving ideal characters for comedy. They were thus admiringly regarded as the exclusive product of a visionary genius as well as an uncompromisingly personal interpretation that ended up becoming the dominant one. The persistence of this almost idyllic image of fairies was also due to the fact that, to Scott's contemporaries, Shakespeare was one of the most immediate sources as to literary representations of the fairy realm, which during the previous century and a

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<sup>592</sup> Scott remarked that '[t]he character of the Scottish fairy is more harsh and terrific'. Scott, Walker (1803), p. 224.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222-3.

<sup>594</sup> Nathan Drake further elaborated on this assumption in the 'Dissertation on the Fairy Mythology, and on the Modifications which it Received from the Genius of Shakespeare', issued in his two-volume study *Shakespeare and His Times* (1817). In his remarks attached to John Cumberland's edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Daniel George wrote that [g]reat pains have been taken to show from which mythology, the Oriental or the Gothic, Shakspeare borrowed his fairies; but we say from *neither*: Shakspeare's fairies are his own: his juvenile reading had given him an idea of an airy being between man and angel—a being so far connected with humanity as to hover o'er us in our vocations by day, and our dreams by night; to help us in our need; or, as his humour pleased, to thwart us in our amusements, or more intricately entangle us in our perplexities—"to haunt, to startle, and waylay". Daniel, George, 'Remarks' to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, London: John Cumberland (1828), p. 6. One century later, Clark Cumberland addressed Shakespeare's fundamental contribution to the shaping of a more positive and joyous image of fairies thus: There was a wide gulf [...] between the Shakespearean fairies and the fairies of rustic belief. The very diminutive beings of *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*, with their acorn cups, their fans of butterfly wings, and torches of the thighs of humble bees, were wholly the creation of Shakespeare. The folk-fairies differed widely from them, particularly in size and disposition. The fairies of popular superstition were equal in stature to the smaller size of men, and so far from being helpful, friendly, and happy were wicked and dreaded spirits, who were associated with witches, abducted mortals, dealt in changelings, smote humans with disease, blasted corps, stole cattle, and punished with pinchings and nippings unchastity, uncleanness, and any invasion of their fairy privacy. It is eloquent of the supreme genius of Shakespeare that his original creation of the subjects of Oberon and Titania proved so beautiful, poetic, and fascinating, that the unlovely folk-fairies disappeared entirely from literature, and the Shakespearean conception usurped and retained their place in the popular mind'. Cumberland, Clark, *Shakespeare and the Supernatural*, London: Williams & Norgate (1931), p. 33.

half had basically disappeared from serious literature due to the campaign of hatred promoted against it by Puritans, the Enlightenment's banishment of the irrational and various other factors (the growing industrialisation and urbanisation, the rise of the novel, etc.), surviving only through oral transmission. The general hostility met by the fairy tradition is testified by the scant consideration given to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in this period; actually, during the eighteenth century the play was considered as a minor work, a mere *divertissement*, basically irreconcilable with the standards of the sober, controlled Neoclassical theatre. Its wild extravagance and unfettered imagination made it less suitable for legitimate comedy than mock opera and light musical entertainment, with the fairies usually played by children<sup>595</sup>.

However, the Romantic infatuation with fairy spectacle and visual stimulation eventually favoured the play's return on stage in 1816, when melodrama specialist Frederic Reynolds revived it on the Covent Garden stage after a long hiatus with the addition of new scenes and new songs. The most notable change was the conclusion, with featured 'A GRAND PAGEANT, commemorative of *THE TRIUMPHS OF THESEUS* in which is introduced the Cretans, the Thebans, the Amazons, the Centaurs, Ariadne in the Labyrinth – Mysterious Peplum, or Veil of Minerva – the Ship Argo – & the Golden Fleece'<sup>596</sup>. This quasi-operatic version, including fantastic paraphernalia such as fairies singing on flying clouds and Oberon and Titania spectacularly entering on moving cars, was in many respects indistinguishable from contemporary fairy melodramas. It was a financial success, but critics did not accept the fact that a play by Shakespeare had been put on the same level as those kinds of production. A review in *The Theatrical Inquisitor* summarised the problem:

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<sup>595</sup> If we exclude John Frederic Lampe's mock opera *Pyramus and Thisbe* (Covent Garden, 1745), the first adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the eighteenth century arrived as late as 1755, when David Garrick presented at Drury Lane his three-act operatic piece *The Fairies* (with music by John Christopher Smith) as a sort of English response to the stirring vogue for Italian opera. *The Fairies* featured 28 songs, several dances and interpolated poetry and focused only on the lovers and the fairies (the latter being performed by children), omitting all other characters and making other significant cuttings. It was well received by the public but lasted for only 11 nights overall and was lambasted by Horace Wapole himself. Then, on 23 November 1763, Garrick and his then co-manager George Colman the Elder again attempted to revive *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a full-blown, five-act musical play carrying the original title, but the result was a terrible misfire. Garrick's desire to restore as much of Shakespeare's text as possible clashed with Colman's substantial cuttings and alterations, further confusing the plot. The flat performances reportedly given by the adult actors only worsened the situation. Nonetheless, three days later Colman reworked it as three-act afterpiece for the Haymarket entitled *A Fairy Tale* which focused more on the characters of the fairies. This version was more successful and was frequently performed between 1763 and 1767 and then again in 1777. See Halio, Jay L., *Shakespeare in Performance: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2nd ed., Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press (2003), pp. 19-21, and Holland, Peter (ed.), *Garrick, Kemble, Siddons, Kean: Great Shakespereans. Volume II*, London: Continuum (2010), pp. 39-42. The intense yet transient enthusiasm for fairy subjects during the 1760s is also testified by the success of John Hawkesworth's *Edgar and Emmeline; A Fairy Tale* (Drury Lane, 1761), which featured two old fairies, Elfina and Grotilla, among the main characters. All these productions, however, aimed less at genuine entertainment than formal literary experimentation.

<sup>596</sup> 1817 playbill of the play quoted in Lopez, Jeremy, 'Dream: The Performance History', in *A Midsummer Night's Dream. A Critical Guide*, ed. Regina Buccola, London: Continuum (2010), p. 67.

The “Midsummer Night's Dream” is one of those dramas which should never be performed; which, indeed, never can be performed [...] those “gay creatures of the element” can never be perfectly represented by human and corporeal bodies. He who in the silence and retirement of his study has figured to himself the elfin forms of the fairies, disporting by moonlight on the greensward, will find his conceptions but pitifully embodied by the exhibitions of the theatre. [...] What can possibly be more dissimilar than the *Ariel* of Shakespeare and the *Ariel* of the stage? than *Titania* in the “Midsummer Night's Dream” and *Titania* on the boards of Covent-garden theatre? It is only by the “mind's eye” that such fantastic beings can ever be faithfully personified; the presentations of the theatre are at best but meagre and imperfect sketches, unsatisfactory alike to the eye, the ear, and the understanding.<sup>597</sup>

William Hazlitt's own reflections on the unstageable nature of Shakespeare's supernatural worlds took off from a performance of Reynolds's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he had witnessed:

The MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, when acted, is converted from a delightful fiction into a dull pantomime. All that is finest in the play is lost in the representation. The spectacle was grand; but the spirit was evaporated, the genius was fled.—Poetry and the stage do not agree well together. The attempt to reconcile them in this instance fails not only of effect, but of decorum. The *ideal* can have no place upon the stage, which is a picture without perspective: every thing there is in the fore-ground. That which was merely an airy shape, a dream, a passing thought, immediately becomes an unmanageable reality. Where all is left to the imagination (as is the case in reading) every circumstance, near or remote, has an equal chance of being kept in mind, and tells according to the mixed impression of all that has been suggested. But the imagination cannot sufficiently qualify the actual impressions of the senses. Any offence given to the eye is not to be got rid of by explanation. Thus Bottom's head in the play is a fantastic illusion, produced by magic spells: on the stage, it is an ass's head, and nothing more; certainly a very strange costume for a gentleman to appear in.<sup>598</sup>

According to the prevailing view, the play should not have been resurrected because “[t]he boards of a theatre and the regions of fancy are not the same thing”<sup>599</sup> and it is almost impossible to do proper justice to its overwhelming imaginative force. Whatever stage adaptation could not but frustrate the audience's expectations, for Shakespeare's fairy work is a ‘rich mental banquet’<sup>600</sup> that could be best enjoyed in the closet, its ‘aerial beings shrink[ing] from mortal touch’<sup>601</sup>. This critical position probably also stemmed from the desire to separate Shakespeare from the down-to-earth commercial ambitions of melodrama. However, in the context of Royal theatres' early nineteenth-century competitive struggle for profits, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* became another fairy melodrama destined to reach the widest audience possible. It should be noted that Drury Lane responded shortly afterwards with Benjamin Thompson's two-act ‘Melo-Dramatic Romance’ *Oberon's Oath; or, the Paladin and the Princess* (1816), founded on William Sotheby's 1798 translation of Christoph Martin Wieland's famous poem *Oberon* (1780)<sup>602</sup>. Unfortunately, the play ‘encountered hostility

<sup>597</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 8 (June 1816), p. 445.

<sup>598</sup> Hazlitt, William, *Characters of Shakspeare's Plays*, London: C. H. Reynell (1817), p. 133.

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>600</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 69 (January 1816), p. 57.

<sup>601</sup> Daniel, George (1828), p. 9.

<sup>602</sup> Oberon, the King of Fairies, was a favourite character of Romantic authors. Wieland's poem was instrumental in

before it could be heard, and was condemned without being understood'<sup>603</sup>. As a matter of fact, Reynolds inaugurated a new approach in the staging of Shakespeare's fairy world which was 'extremely influential – indeed, its influence might be seen to this day in most large-scale professional productions of *Dream*'<sup>604</sup>. Something similar also happened to many other of Shakespeare's plays, which underwent a process of 'melodramatisation' at both legitimate and illegitimate theatres.

Due to its peculiar light-hearted nature canonised by Shakespeare, the fairy mythology was initially irreconcilable with classic Gothic fiction. There were nevertheless some exceptions. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), for example, Ann Radcliffe made wide use of the suggestive potential of fairy superstitions, both in the plot and in the interpolated poetry, in order to create a vividly suspenseful atmosphere. In keeping with the author's habit of rationalising the supernatural, here fairies can be simply interpreted as 'a part of Gothic machinery Radcliffe cranks up to thrill and delight her readers, and then dismantles and puts aside to the satisfaction of their curiosity and their reason', a 'continual possibility, tantalizingly unrealized'<sup>605</sup>. Similarly, Eleanor Sleath, principally known for her 'horrid novel' *The Orphan of the Rhine* (1798), tried to mingle the tenebrous Gothic with fairy suggestions in *Glenowen; or, The Fairy Palace* (1815), a tale revolving around a mysterious lady who purports to be a celestial fairy, only to reveal herself as utterly human. M. O. Grenby has recently described the work as a 'coherent attempt to introduce the Gothic to children'<sup>606</sup>, but such undertakings remained sporadic and hardly convincing. Nathan Drake tried instead a radically different approach when he figuratively pitted the two 'species' of Gothic superstition, the 'terrible' and the 'sportive', one against the other in his 'Ode to Superstition' (1798), where the former is personified as the offspring of Fear and Midnight, the latter of Hesper

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bringing it back to the centre of the literary scene after the Enlightenment's banishment of the fairyland. Before Reynolds's *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*, Oberon had appeared in minor pieces such as the Christmas pantomime *Harlequin and Oberon; or, The Chase to Gretna* (Covent Garden, 1796). In 1826 two other competing Oberon plays were brought out, namely Thomas Simpson Cooke's 'Romantic Fairy Tale' in two acts *Oberon; or, The Charmed Horn* (Drury Lane, 1826) and Carl Maria von Weber's and Planché Romantic Fairy Opera in three acts *Oberon; or, The Elf-King's Oath* (Covent Garden, 1826). Though ostensibly operatic, these productions were actually more of the melodramatic type in line with the English public's taste, as confirmed by Planché, the librettist of *Oberon*, or the *Elf-King's Oath*: 'My great object was to land Weber safe amidst an unmusical public, and I therefore wrote a melodrama with songs, instead of an opera such as would be required at the present day'. Planché, James Robinson, *The Recollections and Reflections of J. R. Planché*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: Tinsley Brothers (1872), p. 83.

<sup>603</sup> Anonymous, 'Some account of the late Mr Benjamin Thompson', in Thompson, Benjamin, *Oberon's Oath; or, The Paladin and the Princess*, London: John Miller (1816), p. 10. On the premiere night the production was targeted by a group of vandals who organised themselves to ruin the performance and damage the theatre. This vicious and apparently unjustified attack was 'a premeditated scheme to destroy the piece at all events, regardless of its merits, or the feelings of the writer'. The episode left a deep mark on Thompson, who after the show retired to his home shocked and feverish. His health rapidly worsened and a few days later he died at the age of 40. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>604</sup> Lopez, Jeremy (2010). pp. 67-8.

<sup>605</sup> Sandner, David (2011). p. 91.

<sup>606</sup> Grenby, M. O., 'Children's and Juvenile Literature', *The Oxford History of the Novel in English. Vol. 2: English and British Fiction 1750-1820*, ed. Peter Garside and Karen O'Brien, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2015), p. 510.

and the Moon<sup>607</sup>. Drake wrote that ‘[y]et no author, that I am acquainted with, has, for narrative machinery, availed himself of this circumstance, and thrown them into immediate contrast’<sup>608</sup>, but he nevertheless mentions Anna Letitia Barbauld's ‘Sir Bertrand’ (1773) as a possible precursor. In this Gothic fragment, an errand knight explores a ruined castle where he faces various preternatural terrors (including a wandering bluish flame and a disembodied dead hand) before eventually entering a ‘large apartment, at the end of which was a coffin rested upon a bier, with a taper burning on each side of it’<sup>609</sup>. Here an unexpected encounter occurs:

Along the room, on both sides, were gigantic statues of black marble, attired in the Moorish habit, and holding enormous sabres in their right hands. Each of them reared his arm, and advanced one leg forwards as the knight entered; at the same moment, the lid of the coffin flew open, and the bell tolled. The flame still glided forwards, and Sir Bertrand resolutely followed, till he arrived within six paces of the coffin. Suddenly, a lady in a shroud and black veil rose up in it, and stretched out her arms towards him; at the same time the statues clashed their sabres, and advanced. Sir Bertrand flew to the lady, and clasped her in his arms—she threw up her veil, and kissed his lips; and instantly the whole building shook as with an earthquake, and fell asunder with a horrible crash.

The earthquake, a typical pantomime feature that signalled a transformation scene or some other major event, leads to a surprising plot twist:

Sir Bertrand was thrown into a sudden trance, and, on recovering, found himself seated on a velvet sofa, in the most magnificent room he had ever seen, lighted with innumerable tapers, in lustres of pure crystal. A sumptuous banquet was set in the middle. The doors opening to soft music, a lady of incomparable beauty, attired with amazing splendor, entered, surrounded by a troop of gay nymphs, more fair than the Graces. She advanced to the knight, and, falling on her knees, thanked him as her deliverer. The nymphs placed a garland of laurel upon his head, and the lady led him by the hand to the banquet, and sat beside him. The nymphs placed themselves at the table, and a numerous train of servants entering, served up the feast; delicious music playing all the time. Sir Bertrand could not speak for astonishment: he could only return their honours by courteous looks and gestures. After the banquet was finished, all retired but the lady, who, leading back the knight to the sofa, addressed him in these words:——”.

The inner theatricality of the final scene conveys a weird blending of horror story and fairy tale. However, here the shift from the gloomy to the sportive Gothic, symbolised by the awakening-kiss motif redolent of *The Sleeping Beauty*, is too abrupt and underdeveloped. According to Drake, ‘the transition is immediately from the deep Gothic to the Arabic or Saracenic superstition; which, although calculated to surprise, would have given more pleasure, perhaps, and would have rendered the preceding scenes of horror more striking, had it been of a light and contrasted kind’<sup>610</sup>. Drake

<sup>607</sup> Drake explained that ‘[t]he idea is founded on a commonly received opinion, among the ancient mythologists, that there were two Cupids, one amiable and tender, the son of Jupiter and Venus, the older debauched and revengeful, the son of Nox and Erebus’. Drake, Nathan (1804 [1798]), p. 154.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>609</sup> Quotations of the text are from Aikin, John, and Barbauld, Anna Lætitia, *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose*, 3rd ed., London: J. Johnson (1792 [1773]).

<sup>610</sup> Drake, Nathan (1804 [1798]), vol. 1, pp. 147-8.

himself then tried to better explore the narrative possibilities of this juxtaposition in his own experimental Gothic tale ‘Henry Fitzowen’, that had first appeared under the title ‘Sir Gawen’ in *The Speculator* (1790) and then, in revised form, in his own collection of critical sketches and narratives *The Literary Hours* (1798), where it was placed immediately after the ‘Ode to Superstition’. Set in fifteenth-century Yorkshire, the story borrows heavily from the quintessential imagery of 1790s Gothic literature and, at the same time, it appropriates some of the typical tropes of fairy tales and plays. The eponymous protagonist is a noble and valiant orphan who falls in love with the beautiful Adeline de Monfort<sup>611</sup>, who is also the object of the lustful attentions of the sadistic Walleran, a nobleman of Norman descent and a powerful wizard. Determined to win possession of Adeline before she marries his rival, Walleran hires a group of ruffians to kidnap the girl, thus prompting Henry to undertake a perilous journey in order to rescue her. The first part of the tale incorporates a rich catalogue of intimidating ‘German’ supernatural horrors, including a haunted forest, a ghostly monk, a wandering fire, demonic screams, animated corpses and even a foul witch. Eventually, Henry confronts Walleran inside a haunted castle and manages to defeat him, causing all the horrible apparitions to disappear. He then finds Adeline, who lies asleep on a couch placed inside a large cavern eerily illuminated by a globe of white light. At this point, in a moment that surprisingly recalls the pivotal scenes of ‘The Sleeping Beauty’ and ‘Sir Bertrand’, Henry awakens her with a kiss and

instantly a tremendous tempest burst upon them, loud thunder shook the earth, and a whirlwind, rushing through the pile, tore it from its foundations.

The lovers recovering from a trance, which the conflict of the elements had occasioned, found themselves seated on some mossy turf, and around them the soft, the sweet and tranquil scenery of a summer's moon-light night. Enraptured with this sudden and unexpected change, they rose gently off the ground; over their heads towered a large and majestic oak, at whose foot they believed some kind and compassionate being had placed them.<sup>612</sup>

Through a pseudo-theatrical, magic-induced transformation<sup>613</sup>, Henry and Adeline are catapulted

<sup>611</sup> The name seems to combine references to the protagonists of two famous Gothic dramas, Boaden's *Fontainville Forest* and Baillie's *De Monfort*.

<sup>612</sup> Drake, Nathan (1804 [1798]), vol. 1, pp. 198-9.

<sup>613</sup> A similar passage from a dark and demoniac place to an almost paradisiacal one can be found, for example, at the end of John Thurmond's pantomime *Harlequin Doctor Faustus* (Drury Lane, 1723), when ‘*A Tune of Horror*’ announces Faustus’s imminent violent death: ‘It Thunders and Lightens, two Fiends enter and seize the Doctor, and are sinking with him headlong thro’ Flames, other Devils run in, and tear him piece-meal, some fly away with the Limbs, and other sinks’. Immediately afterwards, however, ‘[t]he Music changes, and the Scene draws, and discovers a poetical Heaven with the Gods and Goddesses rang’d in Order, on both Sides of the Stage, who express their Joy for the Enchanter's Death’. Thurmond, John, *Harlequin Doctor Faustus: with the Masque of the Deities*, London: W. Chetwood (1724), pp. 12-3. More recently, Miles Peter Andrews's *The Enchanted Castle* (Covent Garden, 1786) had played on the visual contrast between Gothic horrors, created by a mighty necromancer, and Harlequin's light-hearted adventures, supported by a good genius. See Andrews, Miles Peter (1786). There was a curious precedent in a French Gothic melodrama, Cuvelier de Trie's *C'est le diable, ou la Bohémienne* (Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, 1798), where ‘[t]he hell scene of the last act [...] is followed immediately by a transformation scene to a delicious garden where we find the good and the virtuous’. McCormick, John (1993), p. 161.

onto a place of a completely different nature, a beautiful and peaceful valley where all sufferings disappear and sweet musical tones are heard in the air. The description of torrents, flowers and old trees contributes to create an idyllic nocturnal landscape in which ‘an innumerable host of glow-worms lighted their innocuous fires’<sup>614</sup>. All of a sudden, the two glimpse

a being of the most delicate form; from his shoulders streamed a tunic of the tenderest blue, his wings and feet were clothed in downy silver, and in his grasp he had a wand white as the mountain snow. He rose swiftly in the air, his brilliance became excessive from the lunar rays, his song echoed through the vault of the night, but having quickly diminished to the size and appearance of the evening star, it died away, and the next moment he was lost in ether. The lovers still fixed their view on that part of the heavens where the vision had disappeared, and shortly had the pleasure of again seeing the star-like radiance, which in an instant unfolded itself into the full and fine dimensions of the beautiful being, who, having collected dew from the cold vales of Saturn, now descended rapidly towards the earth, and waving his wand as he passed athwart the woods, a number of like form and garb flew round him, and all alighting on the lawn, separated at equal distances on its circumference, and then shaking their wings, which spread a perfume through the air, burst into one general song.<sup>615</sup>

After witnessing the passage of an extraordinary procession of knights clad in green<sup>616</sup> armour, minstrels, nymphs and fairies, the astonished lovers come out to salute them, but they all suddenly vanish from view. However, the evanescent being they first saw materialises again with its ‘snow-white wand’ (a typical pantomime/*féerie* prop) to lead them through a forest ‘sparkling with a thousand fires’ (woods magically glowed also in Skeffington's *The Sleeping Beauty*) to an amphitheatre where a beautiful fairy queen is awaiting. The brightness of the place is so strong that the spirit that guides Henry and Adelina has to squeeze the juice of a magical herb into their eyes given that ‘no mortal eye, unless its powers of vision were adapted to the scene, could endure the glory that would shortly burst upon them’. The queen welcomes the two strangers and explains why the two now find themselves in her realm:

“Spirits of the blest we are, our sweet employment to befriend the wretched and the weary, to lull the torture of anguish, and the horror of despair. Ah! Never shall the tear of innocence, or the plaint of sorrow, the pang of injured merit, or the sigh of hopeless love, implore our aid in vain. Upon the moon-beam do we float, and light as air, pervade the inhabitations of men; and hearken, O favoured mortals! I tell you spirits pure from vice are present to your inmost thoughts; when terror, and when madness, when spectres and when death surrounded you, our influence put to flight the ministers of darkness; we placed you in the moon-light vale, and now upon your heads we pour the planetary dew: go, happy pair! From Hecate's dread agents we have freed you, from wildering fear and gloomy superstition.”<sup>617</sup>

Before the lovers can express their gratitude, however, the music fades, the light goes out and the fairy queen vanishes along with her court, leaving the two bewildered lovers alone on a country

<sup>614</sup> Drake, Nathan (1804 [1798]), vol. 1, p. 202.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>616</sup> Green is a colour traditionally associated with fairies.

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 206-7.

road as the first rays of the morning sun dispel the night. By strategically inserting this story after the ‘Ode to Superstition’, as a sort of illustrative afterthought to it, Drake thus visualised the double nature of Gothic supernaturalism through a literal representation of two equal and opposite worlds – the ‘evil’ and the ‘good’<sup>618</sup> – that ironically seems to prefigure the transition from the sensationalist terror drama of the late 1790s to the more colourful and fanciful melodrama of the early 1800s, with the latter being recognised as representative of a more ‘English’ kind of Gothic. This probably explains why melodramas such as *Valentine and Orson*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Ali Baba*, which adopted the fairy tradition as a more acceptable and even ‘familiar’ kind of supernaturalism, established a solid and enduring trend at the Royal theatres, England’s cultural institutions *par excellence*, performing the double function of being commercially marketable and ideologically harmless. By bringing the supernatural back into spoken drama on a regular basis, melodrama therefore played an instrumental role in ‘institutionalising’ it, a process whose beginning Emma J. Clery symbolically traces back to the year 1800, which ‘announce[d] the end of one particular struggle over the boundaries of fictional representation and the beginning of an era of acceptance’<sup>619</sup>. Furthermore, these productions interestingly revealed how England, unlike Germany or France, basically lacked an easily accessible fairy literature to draw from and had to turn to foreign sources, which were modelled and transformed at will. As Elizabeth Wanning Harries puts it, in the early nineteenth century these ‘imported tales were often seen as a substitute for the earlier British fairy lore that had been lost, the native tradition that had inexplicably faded from view’<sup>620</sup>. But whatever their true origin, characters such as the Genius Pacolet, Melzarina or the Fairy of the Lake were perceived as part of a genuinely English tradition, in any case more English than the lugubrious spectres of ‘German’ Gothic fiction, whose digestion proved much slower and more complex.

### 3.7 Matthew Gregory Lewis's fantastic Gothic

The playwright who, more than any other, seemed ready to explore all facets of the Gothic tradition, not without a good deal of authorial awareness, was Matthew Gregory Lewis. Though generally associated with the lurid ‘German’ Gothic, Lewis was a voracious scholar of literature and folklore

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<sup>618</sup> This dualism seemed to be (more or less consciously) thematised in the plots themselves of those melodramas that pivoted on grand supernatural battles: think for example of the conflict between Agramant and Pacolet in *Valentine and Orson*, or that between Orcobrand and Ardenelle in *Ali Baba*.

<sup>619</sup> Clery, E. J. (1995), p. 2.

<sup>620</sup> Harries, Elizabeth Wanning, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2001), p. 73.

with a fond predilection for every manifestation of the supernatural, not only the 'terrible' but also the 'sportive'. In the early 1800s, however, Lewis had just experienced the resounding disaster of *Adelmorn, the Outlaw* at Drury Lane and seemed willing to change his approach towards Gothic theatre in order to try to affirm himself as a more respectable, even legitimate playwright. He started to work for Covent Garden but neither his monodrama *The Captive* (1803) nor his tragedies *Alfonso, King of Castile* (1802) and *The Harper's Daughter; or, Love and Ambition* (1803) fared well. Though stripped of any supernatural element whatsoever, these productions were judged too wild, horrific and in some cases even unfit for representation due to their questionable morals. The compromise could not satisfy either critics or the general public. Conversely, melodrama, which in many ways Lewis had contributed to shape (it is no coincidence that he was particularly appreciated by French melodramatists), seemed naturally better suited to the author's allergy to received rules and his passion for overblown supernatural spectacle. He therefore soon understood that this new genre allowed him to give free vent to his imagination and continue the investigation of the inexhaustible Gothic mythology.

His first official effort in the genre (if we exclude the various melodramatic versions of the Raymond-Agnes story that circulated in this period, with which Lewis had nothing to do) was *Rugantino; or, The Bravo of Venice*, a 'Grand Romantic Melo-Drama' that was presented as Covent Garden's main novelty for the 1805-06 season. Typically for Lewis, the subject was taken from a German source, Johann Heinrich Daniel Zschokke's robber novel *Abällino, der große Bandit* (1794), centred on a ruthless one-eyed assassin who wreaks havoc in Venice by using his extraordinary disguising skills to elude authorities<sup>621</sup>. Curiously, the novel had also attracted the attention of Pixérécourt, who adapted it as *L'homme à Trois Visages, ou le Proscrit de Venise* (Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, 1801). Lewis undertook a translation of the book in 1804 and published it under the title *The Bravo of Venice*, though without recognising Zschokke as the original author<sup>622</sup>. Lewis introduced some minor alterations (notably the new character of Monaldeschi and a different ending) in order to enhance the Gothicism of the story and make it more attractive for his readers. The work drew praise from both the public and critics and underwent several editions<sup>623</sup>. In the months following the publication, at least three theatrical adaptations were produced: two Drury Lane dramas, James Powell's *The Venetian Outlaw; or, his Country's Friend* (staged without crediting Powell<sup>624</sup>) and Robert William Elliston's *The Venetian Outlaw* (with Elliston himself as the

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<sup>621</sup> Masks, disguises and shape-shifting were indeed common motifs of Gothic fiction. The setting of Venice at Carnival time may have been inspired by Schiller's *Der Geisterseher*.

<sup>622</sup> Bridgwater, Patrick (2013), p. 466.

<sup>623</sup> The play inspired 'more chapbooks than any other of Lewis's works except *The Monk*'. Macdonald, Lorne David (2000), p 164.

<sup>624</sup> For the peculiar story behind Powell's play see Worrall, David (2008), pp. 285-9.

titular protagonist), both translations of Pixérécourt's play, and a ballet, *Abellino; or, the Bravo's Bride* (Coburg, 1805)<sup>625</sup>. Thomas Harris took the opportunity to ask Lewis to write his own dramatisation for Covent Garden in an attempt to outperform the competition. This two-act melodramatic version, superintended by Charles Farley and set to music by Thomas Busby, debuted on 18 October 1805 and actually proved the best: it ran for 30 nights and kept being occasionally revived (for example in 1817, when it was strategically coupled with Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*, with which it shared the mysterious, conspiracy-filled Venetian setting). Lewis changed the name of the protagonist to distinguish this play from the others and removed the suicide of the villain Contarino, considered unfit for the stage.

The plot had no supernatural incidents in a narrow sense, but it is nonetheless worth analysing for the way Lewis creatively experimented with the visual language of melodrama and the state-of-the-art technical equipment offered by Covent Garden to create an ostentatiously imaginative piece that blended the real and the unreal, relying on the use of images rather than words<sup>626</sup>. With the crucial aid of Farley's skilful direction, Lewis accentuated the wild improbability of the plot and made the most of the evocative, spectral imagery of an often nocturnal Venice, including a suggestive funeral procession with lighted torches in the first act. The play's most outstanding scene, however, is the grand fête organized by Andreas, the Duke of Venice, to celebrate his daughter Rosabella's birthday. The heart of the celebrations, which take place on an island in the Adriatic sea, consists in a spectacular mythological-themed masque called 'Triumph of Thetis' in which all the guests dress as deities, sirens, tritons, and other mythical creatures, creating a magical intermezzo that recalled the serious mythological parts of early eighteenth-century pantomimes. Act 2, Scene 4 is set in an '*immense Grotto, composed of variegated spars and crystals. In the centre a large porch [with folding doors richly ornamented] projects far into the scene*'. As loud music plays, a procession of gods and goddesses from Roman mythology parade in front of the Duke (seated under a canopy on an elevated throne) and his court, preparing to celebrate the birthday of Thetis (Rosabella):

*A procession enters—Pan [dancing] Satyrs and Hamadryads—Diana with her Nymphs—Mars in his chariot; Warriors—Bacchus seated on a throne; Bacchannals. On one side, Venus with Cupid descends; and Minerva on the other. The Celestial Palace comes down amidst thunder and lightning—Jupiter, Juno, &c. come out of the Palace, which re-ascends—Pluto and Proserpine rise on a burning Throne; they alight, and the Car sinks. [...] Proserpine expresses her envy of the beauty of the three Goddesses; she waves her sceptre, and a golden apple appears with this inscription—“For the Fairest.”—She throws it before them. They contend for it. [Marine Music]*

<sup>625</sup> Summers, Montague (1968), p. 279.

<sup>626</sup> 'With regard to myself, on the occasion of this Melo-Drama I claim only one merit with the public, that of having troubled them with as few of my own words as possible'. Lewis, Matthew Gregory, 'Advertisement' to *Rugantino; or, The Bravo of Venice*, London: J. F. Hughes (1805), p. vii. All quotations from the text are from this edition.

The detailed stage directions convey the impressive visual richness of this long, elaborated show (a reworking of the famous mythological episode of the Judgement of Paris), ‘almost a play within a play’<sup>627</sup> in which Lewis took full advantage of the high budget at his disposal. The masque proceeds then with Thetis's long-awaited arrival:

*The folding doors open—the back ground is lighted by the Moon. Neptune and Amphitrite enter—then Nereids and Tritons [Stephano is among them]—then Camilla and two other females as Syrens—Last a machine representing a rock of red coral floating on a silver sea, whose waves are in motion. On the summit of the rock is a brilliant conch-shell, in which sits Rosabella. Artificial Zephyrs hang over her, some seeming to fan her with their wings, others with their breath to impel the rock forwards, which is drawn by enormous Dolphins, spouting up water; while on the head of each stands a little Cupid, holding golden reins, with which he appears to guide the animal. The three rival Goddesses agree to give Rosabella the apple, even Proserpine applauding the decision—the Conch sinks gently, till it touches the earth, when Rosabella quits the machine, and receives the apple from the Goddesses. At this moment a volley of musquetry is heard. All start in horror; the music stops abruptly; a dead silence for a moment.*

As in a rude awakening from a beautiful dream, the masque is suddenly interrupted by a gunshot, the signal that warns the Duke's guards to come out from their hiding place and seek for Rugantino, who, however, is already among the guests unbeknownst to anyone, disguised as the Florentine adventurer Flodoardo, Rosabella's suitor. Rugantino throws off his dress and, to general amazement, loudly exposes the secret plot that some members of the court had devised in order to overthrow the Duke's government. He then reveals his true identity as the Prince of Milan, one of the bravo's alleged victims, in a totally unexpected plot twist that subverts what the audience thought it knew about the character<sup>628</sup>. His convoluted plan is therefore revealed: the prince had secretly joined the conspiracy by pretending to be a bravo only to make it fail and unmask the traitors, who are now brought to justice. Moreover, his multiple disguises allowed him to test the sincerity of Rosabella's affection for him, obtaining confirmation that she is worthy to be his wife. The play thus concludes with Prince and Rosabella triumphantly ascending in the conch<sup>629</sup> used earlier during the masque, as the Duke announces the beginning of the celebrations in honour of Venice's saviour.

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<sup>627</sup> Pearson, Rachel, ‘Politics and Power in the Gothic Drama of M. G. Lewis’, PhD dissertation, University of Southampton (2011), p. 170.

<sup>628</sup> As in many contemporary Gothic melodramas, the outsider figure is actually revealed to be a hero of noble blood. Actor Henry Johnston, who according to Lewis strongly insisted on interpreting this role, gave proof of great ability by continuously shifting from the handsome Flodoardo to the terrific Rugantino, from the ‘Apollo-like’ beauty of the virtuous hero to the almost demonic fierceness of the outlaw, in what may be read as a figurative representation of the conflict between Neoclassical and Gothic theatre. The fact that the protagonist's true persona is that of the Prince of Milan, someone in-between the other two incarnations (he is a good man but also one ready to devise morally questionable plans), makes the character an ambiguous hybrid, just like the melodramatic genre itself. In short, Rugantino is the most literal manifestation of the Romantic hero-villain.

<sup>629</sup> Newspapers reported that Mrs. Gibbs, the interpreter of Rosabella, seemed desperately frightened in ascending the clouds in her car, although she had already performed a similar ‘ascension’ as the ghost of Lady Griffith in James Boaden's *Cambro-Britons* (Haymarket, 1798). Macdonald, David Lorne (2000), p. 164.

Through a witty stratagem, Lewis found the way to insert a purely fantastic sequence within a bandit-themed Gothic plot, setting up a splendid pantomimic spectacle that amusingly replicated the fantastic melodramas and féeries, then at the peak of their popularity. The masque was so beloved by the public that, as Lewis himself reports in a footnote, it was soon moved to the very end of the play, probably in order to provide a fully immersive experience without distractions from the main plot. Contemporary reviews confirmed that the masque scene constituted the play's glorious zenith: *The European Magazine* wrote that '[t]he splendour of this part of the entertainment is beyond description' and added that the melodrama's success

is certainly to be attributed less to any literary merit that it possesses, than to the charms of splendid dresses and decorations, beautiful scenery, and pleasing music. As a spectacle, indeed, the town has scarcely ever been presented with any thing more costly and splendid. [...] The pomp both of the Catholic and Pagan religions is displayed with the greatest effect.<sup>630</sup>

As usual, however, reviews showed a snobbish and acerbic attitude toward Lewis and tried to demote his status as writer<sup>631</sup>. With a certain lack of generosity, *The Critical Review* gave an eloquently lapidary comment to one of the play's printed editions:

WALK in, ladies and gentlemen! Here are masks, coloured lamps, musicians, conchs, cupids, and cocke-shells, Pan, satyrs, and hamadryades, Neptune and Amphitrite, nereides, tritons, artificial zephyrs, Pluto, Proserpine, and the Lord knows what.<sup>632</sup>

Although lacking 'real' supernatural effects, critics therefore recognised *Rugantino* as a typically Lewisian production. As a matter of fact, actor-critic William Oxberry, who included the work in his *The New English Drama* (1820), considered it perfectly in tune with that strand of imagination-driven plays that played with the contemporary vogue for all things fantastic and incredible:

the wild, and improbable fiction of *Rugantino* [...] seems to be written in downright mockery and defiance of reason; as if the author had set out with a firm resolution of leaving common

<sup>630</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 48 (October 1805), p. 305. The last sentence captures one of the most intriguing and overlooked aspects of the play. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a deliberate parallelism between the funeral procession honouring the memory of senator Carlo Foscari (supposedly murdered by *Rugantino*) in the first act and the mythological masque in the second, maybe a satire of the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, which Lewis often targeted during his career. Through this subtle comparison, the religious procession also becomes a carnival-like performance, a theatrical show in which everyone plays a part. As Victor Sage points out, a perceived similarity between England and the decaying Venetian Republic (which had actually fallen in 1797) was probably suggested, strengthened by their resistance to the Church of Rome. Sage, Victor, 'Black Venice: Conspiracy and Narrative Masquerade in Schiller, Zschokke, Lewis, and Hoffmann', in *Gothic Studies*, vol. 8 (2006), pp. 52–3.

<sup>631</sup> *The Universal Magazine's* review is emblematic in this regard: 'the masque [...] exceeds, in respect of its general grandeur and effect upon the eye, any thing of the kind we have remembered to have seen. [...]. In short, every thing in which the artists, mechanists, composers, &c., and all but the author himself (*tantum non*, as the Latin says) has had any share (and the austerity of our functions unwillingly compels us to pass this rigid, interdictory sentence) must have a well grounded claim to our unfeigned, and (we had almost said) unbounded PLAUDITE!'. *The Universal Magazine*, vol. 4 (October 1805), p. 350.

<sup>632</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 8 (May 1806), p. 99.

sense behind him, a point which he has fully accomplished, leaving the poor creature in utter amazement at this flight: yet, sooth to say, that straight-laced common sense which is too proud and unsocial to mix in the company of fairies, giants, gnomes, “et id genus omne,” is more to be pitied than admired. To us, the wonders of *Rugantino* are as delightful as the lamp of Aladdin, or the miraculous purse of Fortunatus.<sup>633</sup>

To an extent, even the story's various disguises and masks fully belonged to Lewis's repertoire of otherworldly tricks. The author himself seemed willing to encourage this interpretation by having a telling quotation drawn from Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* (Book 2, Canto 11) as the epigraph to the play's first published edition:

—They doubted, lest it were some magicall  
Illusion, that did beguile their sense;  
Or wand'ring ghost that wanted funerall,  
Or aery spirite under false pretence,  
Or hellish feend raysd up through develish science.

These words are uttered by Arthur during his fight with the monstrous Maleger, a sort of supernatural zombie-like being who apparently gains strength every time he receives a deadly blow. Similarly, the epigraph to the novel *The Bravo of Venice* is taken from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and precisely from the scene in which Lady Anne first meets the murderous Richard:

What black magician conjures up this fiend?—  
What! do ye tremble? are ye all afraid?  
Alas I blame you not, for ye are mortal,  
And mortal eyes cannot endure the Devil—  
Avaunt! thou dreadful Minister of Hell!<sup>634</sup>

These prestigious references obviously point to the almost inhumane, possibly diabolical quality of the titular protagonist, who continuously changes aspect and always seems one step ahead of everybody<sup>635</sup>. This reflected how Gothic works often literally interpreted bandits and robbers as demonic figures. Also for this reason, *Rugantino* can be considered an important antecedent to those supernatural horror works in which the protagonist is a seemingly invincible monster, and shows how, in early melodrama, over-the-top yet entirely human characters such as the terrific *Rugantino* or the wild Orson were endowed with a subtle preternatural flavour that made them in all respects ‘Gothic’.

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<sup>633</sup> Oxberry, William, ‘Remarks’ to *Rugantino; or, The Bravo of Venice*, in *The New English Drama*, vol. 12, London: Simpkin and Marshall (1820), pp. i-ii. Curiously, Oxberry was the original interpreter of the coward conspirator Memmo.

<sup>634</sup> Epigraph to Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *The Bravo of Venice*, 2nd ed., London: J. F. Hughes (1805).

<sup>635</sup> The supernatural aura surrounding *Rugantino* is enhanced by the numerous descriptions aimed at depicting him as an ugly, diabolical being. The vicious conspirator Parozzi, for example, claims he is ‘the ugliest knave [...] his fame so deformed by scars [...] his eyes-brows so black and bushy [...] then his smile is a terrific grin, and when he laughs, the sound is enough to scare the mirth out of the universe’. Another plotter, Memmo, calls him ‘that fiend in a human form’ and even comes to compare him to Pluto, the god of the underworld.

*Rugantino* seemed something of a test for a new subspecies of melodrama, the ‘monster melodrama’, which Lewis arguably first launched with the ‘Grand Romantic Melo-Drama’ *The Wood Daemon; or, The Clock has Struck* (Drury Lane, 1807), the work that marked his return to full-fledged supernaturalism. For this densely visionary two-act piece Lewis drew from the most diverse literary sources, combining his characteristic Gothic diabolism with a rich folk and fairy mythology, thus providing an ideal theatrical counterpoint to Nathan Drake's literary ruminations on ancient superstitions. First performed on 1 April 1807 as afterpiece to a revival of John Home's *Douglas*, *The Wood Daemon* was to all intents and purposes a horror fairy tale in which the author gave free vent to his superbly florid (and cultured) imagination, almost as if *Rugantino*'s masque scene had been expanded into a full-length drama. It was, in many ways, a sort of ‘greatest hits’ of all the supernatural strands of the Gothic and an important theatrical breakthrough for the genre of the fantastic as modernly understood.

The beginning of the melodrama is telling in this regard. The story unfolds in Holstein (at the time a German province of Denmark<sup>636</sup>), ruled by the young knight Hardyknute (Vincent De Camp), who has ascended the throne after the sudden death of his friend, the late Count Ruric, and the mysterious disappearance of his little child, the natural heir. Hardyknute, however, hides a terrible secret: he actually is an ugly and monstrously deformed peasant, who, eight years earlier, had sealed a shocking deal with the horrendous Sangrida, the Wood Daemon (held responsible for the abduction of the infant heir by the population), which transformed him into a handsome and valorous warrior loved and respected by everybody. In exchange for that, however, Hardyknute pledged to make a human sacrifice every sixth of August at one o' clock, otherwise the Wood Daemon would destroy him. In spite of this demonic background, the curtain rises on a beautiful spring-like landscape that immediately plunges the audience into an enchanting fairy tale-like atmosphere. The stage is ‘filled with brilliant clouds’ and the ‘Guardian Spirit of Holstein’ is seen seated on a cloud and extending his spear towards Una, the heroine of the melodrama (played by Harriet Siddons, Sarah Siddons's daughter in law), who lies asleep on a beach as a chorus of invisible spirits sings a celestial tune<sup>637</sup>. In dream, the Guardian Spirit – obviously a benign entity opposite to Sangrida – shows the maid an elaborated vision featuring a little boy chained to a brazen

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<sup>636</sup> *The Lady's Magazine* noted how ‘Lewis has chosen *Denmark* as the scene of his magical incantations; and has fixed the period when the power of Dæmonology was implicitly believed’. *The Lady's Magazine*, vol. 38 (April 1807), p. 190. Apart from the obvious Hamletian resonances of this location, the choice is not random. Theodore, a character in Lewis's own *The Monk*, claims that ‘Denmark is terribly infested by sorcerers, witches, and evil spirits’. Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *The Monk*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, Peterborough: Broadview Press (2004), p. 252.

<sup>637</sup> All quotations from the text are from Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *The Wood Daemon; or, The Clock has Struck*, in John Larpent Plays, The Huntington Library, San Marino: California. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Eighteenth Century Drama [Last accessed 6 August 2020]. Minor graphic adjustments have been made to facilitate reading and comprehension.

pillar and threatened with a dagger by the Wood Daemon. Shortly after, the 'shades' of Ruric and Alexina (the former Count and Countess of Holstein) appear, followed by the spirits of eight children all dressed in white and crowned with flowers, each one pointing to a wound in their heart, thus revealing that they were murdered. The Guardian Spirit then awakens Una from her magical slumber and all the apparitions 'sink' (except for the Spirit, who 'ascends' as the clouds disperse). The audience of course shares Una's amazement and understands that this was more than a simple dream. Such an enigmatic opening therefore introduces the narrative/ontological ambiguity (as far as the straightforwardness of the stage allows) between reality and dream that constitutes an essential feature of the fantastic genre, a tension experienced by both characters and spectators. As Noël Carroll points out, '[o]ften the dream/reality contrast figures in the fantastic as a device for advancing the natural/supernatural ambiguity'<sup>638</sup>.

The strange dream reminds Una of the old stories about the terrible Wood Daemon that her aunt Clotilda had told her. It is however soon forgotten because the two women have other preoccupations, in particular the loss of Clotilda's dumb son Leolyn, who has been recently kidnapped by the gypsies. During searches, Clotilda and Una inadvertently had come too close to the abode of Hacho, the cruel 'Giant of the Black Rock', who had taken them prisoners. Fortunately, Hardyknute had promptly intervened, defeating the enemy and saving the two.<sup>639</sup> For this reason Una highly admires Hardyknute, but Clotilda reveals her that the late Count Ruric had been treacherously murdered by Hardyknute himself, and that Leolyn is not her son but the son of Ruric and his wife Alexina, who had committed him to her care for fear Hardyknute might kill him. Una does not believe her aunt and declares instead her intention of accepting Hardyknute's wedding proposal out of gratitude (rejecting the courtship of the good peasant Otwy, who truly loves her). Later on, during the celebrations in honour of Hardyknute's victory over the giant, a group of gypsies arrive at Hardyknute's castle and, surprisingly, among them there is also Leolyn with his inseparable guitar (apparently, the gypsies had stolen him only to protect him from Hardyknute's clutches). In spite of Clotilda's attempts to hide him, the obstinate Leolyn takes part in the great pageant of the Four Seasons (another pseudo-Shakespearean play-within-the-play) by impersonating Spring. As soon as he offers a wreath of flowers to Hardyknute, the villain sees the mark of a bloody arrow on his wrist and recognises him as Ruric's son. The scene, however, is abruptly interrupted by the sudden darkening of the stage. Dreadful thunder sounds announce the

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<sup>638</sup> Carroll, Noël, 'Notes on Dreyer's *Vampyr*', in *Interpreting the Moving Image*, ed. Noël Carroll, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998), p. 107.

<sup>639</sup> Hardyknute's first appearance in the melodrama is his triumphal entrance into the castle at the head of a procession featuring the vanquished Hacho and all the knights, damsels and peasants freed from its tyranny. The giant manages to break the chains and again threatens Una, but Hardyknute rapidly subdues him, giving further proof of his immense strength.

arrival of the Wood Daemon (played by one Mr Montgomery, a clown of the Royal Circus), who suddenly ‘appears in a car drawn by fiery dragons’ (a possible nod to Merlin's very similar entrance in Dryden's *King Arthur*), points to Leolyn and reminds Hardyknute that this night is the one established for the annual sacrifice, eventually ascending ‘in a shower of fire’. Poet-critic George Daniel praised the escalating anxiety produced by the scene:

there are few scenes in the whole circle of the drama,—scarcely even that appalling one in “Macbeth” after the murder of *Duncan*,—which so inspire an audience with a silent shuddering awe as does that of the Banquet in the second Act: 'tis difficult in fact to imagine that stage-effect can be carried farther, or rendered more grandly impressive. The spectator beholds a magnificent gothic hall, resounding with the “voluptuous swell” of music, crowded with youth and beauty engaged in the lively dance, and displaying in brief every object that can tend to exhilarate the mind or amuse the fancy. Gradually, and without any apparent cause, the mirth becomes languid, the music grows discordant and dies away, the dance ceases, a mysterious horror takes possession of the revellers, and a chilling silence prevails where just before the tones of mirth and melody were heard. The effect is wrought to a climax by the terrific intrusion of the Wood Daemon, with the subsequent appalling darkness and striking catastrophe.<sup>640</sup>

In the second act, Hardyknute, masked and dressed in black, manages to capture Leolyn and, using the trick of the sinking bed, brings him to a secret underground cavern. Clotilda desperately tries to persuade the Count that Leolyn is her son and that he has nothing to worry about, but, as the appointed hour draws near, Hardyknute decides to proceed anyway with the sacrifice. Meanwhile, Una – thanks to the fundamental help of Ruric and Alexina's portraits, which magically animate and indicate her the way to access the fatal cavern – manages to find Leolyn. The stage directions for the scene's setting give only a glimpse of its richness of gloomy and macabre details:

*A Necromantic Cavern – Lamp burning – An iron grated door open – Galleries above – In the centre an altar supported by snakes – A golden platter on it with candles, not lighted – On one side an open pedestal supporting a brazen figure holding a clock – It points to past twelve – On the other side a rock with an opening – On top Leolyn lies chained to a brazen pillar, his guitar by him.*

Una frees Leolyn and finally understands that Hardyknute is not the man she thinks he is. The two hide in a corner of the cavern and witness an awful necromantic ritual when Hardyknute

*arrays himself in a magic robe and bonnet – takes a wand and performs incantations [...] Discordant music – Blue flames issue from the jaws of the serpents – A human head, pale as death, rises in the middle of the golden platter. – The Head. – “Spies are near”. The Head vanishes.*

Hardyknute discovers then Una and confesses the diabolic pact binding him to Sangrida. The time is almost over and the characteristic signs of the Daemon's approach start to appear (discordant

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<sup>640</sup> Daniel, George, ‘Remarks’ to *One O' Clock! Or, the Knight and the Wood Daemon*, in *The New English Drama*, ed. William Oxberry, vol. 19, London: Simpkin and Marshall (1824), p. iv.

music plays, candles mysteriously light, writhing snakes pour out blue flames). As Una takes time by pretending to pray at the altar, Leolyn climbs the statue holding the clock and, with the aid of Hardyknute's magic wand, pushes the hand of the clock forward so that it strikes one. Immediately Sangrida appears and stabs Hardyknute, thus taking its annual soul:

[Hardyknute] *falls into the arms of Fiends. Who bear him to the altar – Sangrida springs on it – and they all sink.*

*Music. The scene vanishes.*

*The castle hall is discover'd illuminated. Servants attending with torches. The galleries filled with spectators. The statue and clock change to a throne – on which Leolyn is seated.*

As the stage magically transforms, Clotilda and Otway reunite with Una and all hail Leolyn as the new sovereign of Holstein. The Guardian Spirit's initial prophecy is fulfilled and the correct line of succession is restored.

As this brief summary shows, *The Wood Daemon* turned the fairy melodrama formula upside down while adding a heavy dose of Gothic diablerie and grotesquerie that inevitably puzzled critics. *The General Evening Post* commented that Lewis had given 'such a loose [*sic*] to his imagination, and introduced so many spectres of various descriptions, that nothing less than a Jury of Ghosts can decide upon the merits of this Extraordinary Performance'<sup>641</sup>, while *The Monthly Mirror's* judgement emblematically summarised the conflicting reactions aroused by the play:

"Hell's broke up, and ghosts have holiday," was what we predicted, and what we found. In this melo-drame, "*on horror's head, horrors accumulate.*" Every thing is horrible. The machinery is horribly grand and sublime, the plot is horribly interesting, and the dialogue is horribly miserable. Nothing, indeed, can exceed the magnificence and ingenuity displayed by Mr. Johnson, the machinist, except the contemptibility of the attempts at humour, exhibited by Mr. Lewis, the author. The fable is simple, but the pageant and spectacle, which accompany it, are so splendid and attractive, that we can scarcely turn to talk of the former, while our minds are still full of the images of the latter.<sup>642</sup>

Although still hostile to Lewis, even melodrama's fiercest detractors could not help being charmed by *The Wood Daemon's* astonishing technical apparatus, especially Michael Kelly's 'pleasing and appropriate'<sup>643</sup> musical score and Alexander Johnson's expensively wondrous visual effects. As a matter of fact, Una's 'midsummer dream' ('exceedingly ingenious [*sic*] and beautiful', according to *The General Evening Post*<sup>644</sup>), the pageant of the Four Seasons with its ballet and the two scenes featuring Sangrida which reportedly sent the audience into raptures were entirely ascribed to Johnson's visionary talent, rather than to Lewis's dubious playwriting skills<sup>645</sup>. The *Wood Daemon's*

<sup>641</sup> *The General Evening Post* (2 April 1807).

<sup>642</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 1 (April 1807), pp. 278-9. The two intertextual quotations are from John Dryden's *Oedipus* (1679) and Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1603), respectively.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>644</sup> *The General Evening Post* (2 April 1807).

<sup>645</sup> This time the accusation was not ill-founded: as many reviewers reported, many of the play's dialogues (especially

first appearance, in particular, would not have been the same without the spectacular chariot drawn by mechanical dragons, a speciality of Johnson<sup>646</sup>. *The Monthly Mirror* reported that '[t]he confusion and apparent horror which ensued after the appearance of the spectre, combined to form perhaps the most terrific and sublime scene ever beheld on stage'<sup>647</sup>. It is curious to note that the Wood Daemon is here defined as a 'spectre', a further proof of the perplexity aroused by this strange figure, completely new to the English stage: *The Mirror of Taste* ironically wrote that 'Mr. Matthew Lewis has found out a new kind of infernal agent [...] Perhaps it is because we are poorly versed in demonology that we do not recollect to have heard of this particular infernal before'<sup>648</sup>. Yet, many recognised the story's resemblance to a fairy tale, though certainly a perverted one: *The Monthly Mirror* noted that '[w]ith compression [...] this piece will entitle Mr. Lewis to rank with *Mother Goose*, in golden fruitfulness, and though he may not make children laugh so much as his relation, he will frighten them more'<sup>649</sup>, while Boaden called Lewis 'the little *lord* of the NURSERY'<sup>650</sup> while briefly commenting on the play.

The general feeling was that Lewis had reinvented both supernatural melodrama and the Gothic genre with his 'most ambitious and atmospheric play'<sup>651</sup>, as David Pringle fittingly defined it. In spite of the fact that it appeared at the end of the theatrical season, it managed to make a big sensation. Then, a few years later, Lewis, going against the prevalent opinion that the story would fare better as a pantomime, revised the script and refashioned it as a three-act, nearly three-hour long 'Grand Musical Romance' entitled *One O' Clock! Or, The Knight and the Wood Daemon*. This extra-large, quasi-operatic version was performed in August 1811 at the unpatented Lyceum Theatre on the Strand, which exceptionally became the temporary home of the Drury Lane company after a fire completely destroyed Sheridan's theatre in February 1809. The special licence given to the Lyceum, which lasted until the opening of the newly rebuilt Drury Lane in 1812, can certainly be considered a pivotal moment in the complicated history of the legitimate/illegitimate classification, and perhaps no play revealed its growing intangibility during the early nineteenth century as *One O' Clock!*. Lewis made his play even more pompous and spectacular, adding several songs and ballads

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in the first act) were puerile and excited the discontent of the audience, to the point that Lewis considerably revised the text before the second performance. The choice was universally approved; *The Monthly Mirror*, for instance, claimed that '[t]he melo-drama is improved, inasmuch as so much of the dialogue is cut out. The spectacle is superb, and far more interesting since the curtailment'. *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 1 (April 1807), p. 280.

<sup>646</sup> Johnson, a talented machinist renowned for the creation of mechanical animals and monsters, had already constructed a flying dragon for William Powell's *Harlequin Amulet; or, The Magic of Mona* (Drury Lane, 1800), a Christmas pantomime filled with marvellous supernatural effects. *The Monthly Mirror* regarded that dragon as 'one of the best-managed pieces of machinery [...] ever witnessed'. *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 11 (January 1801), p. 53.

<sup>647</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, new series, vol. 1 (April 1807), p. 280.

<sup>648</sup> *The Mirror of Taste, and Dramatic Censor*, vol. 1 (January 1810), p. 72.

<sup>649</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 1 (April 1807), p. 280.

<sup>650</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 484.

<sup>651</sup> Pringle, David (ed.), *St. James Guide to Horror; Ghost & Gothic Writers*, Detroit: St. James Press (1998), p. 366.

in keeping with the nature of this music-oriented theatre, at the time also known as English Opera House. The plot also underwent some changes: Clotilda, for example, was re-written as Una's sister, while the minor characters were given more space. The most notable addition, however, regarded the beginning, which now focused only on the monstrous Sangrida, introduced to the audience via an impressive sequence replete with chilling sounds and phantasmagoric effects:

*A Cottage in a Wood,—Mountains in the back ground—Moon-light—when the Curtain has risen, the Trees and Rocks open, and discover Groupes of Wood-Spirits—they come forward.*

*SEMI-CHORUS.*

HIST! Spirits, hist! 'tis near the hour  
Which brings our awful Mistress here!  
The threatening Skies already lower!  
The groaning Woods confess their fear?

*[More spirits ascend from the ground—a Storm begins to rise!—the Moon turns red.]*

Lo! sanguine clouds the moon deform!  
Louder and louder grows the Storm!  
Deep Thunders roar! Red Lightnings flash!  
Hark!—'Twas the fall of the Mountain Ash!—

*[Violent Tempest—a Black Cloud descends.]*

'Tis She! 'Tis She!—Far in the North  
A sable cloud comes rolling forth!

*[It opens, and Sangrida appears; the black part of the Cloud is formed of Flames.]*

It bursts! It bursts! our Queen we see!  
Fiends of the Forest, bend the knee!

*[Solemn Chorus, while the Cloud touches the earth, and Sangrida comes out.]*

Pleased through the Storm we saw thee sail!  
Hail, mighty Mistress! Hail! All-Hail!

SOLO—SANGRIDA.

Hail to the Elf and the Mountain Fairy!  
Hail to the Goblin of the Wood!  
Hither I shaped my progress airy,  
Lured by the hopes of forfeit blood!  
Still on this night, to claim my right,  
Hither I speed when a Twelvemonth's run:  
You shall have part, the Head and the Heart!  
Then, Spirits, rejoice, when the Clock strikes One!

*FULL CHORUS.*

Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice! *[the Cock crows.]* [...]

[Sangrida sinks with a groupe of Elves: the other Spirits retire to the Trees and Rocks, which close upon them—the Stage becomes light.]<sup>652</sup>

The nightmarish, almost apocalyptic imagery evoked by this scene clearly acts as a specular reflection of the dreamy, ethereal atmosphere characterising the appearance of the Guardian Spirit of Holstein (in this version named Auriol), which was shifted to the beginning of the second act, as if to stress, also at a visual level, the symbolic clash between the two antithetical supernatural forces (as seen in *Ali Baba*, for example). Once again, the stage was transformed into the physical battleground of the two souls of Gothic supernaturalism, the ‘terrible’ and the ‘sportive’.

Although reviewers confirmed their negative judgement<sup>653</sup>, *One O' Clock!* proved a box office hit, especially after some cuts were made. Unlike the 1807 melodrama, the 1811 remake was frequently published throughout the century and probably had a bigger cultural impact on the whole. Surely both versions of the play raised the bar very high for this kind of productions on the legitimate stage, remaining unsurpassed for several years. Though generally understudied by modern critics, the work really stands out due to the vast imaginativeness and erudite awareness with which Lewis deals with the supernatural, his true favourite subject matter, in what appears as the perfect culmination of a process that began with his sordid debut novel, *The Monk*, and ended precisely with this glowing, apparently undemanding Gothic fantasy. In this respect, the work configures itself as a thoroughly heterogeneous concoction of different sources, references and allusions amalgamated in an otherwise stereotypical melodramatic plot<sup>654</sup>. In fact, the play is not so dissimilar from other fairy melodramas of the time, although its main model, in line with Lewis's taste, was less the French than the German fairy tale. As Frederick S. Frank has observed, ‘[t]he plot has the gruesome characteristics of the German Märchen, a kind of fairy tale in the wider sense in that it has supernatural elements but need not necessarily introduce fairies’<sup>655</sup> (though the Guardian Spirit might indeed be interpreted as a sort of fairy). Of course the principal source of attraction was the

<sup>652</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory, *One O' Clock! Or, the Knight and the Wood Daemon*, London: Lowndes and Hobbs (1811), pp. 5-7.

<sup>653</sup> *The British Critic* wrote that ‘[t]he dialogue of this opera is, by long established prescription, very nonsensical; the conclusion all show, and German abruptness’. *The British Critic*, vol. 40 (December 1812), p. 639.

<sup>654</sup> *The Cabinet; or Monthly Report of Polite Literature* remarked on the plot's derivativeness: ‘The *Tale of Mystery, Deaf and Dumb*, and other favourite productions, will supply the spectator with frequent resemblances. Leolyn is a mixture of *Francisco* and *Julio*. *Clotilda* is almost precisely *Fiammetta*’. *The Cabinet; Or, Monthly Report of Polite Literature*, vol. 1 (May 1807), p. 213. The mark or scar characterising the child protagonist is also a recurrent motif employed, for example, in Holcroft's *Deaf and Dumb* and William Dimond's *The Foundling of the Forest*. Hardyknute is instead a stereotypical Lewisian villain, not much dissimilar to *The Monk*'s Ambrosio and *The Castle Spectre*'s Osmond. By the author's own admission, the character was influenced by Joshua Pickersgill's Gothic novel *The Three Brothers* (1803), whose protagonist, Arnaud, is a deformed hunchback who seals a pact with the Devil in order to obtain a new and better body and avenge himself of his persecutors. The novel was used also by Lord Byron as an inspiration for his unfinished drama *The Deformed Transformed*. See the ‘Advertisement’ in Lewis, Matthew Gregory (1811).

<sup>655</sup> Frank, Frederick S. (1981), p. 105.

Wood Daemon itself, which stole the spotlight from the classic melodramatic trio of hero-heroine-villain and arguably served as a model for the numerous ‘monster melodramas’ that appeared in the following years, especially at the illegitimate theatres, where in fact Lewis's play had a huge resonance<sup>656</sup>. In monster melodrama, which Booth regarded as ‘[a]n early equivalent of the modern horror film’<sup>657</sup>, the Gothic met with the emerging fantasy genre, somehow completing its return to the genre's folkloric roots.

In the creation of this figure Lewis seems to have mixed the traditional German motif of the Faustian bargain with another German legend, that of the Demon of the Harz Mountains (the place where Goethe had Faust make his pact with the Devil), later popularised in England by a passage of Walter Scott's novel *The Antiquary* (1816)<sup>658</sup>. Moreover, as also contemporary reviewers noted, Lewis drew heavily from a German-style poem included in his own ballad collection *Tales of Wonder* (1801), namely ‘The Grim White Woman’. The protagonist of this horror story is a witch-like fatal woman, also known as ‘The Fiend of the Forest’, which always appears at one o’ clock, makes diabolical compacts and feeds on human blood, bearing obvious resemblances to Sangrida as well as to other female demons created by Lewis (notably *The Monk's Matilda*), as this description reveals:

Her eye, fix'd and glassy, no passions express'd;  
No blood fill'd her veins, and no heart warm'd her breast!  
She seem'd like a corse newly torn from the tomb,  
And her breath spread the chillness of death through the room

Her arms, and her feet, and here bosom were bare;  
A shroud wrapp'd her limbs, and a snake bound her hair.  
This spectre, the Grim White Woman was she,  
And the Grim White Woman was fearful to see!<sup>659</sup>

Lewis might have also picked elements from other texts included in *Tales of Wonder*, such as ‘The Erl-King’ (a translation by Lewis himself of Goethe's renowned 1782 poem ‘Erlkönig’), whose title

<sup>656</sup> Among the works directly inspired by *The Wood Daemon*, three are worth remembering: the blood-curdling melodrama *The Red Daemon of the Harz Forest; or, The Three Charcoal Burners* (Coburg, 1821), the ‘remake’ *The Hag of the Storm! Or, The Doomed Knight* (Astley's Amphitheatre, 1833), in which Sangrida is an evil sorceress that controls several witches and fiends of the forest, including the Daemon Dragon, and the Christmas pantomime *Harlequine and Hardyknute; or, The Knight and The Wooden Demon* (Marylebone Theatre, 1848). Montague, Summers (1940), p. 346.

<sup>657</sup> Booth, Michael (1965), p. 84.

<sup>658</sup> Scott describes this figure as ‘a wild man, of huge stature, his head wreathed with oak leaves, and his middle cinctured with the same, bearing in his hand a pine torn up by the roots. [...] In elder times, the intercourse of the demon with the inhabitants was more familiar, and, according to the traditions of the Harz, he was wont, with the caprice usually ascribed to these earth-born powers, to interfere with the affairs of mortals, sometimes for their weal, sometimes for their woe’. Scott, Walter, *The Antiquary*, Paris: Baudry's European Library (1836), p. 142. Intriguingly, the anonymous Coburg melodrama *The Red Daemon of the Harz Forest; or, The Three Charcoal Burners* (1821), mixed elements from Scott's version of the legend and Lewis's *The Wood Daemon*.

<sup>659</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory, ‘The Grim White Woman’, in *The Tales of Wonder* (1801), ed. Douglass H. Thomson, Ontario: Broadview Press (2009), p. 119.

character is a malignant fiend who haunts the woods of Denmark and abducts young children in order to tear them to pieces, or 'The Cloud King', in which the 'Giant of Flame' (the Fire King) majestically descends on a dragon; the name of the Giant Hacho seems instead to have been taken from 'King Hacho's Death Song', a ballad on a noble Norwegian monarch<sup>660</sup>.

*Tales of Wonder* arguably marked the apex of Lewis's exploration of Gothic folklore: in this ambitious poetic anthology, he concocted an amalgam of old myths, horror legends and fairy tale motifs by collecting translations from and original compositions inspired by an ample set of British, German, Danish and Old Norse poetic materials, with the supernatural as a common thematic *fil rouge* ('a ghost or a witch is a sine-qua-non ingredient in all the dishes, of which I mean to compose my hobgoblin repast'<sup>661</sup>). As Diane Long Hoeveler puts it, this collection (which featured original contributions by Walter Scott and Robert Southey, among others) may have stemmed from a desire to 'forge nothing less than an alternative supernatural literary genealogy for British poetry, one that seamlessly incorporated the Germanic as part of its heritage, rather than as a "foreign importation"'<sup>662</sup>, in a (half-serious) attempt to delineate a sort of 'shared' Gothic tradition<sup>663</sup>. This is perfectly exemplified by 'The Grim White Woman', an excessive, quasi-parodic imitation of a German ballad transposed into a Scottish setting that appropriated a theme common in the folklore of many countries, namely that of the spectral/monstrous woman. The all-encompassing scope of the work is best exemplified by the fact it originally appeared in 1799 as the one-volume *Tales of Terror*, before being retitled *Tales of Wonder* and expanded with the addition of a new volume featuring texts of famous British authors such as Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Thomas Parnell, Thomas Gray, Thomas Percy and Robert Burns. The intention was apparently to represent the full spectrum of Gothic supernaturalism, counterbalancing the disreputable tradition of German horror-balladry with loftier native materials<sup>664</sup>. Moreover, Lewis did nothing to hide his highly amused

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<sup>660</sup> The naming of characters in *The Wood Daemon* betrays Lewis's great attention to details. The name Hardyknute, for instance, might derive from an eponymous old heroic ballad generally attributed to Scottish poet Lady Elizabeth Wardlaw and featured in Percy's *Reliques* (a key source for *Tales of Wonder*).

<sup>661</sup> Lewis, Matthew Gregory, Letter to Walter Scott (1798), quoted in *The Tales of Wonder* (1801), ed. Douglass H. Thomson, Ontario: Broadview Press (2009), p. 17.

<sup>662</sup> Hoeveler, Diane Long (2010), p. 165.

<sup>663</sup> The work's aspiration to be a wide-ranging source for the supernatural is somehow fittingly epitomised by the epigraph drawn from one of the witches' songs in *Macbeth*: 'Black Spirits and white / Blue Spirits and grey / Mingle, mingle, mingle, / Ye that mingle may!'. The quotation is slightly misreported since the original text reads 'red' instead of 'blue'. Lewis, Matthew Gregory (2009), p. 193.

<sup>664</sup> Peter Mortensen has analysed Lewis's choice in these terms: 'In commercial terms, Lewis's secondary additions to *Tales of Wonder* could hardly have benefited the volume, for besides expanding an affordable one-volume text into an expensive two-volume edition, Lewis's inclusion of long-familiar materials already accessible to readers in many different versions substantially diminished the text's originality. Yet creating an effect of reassuring familiarity, in all likelihood, was precisely what Lewis intended by padding the volume with household names and standard material. *Tales of Wonder* appeared at a time when critics were widely lamenting the appearance of a German-derived supernaturalism and pseudo-supernaturalism that threatened to deluge British culture [...] Somewhat immodestly, Lewis implicitly likens his own taste for the marvellous to that of Jonson, Dryden and Gray, and with this comparison he denies that such predilections should automatically disqualify a writer's works as childish, mawkish

approach, as testified by the deliberately farcical and burlesque tone that characterises several of the texts included in the anthology (though Lewis's success in this mode is rather questionable<sup>665</sup>). Critics, however, did not perceive the operation as a true change in direction. The abundance of macabre and gory imagery still overweighted any attempt at lightness, given that in the *Tales of Wonder* there is 'nothing but ghosts and fiends—all is hideous—all is disgusting. The work was attacked, censored and fiercely parodied, but this was hardly surprising to Lewis, who continued to regard it as a sort of personal declaration of literary identity, an attempt to break free from his reputation as an importer of German literature and establish himself as the main poet of a transnational yet still quite undefined Romantic fantastic strain. A work such as *The Wood Daemon* goes exactly in this direction. By incorporating various hints of these texts into the play, Lewis implicitly confirmed James Boaden's idea that '[t]he "tales of wonder" were not collected [...] merely to *astound* the people for a time, and then, as Shakespeare expresses himself, "to fust unused"', but to establish an important literary point of reference for 'the grown followers of the marvellous'<sup>666</sup>. Even, or especially, on stage.

To seek further legitimisation, Lewis did not forget to include also some more or less subtle Shakespearean allusions, appropriating both the ghostly terrors of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and the lighter magical moods of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* in a quite original way. The *Wood Daemon* itself, in particular, seems a distant relative of *Macbeth's* Weird Sisters<sup>667</sup>: like them, it appears amidst crashing thunder and displays a certain ambiguity with respect to its gender given that the character was presented as female yet played by a male actor. Rachael Peason has rightly noted that *Macbeth* is also referenced in the scene that features the spirits of the eight children previously immolated by Sangrida, which strongly recalls *Macbeth's* vision of the eight kings of Scotland; similarly, the pale human head that briefly materialises during Hardyknute's incantations

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or unnatural. Lewis, then, not only anticipates critical objections to his volume and redirects attention from his very real (and much more substantial) obligations to German writers like Bürger, Schiller and Goethe; by placing himself in the august company of revered seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets, antiquarians and men of letters, Lewis also attempts to make his own writing seem more legitimate: less a product of false taste and ephemeral fashion, and more an organic outgrowth of the genuine tradition of masculine English supernaturalism'. Mortensen, Peter, *British Romanticism and Continental Influences Writing in an Age of Europhobia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2004), pp. 82-3.

<sup>665</sup> George Daniel wrote that 'the rock upon which Lewis's vessel split in all her dramatic voyages was the idea he weakly enough entertained that he had a talent for a humorous writing, though no man's forte lay in a more opposite direction'. Daniel, George (1824), p. v.

<sup>666</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 434. In spite of mixed reviews, the collection made its mark, as testified by subsequent parodies such as the anonymous *Tales of Terror; with an Introductory Dialogue* (1801), Henry William Bunbury's *Tales of the Devil* (1801) and Thomas Dermody's *More Wonders!* (1801), all published within the end of 1801. The title page to *Tales of Terror* contains a curious picture of a skeleton dressed in Harlequin garb which holds a copy of 'Mother Goose's Tales', a burlesque image that somehow illustrates the traumatic encounter between the gloomy and the sportive Gothic for the purpose of deriding it.

<sup>667</sup> The Weird Sisters are also recalled in 'The Grim White Woman' given that the titular female spectre shares some of their trademark features, notably the habit of stealing babies with her long crooked nails and performing malicious rituals around a boiling cauldron in which she throws repugnant ingredients (including a shrieking toad).

seems an obvious nod to the apparition of the armed head in the witches' cavern<sup>668</sup>. Conversely, Auriol (nominally reminiscent of *The Tempest's* Ariel, another gender-fluid entity) was impersonated by one miss Lacy though in fact characterised by male attributes. Auriol seems something akin to a sylph (probably a contraction of the Latin *sylvestris nymph*, 'nymph of the woods'), an invisible elemental spirit of the air, half fairy and half angel, first described in the works of the sixteenth-century alchemist Paracelsus and frequently employed in the melodramas of the time. There are five poems devoted to the elemental spirits in the first volume of *Tales of Wonder*: Lewis's 'The Erl-King', 'The Water-King' and 'The Cloud-King', Walter Scott's 'The Fire-King' and John Leyden's 'The Elfin-King'. Sylphs were also featured in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772), one of the acknowledged sources of *The Monk*, and Thomas Dutton's *Ariel; or, a Picture of the Human Heart* (1796), a minor Gothic novel in which a sylph tellingly named Ariel temporarily takes on human form and experiences the tragedy of the mortal condition. This intricate web of folkloric and literary references reveal, therefore, Lewis's efforts to endow his Gothic works with a certain degree of consistency and legitimacy, while simultaneously making it enjoyable also at a superficial level. He, like other melodramatists of the time, used the Gothic as a comprehensive label to explore a long-neglected supernatural heritage and celebrate its inherent theatrical power, giving shape and colour to something that had long remained submerged. This is why in the theatre, even more than elsewhere, the Gothic did not entirely disappear as the century progressed, but took on new forms and merged into the rising and all-encompassing fantastic genre, thus confirming its extraordinary versatility. *The Wood Daemon* is certainly paradigmatic of this evolution.

### 3.8 Early forms of the fantastic in melodrama

The trajectory of Matthew Lewis's career is intriguingly useful to examine the evolution of English melodrama in the early years of the nineteenth century. A few months before the premiere of *One O' Clock!*, in April 1811, Lewis presented his last great original play, *Timour the Tartar*, a 'Grand Romantic Melo Drama' directed and acted by Charles Farley, 'the magic genius of Covent Garden'<sup>669</sup>. This was the second collaboration between the two after *Rugantino*, an especially auspicious partnership given that Farley seemed to share Lewis's taste for the representation of visionary subjects (he had been the first to dramatise the Bleeding Nun tale, among other things).

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<sup>668</sup> Pearson, Rachel (2011), pp. 235; 245.

<sup>669</sup> Croker, Thomas Crofton, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, London: John Murray (1825), p. 293.

*Timour* immediately caused uproar for the introduction of a troop of horses from Astley's Amphitheatre. Thomas Harris insisted to have it included in the wake of the extraordinary success of a revival of *Blue Beard* staged in the previous February<sup>670</sup>, in which for the first time real horses were brought on the legitimate stage, substituting the mechanical animals devised by Alexander Johnson. This improved version, packed with gorgeous set pieces and special effects (including an impressive combat scene), ran for over 40 nights to the disgust of theatrical purists, who decried the fact that quadrupeds were allowed to walk on a Royal stage (hippodramas were instead a common feature of illegitimate playhouses, where horses 'frequently surpassed their two-foot colleagues in histrionic abilities'<sup>671</sup>). *Timour* did not include supernatural elements but was instrumental in launching the new vogue for Oriental melodramas, possibly the most popular genre between the mid-1810s and the mid-1820s and one that frequently delved into the fantastic. As a matter of fact, the Orient was historically considered as a land of magic and wonder, with ancient cultural ties with Britain's own otherworldly traditions. As an anonymous writer for *The European Magazine* recognised,

[i]n the East, the mother-country of all the numerous family of superstitions, as well as of civilization, all the charms of oriental splendour were added to their beautiful fictions, which were carried to the highest possible pitch.—The Peri (from whom our own Fairies are descended in a direct line) resembled the supernatural beings of our own climes in their nature, while the Genii were more like them in their other attributes.<sup>672</sup>

The eighteenth century witnessed an unprecedented growth of interest in Eastern lore, as is reflected in the rich variety of Oriental and pseudo-Oriental tales that inundated the English literary market. The exotic, paradisaical Orient imagined by the English actually was a literary reconstruction based on a blend of documented reality and ethnically stereotyped myth, a sort of timeless fairy tale-like place shaped by Western prejudices and re-elaborations. The main boost came of course from Antoine Galland's *Arabian Nights*, whose first English translation (1706 onwards) popularised the myth of the Oriental world as a largely fantastic place replete with magnificent palaces, beautiful gardens, despotic sultans, shy princesses, harem maidens, ambiguous eunuchs as well as fairies, genii, elves, ogres, vampires, bottled genies, talking animals and magic of all kinds. Galland's collection was followed by a host of (sometimes shallow, sometimes parodic, sometimes both) imitations promptly translated into English, such as François Pétis de la Croix's *Turkish Tales* (1707) and *Thousand and One Days: Persian Tales* (1714), Jean-Paul Bignon's *The Adventures of Abdallah* (1729), Thomas-Simon Gueullette's *Chinese Tales* (1725), *Peruvian Tales* (1734), *Mogul*

<sup>670</sup> Irwin, Joseph James, *M. G. "Monk" Lewis*, Boston: Twayne (1976), p. 28.

<sup>671</sup> Saxon, A. H., 'The Circus as Theatre: Astley's and Its Actors in the Age of Romanticism', *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 27, no. 3 (October 1995), p. 301.

<sup>672</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 78 (November 1820), p. 395.

*Tales* (1736) and *Tartarian Tales* (1759) and Count Hamilton's *Select Tales* (1760), with English writers also eagerly riding the wave<sup>673</sup>. Then, in the second half of the century, the Orientalist trend met with the emerging Gothic fiction, with the *Arabian Nights* being an 'important conduit'<sup>674</sup>. Horace Walpole himself had a deep knowledge of Oriental tales, with his *The Castle of Otranto* being considerably indebted to stories such as 'Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp', among others<sup>675</sup>. The most famous (pseudo-)Oriental Gothic work was William Beckford's novel *Vathek* (1782), which revolves around a voluptuous, Faust-like Caliph who abjures Islam and pursues infinite knowledge and power, only to be condemned to eternal damnation in a sort of infernal underworld. Also worth mentioning are Walter Savage Landor's verse romance *Gebir* (1796), Robert Southey's epic poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), Charlotte Dacre's novel *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (1806) and Lord Byron's poem *The Giaour* (1813)<sup>676</sup>, all of which employ supernatural themes.

On stage, the most famous example of Oriental Gothic certainly was Colman The Younger's *Blue Beard*, but with the advent of melodrama theatrical renderings of Oriental subjects abounded as never before. The *Arabian Nights* continued to be the most accessible and most easily plundered source; the so-called 'orphan tales' (namely those that had no extant Arabic original and were probably created by Galland on the basis of folk-based oral traditions, notably 'Aladdin', 'Ali Baba' and 'Sinbad the Sailor'), in particular, were the favourite sources of playwrights. In 1813, Farley himself wrote and produced the two-act 'Grand Romantic Spectacle' *Aladdin; or, The Wonderful Lamp*, exploiting the current vogue by adapting a popular story that had already appeared on the Covent Garden stage in 1788, as a pantomime penned by John O'Keefe. It was a very great success; Aladdin was played by Maria Theresa De Camp, the Chinese slave Kazrac by Joe Grimaldi (one of his best roles) and the African magician Abanazar by Farley himself. In terms of supernatural gadgetry and effects (especially with regard to the Genius of the Lamp's wish-granting ability), *Aladdin* was second to none in the theatrical industry of the time, but it would be superfluous to analyse the play in detail given that the 1806 melodramatic version of 'Ali Baba' already provides a perfect example of a densely fantastic piece based on the *Arabian Nights* (though with some significant changes in plot). Other noteworthy supernaturally-tinged Oriental melodramas in this

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<sup>673</sup> 'The Oriental story became so fashionable a form that didactic writers eagerly seized upon it as a disguise for moral or philosophical reflection. The Eastern background soon lost its glittering splendour and colour, and became a faded, tarnished tapestry, across which shadowy figures with outlandish names and English manners and morals flit to and fro. Addison's *Vision of Mirza* (1711), Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), and various essays in *The Rambler*, Dr. Hawkesworth's *Almorán and Hamet* (1761), Langhorne's *Solyman and Alméná* (1762), Ridley's *Tales of the Genii* (1764), and Mrs. Sheridan's *History of Nourjahad* (1767) were among the best and most popular of the Anglo-Oriental stories that strove to inculcate moral truths'. Birkhead, Edith (1921), pp. 94-5.

<sup>674</sup> Bridgwater, Patrick (2013), p. 546.

<sup>675</sup> Varma, Devendra (1957), p. 51.

<sup>676</sup> See Kitson, Peter J., 'Oriental Gothic', in *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2016), pp. 167-84.

period were James Robertson Planché's *Abudah; or, The Talisman of Oromanes* (Drury Lane, 1819), Thomas Dibdin's *The Chinese Sorcerer; or, The Emperor and His Three Sons* (Drury Lane, 1823), Charles Farley's *The Vision of the Sun; or, The Orphan of Peru* (Covent Garden, 1823) and *The Spirits of the Moon; or, the Inundation of the Nile* (Covent Garden, 1824) and William Thomas Moncrieff's *Zoroaster; or, the Spirit of the Star* (Drury Lane, 1824). In some of these, such as *The Chinese Sorcerer* and *Zoroaster*, also ghosts were liberally included. However, the vogue for Oriental melodrama soon lessened because of the almost obsessive repetitiveness of the formula and the tendency to overdo the special effects, leading to considerable commercial losses and embarrassing misfires such as the one occurred during a performance of Rev. George Croly's *The Enchanted Courser; or, The Sultan of Curdistan* (Drury Lane, 1824), in which 'the attempt to represent [an] enchanted horse flying in the air was a complete failure'<sup>677</sup>. As years progressed, the Gothic component tended to disappear in Oriental melodramas (even ghosts lost all their frightening power), while the fantastic, completely freed from any concern about verisimilitude and often open to extravagance and childishness, took over as the predominant mode. Yet, in the theatre of the time fashions changed rapidly, and the Gothic was far from being dead.

In April 1821, the indefatigable Charles Farley presented at Covent Garden a mesmerising new melodrama entitled *Undine; or, The Spirit of The Waters*, about an immortal water spirit (the name Undine derives from the Latin unda, 'wave') who sacrifices her immortality by marrying the human knight she loves. The plot stands out for its originality if compared to other melodramas produced in the same period. It could very well have been drawn from one of the poems about the elemental spirits in Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* (notably the 'Water King', which probably Farley had in mind while setting up his version), though the shadow of the *Arabian Nights* was always there. It was instead an adaptation of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's fairy tale novella 'Undine' (1811), whose sources were in turn ancient Teutonic superstitions as well as the medieval French legend of Mélusine and Paracelsus's tract *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* (1566)<sup>678</sup>, which described the four categories of elemental spirits: Gnomes (earth elementals), Salamanders (fire elementals), Sylphs (air elementals) and Undines (water elementals). That of Undine became one of the most popular myths of European Romanticism, and in 1816 Fouqué himself provided the libretto for Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann's operatic adaptation of his tale, which deserves recognition as the first example of German Romantic opera, a genre that would clearly influence English theatre. Fouqué's tale was translated into English only in 1818 thanks to the accomplished connoisseur of German literature George Soane, who was given credit

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<sup>677</sup> *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (30 October 1824), p. 703.

<sup>678</sup> Fass, Barbara, *La Belle Dame sans Merci and the Aesthetics of Romanticism*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press (1974), p. 19.

on the title page of Farley's melodrama. The Covent Garden piece finally made Fouqué known to the English and was hailed as a top-notch production capable of valorising the original source, at least in terms of visual inventiveness (there are instead several alterations in the plot). Since the very beginning of the play, the audience was literally immersed in a magical underwater world:

*A dark sub-marine Grotto, with petrifications.  
Kuhleborn, the spirit of the waters,  
discovered upon a throne, surrounded  
by his attendants in various groupes [sic].*<sup>679</sup>

Kuhleborn (Charles Farley), the Water King, summons all his attendants to address the great agitation that has been generated in the water realm by the young naiad Undine. Whereas in Fouqué's tale Kuhleborn is Undine's uncle, here he is her evil suitor, a figure more akin to the traditional Gothic villain. Years earlier, Kuhleborn had abducted her from her father's court on the Italian coast and placed her at the door of a cottage situated near an enchanted forest. The fisherman Walter and his wife Bridget, who found Undine on the same night their three-year-old daughter accidentally drowned in a nearby lake, took care of her as if she were their child. Now that she has reached her majority, Kuhleborn craves to take her as his bride, although a 'formidable foe', Sir Huldbrand of Ringstetten, stands in his way. The young knight is currently wandering through the enchanted forest and Kuhleborn knows that, if he finds Undine, his hopes on her will be lost. He therefore orders his goblin agent Gyblin, a 'being of earthly mould' (an embodiment of elemental earth in the Paracelsian sense) who can 'mix with terrestrial creatures' without being seen<sup>680</sup>, to go to Undine and keep close watch on her until the wedding. However, in spite of Gyblin's malicious efforts to hinder Sir Huldbrand's arrival, the knight, apparently protected by the mysterious forces of the forest, manages to reach Walter's cottage, where he is warmly welcomed. Undine and Huldbrand feel an immediate attraction to each other, but her foster parents and Gyblin (disguised as a dumb dwarf pretending to seek refuge in the cottage) try to keep them separated. During the night the rebellious Undine escapes in the forest, but a storm bursts out and the waters of the nearby lake start to rise. During searches, Gyblin tries again to obstruct Huldbrand, but suddenly Undine 'is borne on a gossamer cloud over the waters, into the arms of Sir Huldbrand' (perhaps an intervention of the sylphs, who according to Paracelsus's theories are invisible beings?). After this narrow escape from danger, Huldbrand declares his intention to marry Undine. She takes out splendid rings and the two

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<sup>679</sup> All quotations from the text are from Farley, Charles, *Undine; or, the Spirit of the Waters*, in John Larpent Plays, The Huntington Library, San Marino: California. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Eighteenth Century Drama [Last accessed 09 July 2020].

<sup>680</sup> This character, played by Joe Grimaldi and on one occasion by his son Joseph Samuel William, was here given much more room than in Fouqué's story. Farley probably modelled him on the Yellow Dwarf of Walter Scott's poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805). *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 1 (May 1821), p. 44.

vow eternal love to each other, to Gyblin's rage. In spite of Walter's perplexities and the perils that may lurk in the darkness, that same night the new couple wants to set off to Huldbrand's castle and also Walter and Bridget are invited to join. However, Gyblin, who has transformed into an unrecognisable fiendish dwarf, attacks the group as it is about to cross a perilous wooden bridge, starting the fight that closes the first act:

*As they approach the bridge, the Dwarf appears on it – They start – Bridget screams – He jumps from the bridge, and comes forward – at the same time a gigantic figure of the Kuhleborn, with outstretch'd arms, appears at the back, immersed in water. [...] The Dwarf is overcome, and thrown on the ground. Sir Hildebrand and Walter run to the bridge, which changes to a car, drawn by horses, resembling Phaeton's car. They cross, with the sun at the back, as Sir Hildebrand, Walter, Undine and Bridget are carried off a clerical chorus is sung. [...] Kuhleborn, frantic with rage, waves to Gyblin, who, trembling with fear, crawls to him, and prostrates himself at his feet. The Midnight Bell tolls twelve as Kuhleborn and Gyblin sink in rage and disappointment.*

At the beginning of the second act, the furious Kuhleborn and Gyblin return to their submarine crystal cave (one of the melodrama's most beautiful locations). Gyblin, mortified, justifies himself by saying that some superior power hindered him from performing his duty. Kuhleborn knows that Undine has magical rings that protect her; his next plan is therefore to provoke jealousy in Bertalda, a court lady who is enamoured of Huldbrand. He orders Gyblin to steal one of Undine's rings and lure her to the well of the infamous Black Valley. Meanwhile, at the castle of Ringstetten, Bertalda is worryingly waiting for Hildebrand when she is startled by the sudden appearance of a strange figure dressed in a habit of the Rosicrucian order (a totally new character introduced by Farley), who 'rises in a red flame' while holding 'a flaming cross in his hand'. The man reveals that Huldbrand will soon make her unhappy by directing all his attention to another woman, disappearing immediately thereafter. In the meantime, Hildebrand, Undine and her foster parents arrive at the castle, where the treacherous Gyblin manages to steal Undine's ruby ring from her hand without anyone being able to stop him. As the maiden lies unconscious on her bed, the revengeful Bertalda secretly enters the chamber and attempts to stab her with a dagger, when suddenly '[t]he back part of the bed opens and the Rosicrucian is seen standing in a transparency'. The Rosicrucian warns Bertalda that no peasant-born can harm the daughter of a king and disappears. Terrified, Bertalda flees and accidentally bumps into Bridget, who, noticing a particularly strange mark on her arm, understands that she actually is her long-lost daughter, miraculously escaped from death and then reared by Huldbrand's mother. Bertalda, however, reacts coldly, rejects her real parents and curses Undine. She is determined to seek the well of the Black Valley and use its magic water to restore her faded youth in hopes of reconquering Huldbrand's love. However, Undine is one step ahead and closes the well in order to prevent Bertalda from fulfilling her evil plan, but once again

the arrival of Gyblin dramatically changes the situation:

*Gyblin goes to the well, and raises up the stone. Joy of Bertalda and surprise of Undine who comes forward – A smoke issues from the well, which changes to a most Splendid Fountain. In the midst of which stands Kuhleborn. The Dwarf appears in his own shape, Bertalda screams and flies – Undine does the same. Dwarf rushes after, and catches her in his arm, places in those of Kuhleborn, who exclaims “Mine! Mine!” and the whole sinks with them. The Dwarf screaming “Found! Found! Found!”.*

Undine is brought to Kuhleborn's crystal palace, where the Water King wants to reclaim her as his bride. Gyblin forcefully drags her to the altar, but the ceremony is interrupted by a loud, ominous noise: the altar splits open and the mysterious Rosicrucian appears again, while also Huldbrand, who unbeknownst to Kuhleborn possesses the other ruby ring, comes to the rescue:

*The knight appears at the back, holding out his hand, and showing the Ring, placed there by Undine. Undine rushes into his arms, the Rosicrucian waves his Cross, and the whole of the chrystal palace melts away. Kuhleborn and Dwarf, with all the attendants, sink, crying, “Lost! Lost Lost!”*

At this point the scene changes to

*The Palace of the Rosicrucians, or the Fire Philosophers. In the midst of bright clouds, ascends a Temple, in which, Walter, Bridget, and all the Spirits of Fire arise – and the upper part is filled with flying Figures bearing burning torches.*

*A grand Groupe is form'd, and sir Hildebrand and Undine are united under the Fiery Cross.*

This characteristically melodramatic happy ending is the most evident alteration Farley made to Fouqué's text, which instead ended with Huldbrand marrying the mischievous Bertalda and Undine killing him with a kiss during their wedding night. *Undine* was performed 26 times and obtained critical approval; the set pieces, in particular, were unanimously applauded as ‘matchless efforts of scenic art’<sup>681</sup>. The melodrama's greatest merit, however, was probably that of having introduced Fouqué and his novella to the English public<sup>682</sup>. The story of the immortal Undine, magnificently rendered in Soane's elegant and faithful version, became a manifesto of the more fanciful side of Romanticism, directly influencing Hans Christian Andersen's more famous ‘The Little Mermaid’ (1837) and inspiring countless adaptations in almost every medium, from opera to film, from comic books to video games. But what perhaps has passed unnoticed is that, under the guise of an artistically flawed and commercial-driven holiday fairy play, Farley's melodrama marked the return of genuine German supernaturalism onto the English legitimate stage, taking advantage of an

<sup>681</sup> *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (28 April 1821), p. 271.

<sup>682</sup> ‘The recent production of this tale as the outline of a melo-drame at Covent Garden, reminds us, that though published in 1818, we have mostly negligently suffered it to remain upon our table unnoticed until now’. *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 79 (May 1821), p. 443.

obviously different cultural *Zeitgeist* (though prejudices against German literature still survived). It did so in a rather surprising way, celebrating the dark powers of the Rosicrucian philosophy and freely adopting its symbols (notably the fiery cross) through the introduction of a new character, the Rosicrucian Seer, who acted as the benign counterpart of the wicked Kuhleborn, a role similar to that played by the good fairies and sylphs in *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Ali Baba* and *The Wood Daemon*. The element of fire, the natural antithesis of the element of water, was here embodied not by a Paracelsian salamander or some other kind of fiery spirit but, somewhat ironically, by a German ‘Fire Philosopher’, as he is styled in the text. Paracelsus's elementals are here evoked in their connection with the German Rosicrucians, who venerated the philosopher as a prophet. Therefore, with a complete U-turn, the occult supernaturalism associated with Rosicrucian-Masonic movements, a typical motif of German and Germanised Gothic fiction as well as an emblem of terror and absolute evil (especially in the context of the obsessive paranoia about secret societies that ran wild during the 1790s and beyond<sup>683</sup>), was endowed with totally positive values. The choice was unproblematically accepted in that most critics had by this time come to terms with the fact that melodrama was the genre in which (almost) everything was allowed:

Who care not what agents are called up from *the blue æther*—or the *emerald wave*—the depths of *earth*—or the fierce world of *fire*, for their gratification, will observe “*Undine*” with peculiar predilection. It develops alone the “wonderful and wild”—it addresses itself to the remnant of that credulity and fondness for the marvellous which has escaped with us from the nursery, and which may not be unaptly termed the leading-strings of the mind. We must say that we do not approve of a *rational* stage exhibiting such unreasonable fancies; but while *something* must be done, we certainly have no hesitation in saying that nothing of the *kind* could be done much better.<sup>684</sup>

The progressive acceptance of stage supernaturalism also led to unexpected re-evaluations, such as that of Lewis's *One O' Clock!*, celebrated in 1824 by George Daniel:

To raise a stupid grin at the supernatural agency of this piece may be a very easy exploit, and very worthy of those dull-matter-of-fact capacities which can tolerate nothing that is removed one step beyond the sphere of actual existence; but imaginations of a loftier order will not fail to appreciate and admire the boldness of the genius which, spurning the dull boundaries of the visible creation, has here imagined a fiction replete with the most captivating originality, and admirably suited to the purposes of the dramatist.<sup>685</sup>

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<sup>683</sup> Secret esoteric organisations continued to be demonised also in the early nineteenth century: Percy Bysshe Shelley's Gothic horror novel *St. Irvyne; or, The Rosicrucian* (1811), immediately condemned as an outrage against morality and decency, featured a Rosicrucian magician named Ginotti who is a disciple of the Devil, and also in Maturin's *Melmoth The Wanderer* (1820) and William Harrison Ainsworth's *Auriol; or, The Elixir of Life* (1844-6) Rosicrucianism is depicted negatively.

<sup>684</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 1 (May 1821), pp. 43-4. Interestingly, the review refers to all four elemental spirits, hinting at the fact that Farley's melodrama, unlike Fouqué's novella, fully delves into Paracelsian cosmology.

<sup>685</sup> Daniel, George (1824), pp. iii-iv.

*Undine*, like Lewis's melodrama, was, therefore, Gothic in the sense that it represented a 'supernatural literary genealogy', to use Diane Long Hoeveler's definition, that included all the various traditions that were now being channelled into the wide-ranging category of the fantastic. Although a fantastic mode had been developing in several European countries in the wake of the rediscovery of romanticised mythical, folk and fairy tale materials, it was in Germany that it first emerged as a distinct and well-defined literary form, namely the fantastic tale, spearheaded by authors such as Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, Adelbert von Chamisso, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Wilhelm Hauff and Fouqué himself. Walter Scott, showing his usual critical acumen, was one of the first to describe the new genre, pointing to its uncompromising oddity and extravagance:

the attachment of the Germans to the mysterious has invented another species, which, perhaps, could hardly have made its way in any other country or language. This may be called the Fantastic mode of writing,—in which the most wild and unbounded license is given to an irregular fancy, and all species of combination, however ludicrous, or however shocking, are attempted and executed without scruple. In the other modes of treating the supernatural, even that mystic region is subjected to some laws, however slight; and fancy, in wandering through it, is regulated by some probabilities in the wildest flight. Not so in the fantastic style of composition, which has no restraint save that which it may ultimately find in the exhausted imagination of the author. This style bears the same proportion to the more regular romance, whether ludicrous or serious, which Farce, or rather Pantomime, maintains to Tragedy and Comedy. Sudden transformations are introduced of the most extraordinary kind, and wrought by the most inadequate means; no attempt is made to soften their absurdity, or to reconcile their inconsistencies; the reader must be contented to look upon the gambols of the author as he would behold the flying leaps and incongruous transformations of Harlequin, without seeking to discover either meaning or end further than the surprise of the moment.<sup>686</sup>

Scott did not include Fouqué among the representatives of the newborn fantastic genre (to him his works rather represented 'the most legitimate species of romantic fiction'<sup>687</sup>), but it is very likely that Farley's more bizarre adaptation, just like all the overloaded supernatural melodramas of the time, appeared to him more akin to the exuberant fantastic mode contemporaneously explored in Germany. As generic and cultural barriers crumbled, the fantastic took over English theatre. Yet the Gothic, which experienced a steady decline in the 1810s (as confirmed by increasing number of both literary and theatrical parodies of the genre), did not disappear: towards the end of the decade and then during the 1820s, the genre briefly raised its head by launching new stories, characters and themes. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in this respect, marked a true watershed: while generally considered as the last great work of the first wave of the Gothic, Scott instead regarded it as the English text that more closely approached the German fantastic strain<sup>688</sup>. And with Royal theatres unable to really keep pace with these rapid developments, from the 1820s onwards the

<sup>686</sup> Scott, Walter, 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition', *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, vol. 1 (July 1827), p. 72.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*

long-burgeoning illegitimate venues definitively took over the English theatre industry and eclipsed their more prestigious competitors, satisfying the public's supernatural hunger with a series of memorable, incredibly influential productions (mainly melodramas, but in this context generic distinctions were even more blurred) that turn the tide in their favour. This decade, therefore, constituted not only the pinnacle of English supernatural theatre but also an almost fatal blow to the patent system, which was officially dismantled in 1843. It is therefore appropriate to dedicate the last chapter of this thesis to analysing some of the most significant illegitimate shows that employed the Gothic and the fantastic, which soon became the strongest assets of these playhouses, eventually resulting in the great supernatural boom of the 1820s, the right conclusion for the survey carried out here.

## 4. The supernatural boom at the minor theatres and the ‘end’ of theatrical legitimacy

### 4.1 *The Gothic on the illegitimate stage*

The so-called illegitimate or minor theatres of London began gaining increasing prominence towards the end of the eighteenth century. As patent theatres were struggling to preserve their identity and privileges in face of the radical cultural changes of the time (adopting every legal means in their power), the unpatented, more susceptible to fads and popular sentiments, proved much more receptive to the new demands of a rapidly evolving marketplace. Because of the ban on spoken drama established by the 1737 Licensing Act, entrepreneurial creativity and the ability to valorise non-verbal aesthetics (music, dance, spectacle) became not only recognisable trademarks but necessary talents to stay competitive in London's lively theatrical world. In fact, unpatented theatres often anticipated ideas later exploited by the patented (the fact that their works did not need to be submitted to the Examiner of Plays ensured major time-saving and a greater creative independence), influencing them in a variety of ways. Thus a new way of theatre-making emerged, aimed not at the refined audience of Westminster and the West End, but at the huge working-class audience of more unfashionable parts of the metropolis such as the East End and the Surrey side of the Thames (this phenomenon was especially peculiar to London, given that in the provinces theatrical activity flourished mainly thanks to an extension of the patent system), who had different preferences and expectations. As Susan Valladares explains, minor theatres – also known as transpontine theatres if they were located across the Thames – were ‘highly individualised venues where theatrical programmes were determined by factors ranging from managerial egos and the specific talents of the resident company, to local audience demographics and other convenient geographical determinants’<sup>689</sup>. Their reputation was very poor because they were regarded, often not without reason, as places of disorder, lawlessness, vice and depravity. Moreover, illegitimate theatrical shows were freer to depict more controversial subjects (such as more or less recent political and military events), provided they respected royal restrictions. The Gothic genre, especially in its more excessive manifestations, proved particularly suitable to the necessities of these playhouses, which could play with their own cultural illegitimacy by adopting a popular genre that appealed to middle and lower classes and proudly challenged everything that was regarded as appropriate in literature and drama. Although clear-cut trends are more difficult to identify in such a heterogeneous and volatile context, at the minors the Gothic did not face the same obstacles encountered at the patent houses and continued to prosperously flourish for several decades, being

<sup>689</sup> Valladares, Susan, *Staging the Peninsular War: English Theatres 1807-1815*, London: Routledge (2016), p. 109.

sometimes diluted by the emerging fantastic genre, but always remaining a relevant and recognisable force (until some time in the 1840s, which was also, perhaps uncoincidentally, the decade that witnessed the official end of the patent monopoly). The illegitimate theatrical circuit cannibalised pretty much everything the Gothic literary market had to offer and showed a peculiar predilection for Gothic supernaturalism, which was presented on stage without any hesitation or restraint and with maximum artistic freedom. Ghosts, demons and monsters were a sure bet when tickets had to be sold. It does not come as a surprise that minor playhouses such as Astley's Amphitheatre, the Royal Circus and Sadler's Wells acquired more and more importance towards the end of the eighteenth century, in parallel with the blossoming of the Gothic.

Astley's Amphitheatre, located on the Surrey side of the Thames near Westminster Bridge, was founded by former riding school owner Philip Astley in 1773. It originally opened as a circus-ring theatre where equestrian acts were performed alongside acrobatics, rope dancing and other typical circus amusements. A stage was later added near the ring, which allowed for the representation of more developed theatrical spectacles, mainly ballets, pantomimes and musical extravaganzas, with scripted dialogue and orchestral music gradually making their way into the shows. In particular, Astley's specialised in historical and military spectacles in which of course horses played a major role. During the 1790s it gained a quite prestigious status and attempts to perform real drama and bypass the ban on the spoken word became more and more insistent. Besides the witty use of songs, recitative and rhymed verse, in this period Astley's as well as other illegitimate venues started to deploy linen scrolls (banners or flags) with fragments of dramatic speech printed on them. These were typically held up in front of the audience when important pieces of information unconveyable by miming needed to be communicated<sup>690</sup>. Thus the spoken word became written word, literally another visual prop on stage. When the Gothic rage exploded, these playhouses were not caught unprepared. Astley's Amphitheatre's most significant contribution probably was William Upton's *The Black Castle; or, The Spirit of Ravia*, a 'Grand Spectacle Romance' in two parts staged in 1799. The play had a rich vocal component (airs, duets, choruses) and used explanatory scrolls to provide verbal clues concerning the plot, which was intrinsically Gothic (or rather Oriental Gothic, given the highly romanticised Moroccan setting). Philip Astley's son John, who was about to take over the theatre's management, superintended and directed all parts of the pantomime and cast himself in the role of Asphar, the Moorish Lord of the Black Castle. As the title itself suggests, the story pivots around a spectral apparition, the spirit of the murdered heroine Ravia, which appears twice and even sings two recitatives<sup>691</sup>, curiously showing a loquacity quite untypical of the early ghosts of Gothic

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<sup>690</sup> Moody, Jane, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (2007), pp. 28–9.

<sup>691</sup> Upton, William, *Descriptive Sketches of the New Grand Spectacle Romance, in Two Parts, called The Black Castle*,

drama. *The Black Castle* was given for nearly 100 performances, its success being also testified by the publication of the play's *Descriptive Sketches* in 1799 and of a chapbook adaptation, C. F. Barrett's *The Black Castle; or, The Spectre of The Forest*, in the following year. The decidedly visual aesthetic of the show was remarkably appreciated by *The Monthly Mirror*:

*The Black Castle, or the Spirit of Ravia* [...] possesses uncommon excellence: the scenery is, without exaggeration, superior to any thing we have seen for many years, and the *blue flame* managed with more complete effect than at the winter houses.<sup>692</sup>

Given that at the time when *The Black Castle* debuted there had already been great supernatural plays like *Fontainville Forest* and *The Castle Spectre*, the remark that here the ghostly element was handled more effectively provides an interesting indication of how well the illegitimate theatres responded to the Gothic sensibility, paying significant attention to the credibility of visual effects. In this respect, also in the following years Astley's Amphitheatre would be linked in the popular imagination to supernatural theatrics. As late as 1820, a critic of *The New Bon Ton Magazine* wrote that '[t]hose who are fond of the *marvellous* and the *unnatural*, will visit this abode of the Gnomes with the chance of leaving it highly gratified, though little, we fear, improved'<sup>693</sup>.

The stunning success of the shows put on at Astley's soon prompted Charles Dibdin the Elder, Thomas Dibdin's father, and Charles Hughes, a former rider of Astley's troupe, to found their own unlicensed venue, namely the Royal Circus, another hybrid venue combining circus and theatre. The Royal Circus opened in 1782 on the western side of Blackfriars Road (then called Great Surrey Street), St George's Fields, at a very short distance from Astley's, which it immediately entered into direct competition with. Actually, the Royal Circus was the first theatre to introduce a full stage next to the circus ring, prompting Astley's to do the same and officially starting the vogue for equestrian drama. Over the years, however, its theatrical menu became more variegated and came to include a series of thrilling military, naval, exotic and Gothic spectacles, provided of course that they were offered in dumbshow. The two volumes of *Circusiana* (1809) by James Cartwright Cross, actor, playwright and manager of the Royal Circus from about 1797 to his death in 1809, provides an invaluable testimony of the Circus's typical dramatic offerings at the turn of the century, which truly distinguished themselves as to technical innovation and narrative craft<sup>694</sup>. Titles such as *Julia of Louvain; or, Monkish Cruelty* (1797), *Blackbeard; or, The Captive Princess* (1798), *Rinaldo Rinaldini; or, The Secret Avenger* (1801), *Halloween; or, The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*

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*or, The Spirit of Ravia*, London (1799), pp. 13-4.

<sup>692</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 7 (June 1799), p. 369.

<sup>693</sup> *The New Bon Ton Magazine*, vol. 5 (September 1820), p. 324.

<sup>694</sup> 'Cross, John Cartwright', in *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, Volume 4: Corye to Dynion, ed. Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim & Edward A. Langhans, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (1975), p. 60.

(1801), *Louisa of Lombardy; or, The Secret Nuptials* (1803) and *The Round Tower; or, The Chieftains of Ireland* (1803), the last of which had originally been staged at Covent Garden, reveal a particular propensity for the Gothic subjects that were so much in fashion in those years, with frequent excursions into the realm of the supernatural or otherworldly (M. W. Disher observed that '[g]hosts were rare in circuses'<sup>695</sup>, but cited Royal Circus as a noteworthy exception). Two other less studied pieces, the 'Grand Magic Ballet of Action' *The Fire King; or, Albert and Rosalie* (1801) and the 'Splended [*sic*] Melo Dramatic Tale of Enchantment' *The Cloud King; or, Magic Rose* (1806) deserve special notice for how they drew from the elemental themes of Matthew G. Lewis's *Tales of Wonder*, among other sources, in order to exploit the vogue for fantastic-themed melodramas that emerged most powerfully at the two Royal theatres. *The Fire King*, in particular, stands out as a fiercely imaginative otherworldly feast, with the *dramatis personae* divided into three groups: Christians, Saracens and Supernatural Agents, the last including the Fire King himself with his attendants, a Skeleton and an Aerial Spirit which initially appears under the guise of a sorceress. Scene 2, in which the beautiful Rosalie seeks to learn about the fate of her lover Albert by magical means, perfectly exemplifies how the devices of illegitimate drama skilfully made up for the absence of speech:

MAGIC CAVERN.

The Sorceress is discovered in the centre, her wand elevated, and her eyes fixed—Rosalie, timidly approaches and prostrates herself.

AIR – SORCERESS.

Daughter, wou'dst *thou* by witchcraft's charm,  
 Inquiry's aid pursue?  
 Three drops of blood draw from thine arm,  
 And pluck the baneful yew!  
 (*The Sorceress presents her a dagger, with which she draws three drops of blood, and plucks a slip of yew—the Sorceress forms a circle of flame.*)  
 Approach, my child, and where I place  
 The magic circle stand,  
 And fear not aught of ghastly face,  
 That glides beneath my wand.  
 (*Rosalie, tremblingly, occupies the circle.*)  
 And now, my child, my power to aid,  
 Count Albert's father's grave  
 To me shall render up the dead,  
 And send him to my cave.  
 His skeleton obeys my spell,  
 And to the figur'd walls  
 His hand of bone shall point and tell  
 What fate his Son befalls.

<sup>695</sup> Disher, Maurice Wilson, *Greatest Show on Earth*, London: G. Bell & Sons (1937), p. 77.

Waves her hand over a centre Ruin, from which a skeleton, bearing a Death's dart in his right hand, gradually rises, and inscribes on a part of the Rock,

“ALBERT IS CAPTIVE IN PALESTINE”<sup>696</sup>

As one can immediately see, the lack of spoken sections really was the only thing that distinguished these productions from the melodramas staged at the Royal theatres. But, over time, illegitimate playhouses became more and more daring, taking advantage of the malleable and ultimately undecipherable nature of this kind of hybrid musical forms. Although here dramatic nomenclature was rather vague, the most popular genre was the burletta (literally, a ‘little joke’), an Italian form of comic opera combining arias and recitatives. In the second half of the eighteenth century, burlettas were frequently performed at Drury Lane and Covent Garden as afterpieces, and during the 1780s also the managers of the minors – the first being Philip Astley – started to adopt the form given that it fulfilled all necessary legal requirements, and the fact that it was a commonplace genre at the patent houses guaranteed them an additional degree of respectability and, to an extent, unassailability. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, the term ‘burletta’ became a sort of umbrella label to designate almost every play performed at the minor theatres. Eventually, even prose speech began to be included, at first by occasionally mixing it with music and songs, then straightforwardly on a regular basis. As David Chandler explains, ‘the minors used the increasingly vague definition of burletta as a weapon to gradually probe the weaknesses of the patent theatres’ monopoly on spoken drama’<sup>697</sup>.

The Royal Circus was at the absolute forefront of these changes. A decisive turning point came in February 1809, when Robert William Elliston, a leading actor at Drury Lane, became lessee of the theatre, which one year later he renamed the Surrey after having made several alterations and embellishments (notably the conversion of the riding ring into a theatrical pit). A histrionic performer<sup>698</sup> and ambitious entrepreneur, Elliston wanted to compete head to head with the Royal theatres, liberally adopting the genre of burletta in order to stage plays by Shakespeare and other classic authors in condensed form. His famous burletta version of *Macbeth* (1809), advertised as a ‘Grand Ballet of Action’ with new music and scenery, is the most vivid example of how visual expedients were employed to make up for the absence of Shakespeare's richly evocative language.

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<sup>696</sup> Cross, James Cartwright, *The Fire King; or, Albert and Rosalie*, in Cross, James Cartwright (1809), vol. 2, pp. 159-60.

<sup>697</sup> Chandler, David, ‘Burletta’, in *The Encyclopedia of Romantic Literature*, 3 vols., vol. 1, ed. Frederick Burwick, Nancy Moore Goslee and Diane Long Hoeveler, New York: Wiley-Blackwell (2012), p. 181.

<sup>698</sup> Elliston was an actor who excelled in both tragic and comic roles. Leigh Hunt described him as ‘the only genius that has approached that great man (Garrick) in universality of imitation’. Quoted in ‘Elliston, Robert William’, in *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, Volume 5: Eagan to Garrett, ed. Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim & Edward A. Langhans, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (1975), p. 68.

The multifaceted and ambiguous supernatural aspects of the play were literalised rather heavily-handedly in keeping with the illegitimate drama's visceral language of embodiment. One particular noteworthy mechanical contrivance was introduced in the scene where Macbeth sees the spectral dagger:

In the soliloquy of Macbeth, previous to the murder of Duncan, a real bona fide dagger flitted on, P. S., suspended from the flies, by an imperceptible wire, bobbed across the front of the stage to O. P., and was suddenly whisked out of sight at the proper cue. At this mode of illustrating the most poetical and imaginative of Shakespeare's conceptions, the Transpontines of that day yelled with delight.<sup>699</sup>

The illegitimate *Macbeth* was such a triumph that the following year Elliston, craving for official recognition, applied to the House of Commons to obtain permission to introduce dialogue in his musical pieces and then to the Privy Council to be granted a royal patent for the Surrey, but both attempts failed as patent theatres put him in their crosshairs. His efforts, however, set an example for other managers, who were inspired by these audacious undertakings and intensified the fight against the arbitrary laws that had long suffocated their liberty. To the Royal theatres' great annoyance, new theatres were opened even in the Westminster area, such as the Olympic Pavillion (started off by Philip Astley in 1806 and transformed seven years later into the Olympic Theatre by Elliston himself, who briefly christened it 'Little Drury Lane') and the Sans Peril Theatre (built on the Strand in 1806 by the colour merchant John Scott and supported also by the Earl of Darthmouth, the Lord Chamberlain between 1804 and 1810), both determined to fill their programmes with dark fantasies of Gothic supernaturalism in the hope of winning public favour. The Sans Peril, in particular, was chiefly established to showcase the dramatic talents of the founder's daughter, Jane Scott, an incredibly prolific author who was especially comfortable with Gothic themes. In her burlettas, however, the supernatural is often revealed to be mere chicanery<sup>700</sup>. Maryjean D. Purinton cites Scott as an important representative of the techno-Gothic tradition of the early nineteenth century, which otherwise manifested itself mainly on the legitimate stage, as shown in chapter 2. In the 'Melo-Romantick Burletta' *The Old Oak Chest; or, The Smuggler's Sons and the Robber's Daughter* (1816), the only play she published, some characters use suggestive phantom costumes (full-size black suits with skeleton designs) to appear like forest spectres, creating 'effective optical illusions for on-stage characters' and producing 'a hypnotic effect on the audience similar to that

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<sup>699</sup> *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 73 (May 1869), p. 514. The idea had originally been first suggested by Bonnell Thornton: 'There is no reason why a bloody dagger might not with as much propriety be let down by a wire over MACBETH'S head, when in that fine scene he creates the air-drawn dagger of the mind'. Thornton, Bonnell (19 March 1752), p. 229.

<sup>700</sup> An exception can be found in her Gothic fantasy spectacle *Asgard the Demon Hunter; or, Le Diable a la Chasse* (1812), which included a glowing cavern, infernal hounds, a demon of darkness and a ghost hermit enveloped in celestial light.

achieved by the staged science shows of Mesmer's magnetism, exhibitions of galvanized torpedo fish, and demonstrations of nitrous oxid intoxications'<sup>701</sup>. As a matter of fact, in the early days of Scott's direction the Sans Peril also presented elaborate shadow plays complete with artificial fireworks such as *Vision in the Holy Land; or, Godfrey of Bouillon's Dream* (1806) and various sorts of 'phantasmagoric evolutions'<sup>702</sup> that blended mechanical tricks of illusion and lurid supernatural imagery in true techno-Gothic fashion. The entertainment called *Tempest Terrific* (1806) was described as an 'Optical Exhibition of Visionary Objects, Illustrated with Historical Remarks, something in the manner of that admired Exhibition the Phantasmagorie [*sic*] but varying materially in the effect'<sup>703</sup>, whereas *Spectrology of Ghosts* (1807) has a sufficiently self-explanatory title. After Scott's retirement in 1819, the Sans Peril was renovated and renamed the Adelphi, establishing its new reputation as the leading home for domestic and nautical melodrama, although supernatural sensationalism continued to occasionally pop up on stage.

The illegitimate theatre that better capitalised on the London public's love for things supernatural, creatively reconciling the rigid legal limitations with its structural characteristics and commercial aspirations, was Sadler's Wells. In 1683 one Richard Sadler had opened it as a 'Musick House' located near Pentonville, just off the Islington Road. By the beginning of the eighteenth century Sadler's Wells's entertainment programme included singing, rope-dancing, acrobatic stunts, athletic contests, performances of trained animals and pageants. It later evolved as a well-appointed theatre in 1765, when Thomas Rosoman rebuilt it so that he could mount high-grade operatic productions. During the 1790s, however, the Wells specialised in pantomimes, both comic and serious, and gained unprecedented popularity thanks to playwrights such as Mark Lonsdale and Thomas Dibdin (who also served as managers) and actors such as Jack Bologna, Jean Baptiste Dubois and Joseph Grimaldi. It was in this period that Dibdin produced classic pantomimes like *Valentine and Orson, or, the Wild Man of Orleans* (1795) and *Alonzo and Imogene; or, the Bridal Spectre* (1796), which over the years he would refurbish by adding spoken dialogue. The year 1800 marked a decisive watershed for the history of Sadler's Wells: Charles Dibdin the Younger, brother to Thomas, took over management of the theatre, where he immediately began working also as actor and principal house dramatist (his first major success being the 1801 'Serio-Comic Spectacle' *The Great Devil; or, The Robber of Genoa*). Two years later the Dibdins, along with the composer William Reeve, the scene painter Robert C. Andrews and other shareholders, became co-proprietors of the theatre. It is in this period that Charles Dibdin had a revolutionary idea that made Sadler's Wells the most talked

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<sup>701</sup> Purinton, Marjean D. (2001) [Last accessed 02 April 2021].

<sup>702</sup> *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 1 (January 1807), p. 73. In this period Jack Bologna, known for his *Phantascopia* entertainment at the Lyceum, also gave some ghost exhibitions at the Sans Peril.

<sup>703</sup> *London Times* (15 November 1806).

about summer venue in London: in the winter of 1803-4, he had installed a huge, permanent water tank beneath the stage that was directly filled from the nearby New River by means of an ‘Archimedes’ wheel’, while another tank was installed on the theatre’s roof so that it could create real waterfalls dripping down in the backdrop of the stage<sup>704</sup>. This allowed Dibdin to put on a series of ultra-heightened ‘aqua-dramas’ (usually designated as ‘melo-dramatic romances’, although also pantomimes, ballets and other kinds of spectacles added aquatic displays) with realistic maritime scenes and state-of-the-art special effects such as smoking volcanoes, burning castles and fireworks, which reflected well on the surface of the water<sup>705</sup>. As Gabriela Cruz fascinatingly puts it, Sadler’s Wells ‘drew from the sea much more than just the motifs and vistas they put on display. They adopted aspects of naval technology for spectacular use and embraced the habits of pragmatic and inventive thinking then seen as the defining traits of mariners’<sup>706</sup>, Between 1804 and 1824 a total of 36 aquadramas were staged, most of them written or co-written by Dibdin himself. If this innovation was initially meant to enhance the quality of historical and specifically naval spectacles through elaborate reconstructions of sea battles, shipwrecks and other sorts of maritime adventures and disasters<sup>707</sup>, soon enough the Wells slightly changed creative direction. The first aqua-drama, the highly expensive *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1804), had a terrific success on its first season, but in the next it fared considerably less well, with the use of the water tanks soon becoming too predictable. Dibdin quickly understood that now only spectacular supernatural pieces could keep an easily bored audience’s interest alive in the long term. He therefore began providing the Aquatic Theatre, as it was soon nicknamed, with works such as *An Bratach, or, the Water Spectre* (1805), *The Invisible Ring, or, the Water Monster and Fire Spectre* (1806), *The Ocean Fiend; or, The Infant’s Peril* (1807), *The White Witch; or, The Cataract of Amazonia* (1808), *The Magic Minstrel; or, The Fairy Lake* (1808), *The Wild Man; or, Water Pageant* (1809), *The Spectre Knight* (1810), *Rokeby Castle; or, The Spectre of the Glen* (1813), *The Gheber; or, The Fire Worshippers* (1818) and *The Weird Sisters; or, The Thane and the Throne* (1819), in which the Gothic mode – here more and more directed towards the sheer fantastic – magnificently combined with the venue’s advanced hydraulic technology and trick effects. The typical climax usually involved the appearance of one or

<sup>704</sup> Arundell, Denis (1965), p. 72.

<sup>705</sup> Water scenes were usually kept for the very last scene of the play given that it generally took from 20 to 40 minutes to remove the stage floor and reveal the water tanks, during which the curtain was lowered and the audience had to patiently wait. See Temple, Philip (ed.), *Survey of London*, vol. 47: *Northern Clerkenwell and Pentonville*, New Haven and London: Published for English Heritage by Yale University Press on behalf of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London (2008), p. 150.

<sup>706</sup> Cruz, Gabriela (2020), p. 104.

<sup>707</sup> J. S. Bratton noted that ‘[t]he Sadler’s Wells audience included all ranks of seamen. Bratton, J. S., “British Heroism and the Structure of Melodrama’, in *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930*, eds. J. S. Bratton, Richard Allen Cave, Brendan Gregory, Heidi J. Holder and Michael Pickering, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press (1991), p. 43.

more supernatural characters who majestically emerged from the water to bring about the conclusion of the plot (but apart from the frequent introduction of unearthly *dramatis personæ* there was also the usual melodramatic repertoire of poisonings, combats, conflagrations, last-minute escapes, animal acts and so on). These plays, each more applauded than the previous one, were authentic blockbusters that only sought to provoke eye-popping amazement, displaying anarchic creativity in terms of plot, scenery, decorations and visual effects. Sadler's Wells's typical low-ranking theatre-goers, possibly the most rowdy and unruly in the whole city<sup>708</sup>, only wished to drink alcohol galore and be entertained by the exhibition of watery ghosts, sea monsters and other types of bizarre aquatic creatures. The last scene of *The Invisible Ring*, for instance, featured 'a Combat with the Water Monster and a Fiery Dragon, the Ascension of a good Spirit, the Appearance and Fate of the Fire Spectre, with the Liberation of a good Genius from the Volcano', the whole 'performed on Real Water'<sup>709</sup>. *The Ocean Fiend* instead introduced an especially credible life-size doll in a scene in which a child was supposed to be dashed into the water from a bridge and saved by a Newfoundland dog (causing some members of the audience to panic) and the new 'Red Fire' (a chemical preparation of strontia, shellac, chlorate of potash and charcoal) used for the final explosion of a palace<sup>710</sup>. *The Cabinet; or, Monthly Report of Polite Literature* noted that

The effect of the last scene has never been surpassed on any stage. It exhibits an uninterrupted body of water, on which dolphins, tritons, sea-horses, boats, &c.&c. are displayed so as to form a most interesting and romantic *spectacle*, which concludes with the appearance of the *Ocean Fiend*, and a general conflagration.<sup>711</sup>

Sometimes the extreme realism of Sadler's Wells's machinery led to curious incidents, such as that which happened to actress Miss Jellett during the premiere of *The White Witch*:

<sup>708</sup> Nonetheless, Sadler's Well's aqua-dramas appealed also to more respectable and refined audiences. In the summer of 1807, for example, *The Monthly Mirror* observed that the theatre had become 'the most thronged with fashionable company of all the places of amusement in the suburbs of the metropolis'. *The Monthly Mirror*, vol. 1 (June 1807), p. 437. Dibdin himself recalled how '[d]uring the run of An Bratach, we had not only the honour of being repeatedly visited by all the british and foreign nobility in London; but, with very few exceptions, the whole of the royal family'. Dibdin, Charles, the Younger, *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger*, ed. George Speaight, London: The Society for Theatre Research (1956), p. 66.

<sup>709</sup> Hazlitt, William, *A View of the English Stage; or, A Series of Dramatic Criticisms*, London (1818), p. vii. Dibdin wrote that he brought out the play 'in the most superb manner, as to Scenery, Dresses, Properties and Decorations. [...] The Aquatic Scene represented a Volcano, on the Borders of a Lake; the reflection of which in the Water, gave an indescribable richness to the Scene. Theseus and Ariadne furnished the hint for subject, and the liberation of the Heroine from the Jaws of an enormous and nondescript Sea Monster by the Hero of the Piece, after a tremendous conflict with the Spirit of the Volcano, effected for us a complete victory over the public prejudice which our previous failures had occasioned. These Water Monsters, and all that description of Properties (of which we had many in subsequent Seasons) cost us from 30 to 60 pounds each. Originally they were made by Mr. Alexander Johnstone of Drury Lane, and after his death by Mr. Bradwell of Covent Garden'. Dibdin, Charles, the Younger (1956), pp. 87-8.

<sup>710</sup> Arundell, Denis (1965), p. 80. Dibdin called it 'a most imposing *Coup-de-Theatre*'. Dibdin, Charles, the Younger (1956), p. 91.

<sup>711</sup> *The Cabinet; or, Monthly Report of Polite Literature*, vol. 1 (July 1807), p. 354.

This young Lady played the Heroine of the Piece, an Orphan; which she literally became, her Mother dying during the rehearsal of the Aqua-Drama—in consequence of which her presence at the Theatre was dispensed with, till after the funeral of her Mother had taken place; and she had previously had sufficient rehearsals to make her *au fait* in her part, with the exception of the Water Scene, which was always left to the last. It was the fashion then—a little so now—to introduce Spectres, Apparitions and other Gauze and wire, blue and red fire, unrealities and in conformity with the prevailing taste, the Spirit of the Heroine's departed Mother was to appear to her, at the Denouement of the Piece; and, (in conformity with old Astley's plan of making the audience thoroughly understand what they saw) a cloud was to fall, previous to the Appearance of the Spirit—as the Mother as a living personage was not a character in the Piece)—this cloud bearing a Transparent Inscription (then also very fashionable) with the words, “*Behold the Spirit of your departed Mother!*” Of this Inscription Miss J. knew nothing further than *an* Inscription would fall in the last scene, and an apparition follow it, and as she did not return to the Theatre till the morning of Easter Monday, she was little acquainted with the Business of the Water Scene; and therefore, when (at night) she was performing in the Scene, and the Scroll [...] fell and its contents rivetted her eyes, succeeded by the rising of the Apparition from the Water, the distressing effect which it had upon her, will be readily conceived; she was carried off the Stage in a fit, succeeded by strong Hysterics; which I was apprehensive would produce still more alarming results. Providentially it did not—and in a Night or two she resumed her usual and exemplary alacrity.<sup>712</sup>

An erudite man, Dibdin showed uncommon talent in picking up elements from classic literature, more or less recent dramas as well as popular traditions and superstitions, mixing unusual ingredients of what often appeared as crazy theatrical hodgepodes. This was the case with the exotic-themed *The Wild Man*, written by Dibdin as a showcase for Joe Grimaldi, who played an Orson-like character conceived to revive the success of his performance in Covent Garden's *Valentine and Orson*<sup>713</sup>. The protagonist is Artuff, a prince who wants to regain control of his island's government and save his family from the fiendish Muley, the usurping Moorish Viceregent. He eventually succeeds thanks to the help of the titular Wild Man and none other than Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, the famous Cervantesque characters. The final scene is devoted to a flamboyant water pageant that takes place on the lake in the prince's gardens, in which Muley once again threatens Artuff's son Adolphus and strange events occur in rapid succession:

*The Mock Sorceror, Braganthan, appears on an Aquatic Hydra, which is combated by a Water Serpent, while the Sorceror is attacked and overcome by the efforts of Don Quixote. Descension of a Personification of Clemency. The Moor pardoned. His desperation, and the effect of disappointed Ambition, Peril of Adolphus, and his preservation by the Wild Man.*

<sup>712</sup> Dibdin, Charles, *The Younger* (1956), pp. 99-100.

<sup>713</sup> The most memorable scene involving the Wild Man is that in which he is affected by the sound of Artuff's silver flute. Dibdin described it in his *Memoirs*: ‘Mr. Grimaldi played the *Wild Man*; and in order to give his peculiar talents full scope, I wrote a scene, representing the powerful influences of Music over even the Savage Mind; which, as the fluteplayer varied his Measure, drew from Grimaldi, a very impressive exhibition, in action, of all the various passions of the natural mind; and so popular did this Scene become, that the incident, as a Scene, has been perpetually introduced as an attractive feature on Benefit Nights, at almost every Theatre in Town, and many in the Country; under the title of “The Power of Music”. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

## DEATH OF THE MOOR.

*Supposed appearance of the Dulcinea del Toboso  
released from Enchantment.*<sup>714</sup>

The success of these productions was truly resonant: some of the scripts were published, other adapted into chapbook form by eyewitnesses. Dibdin was constantly under pressure to create new pieces every year in order to cater for the demands of an audience in constant search of innovation and surprise<sup>715</sup>. After several years of prosperity, however, the sense of novelty had gone. By the late 1810s the public started to show signs of being tired of the highly repetitive patterns of Sadler's Well's aqua-dramas and their engineering wonders, while new theatres such as the Sans Peril/Adelphi, the Olympic, the English Opera House (formerly the Lyceum) and the Coburg seemed to better capture the Romantic audience's constant, almost desperate desire for originality. The theatre began to lose money and the frequent health problems of Grimaldi, the house undisputed star, did nothing but worsen the situation. In 1819, after more than 19 years of management, the exhausted Dibdin was declared bankrupt and resigned in favour of Grimaldi himself. In this period, the new aquatic pieces, such as Edward Fitzball's *Nerestan, Prince of Persia; or, The Demon of the Flood* (1823)<sup>716</sup>, were unable to keep up with changing audience tastes and proved, somehow, less effective in spite of their attempts at improvements (in *Nerestan* a new machinery was introduced that enabled the stage to be raised into the flies along with the whole scenery, thus immediately displaying the water tank). In 1824 the water tanks were removed, thus putting an abrupt end to the era of aqua-dramas (although in later years they were revived at intervals). The following year Thomas Dibdin became manager/superintendent and presented many new pieces, notably burlesques of supernatural melodramas performed at other theatres. He held the position until 1828, which was the last year also for Grimaldi, who on 17 March made his last performance (as the German drunken soldier Hock in Dibdin's own *The Sixes; or, The Devil's in the*

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<sup>714</sup> Dibdin, Charles, The Younger, *Songs and other Vocal Compositions, With the Plot of the Piece, A Description of the Scenery, in The Wild Man, or Water Pageant*, London: W. Glendinning (1810), pp. 31-2.

<sup>715</sup> Writing about the season 1806-07, Dibdin recalled how '[t]o our great astonishment, *An Bratach* had not lost its power of pleasing and astonishing, it had lost its public attraction—it did not draw—revivals rarely do'. Dibdin, Charles, the Younger (1956), p. 87.

<sup>716</sup> The review of the play in *The Drama* was rather lukewarm: 'The plot of this "aquatic romance," making all due allowances for its necessary extravagance, was interesting, and some of the scenes seemed to wrap the senses of at least some portion of the audience in perfect illusion. The scenery in general was very good. The feature peculiar to this theatre, of exhibiting a "lake of real water," did not produce all the effect of which we consider it to be susceptible. [...] The burning of the enchanted fortress of the demon, reflected on the glassy surface of this "lake of real water," was rather well managed; but still we apprehend there remains great room for improvement. This scene appears to be hurried over with unnecessary rapidity. The aquatic beings, to whatever class they may belong, whether mermaids or devil-fish, should be taught to seem to swim better'. *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 4 (May 1823), p. 257.

*Dice!*) followed by a moving farewell speech<sup>717</sup>. The downward spiral continued until 1843, when the patent monopoly was abolished and Samuel Phelps became manager, starting to mount memorable productions of Shakespeare's plays.

In spite of its unceremonious end, Charles Dibdin's managerial enterprise at Sadler's Wells would exert a long shadow over illegitimate theatre, anticipating the great age of nautical melodrama (1820s-30s) and its interconnections with the Gothic/supernatural mode (but lavish water features were soon employed also by Royal theatres<sup>718</sup>). Most relevantly, Sadler's Wells was the first minor theatre to systematically infringe the patent law by including spoken parts in its plays<sup>719</sup>. For example, in *The Spectre Knight* (1810), a 'Grand Caledonian Aquatic Romance' principally conceived to cash in on the vogue for all things Scottish launched by Walter Scott (the plot is founded on his 1808 poem *Marmion* as well as an episode narrated in Holinshed's *Chronicles*) and culminating with a characteristic spectral apparition on the water, songs alternated with spoken prose dialogue, unashamedly taking advantage of a general loosening of controls. Dibdin was not prosecuted (the fact that his theatre was open only in the summer did not constitute a particular threat to the patent winter theatres) and other managers soon decided to imitate him<sup>720</sup>. During the 1810s, burletta became a sufficiently vague term to serve as a convenient disguise for actual spoken drama: rhyming dialogues progressively disappeared, recitatives became plain prose speech (with only a feeble piano or harpsichord accompaniment) and soon 'there was no distinguishing the illegitimate from the legitimate drama'<sup>721</sup>. William Thomas Moncrieff's burletta *Rochester; or King Charles The Second's Merry Days* (Olympic Theatre, 1818) was the first illegitimate drama composed entirely in prose. Even though the patent theatres continued to fight hard to maintain their privileges, their monopolistic power suffered a severe blow. It was established that burlettas had to

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<sup>717</sup> Arundell, Denis (1965), pp. 104-5. As Dibdin himself used to said, 'Grimaldi and the water were the Alpha and Omega' of Sadler's Wells. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>718</sup> William Thomas Moncrieff's Oriental melodrama *The Cataract of the Ganges; or, The Rajah's Daughter* (Drury Lane, 1823) was the first production of a patent theatre to feature a real waterfall on stage.

<sup>719</sup> In his *Memoirs*, Dibdin wrote that 'as the Age grew more informed, Burlettas grew insipid, and the Public relished no musical Pieces destitute of Dramatic Dialogue; so, at the Wells, whether I was right or wrong, prudent or imprudent, after some time, using an intermezzo of recitative singing, in rhyme, and speaking in Prose, I "*did a bit of march of Intellect*", dismissed the Piano from the Orchestra, and introduced dialogue, spoken in prose only; I say I did, for me, at Sadler's Wells, originated this Custom, which was soon after adopted, and has since been continued at all the Minor Theatres'. Writing in 1830, Dibdin also anticipated the end of the patent monopoly: 'Looking at the benefit which may accrue from Theatres, it is, I think, much to be desired that the Licences of all the Minor Theatres should be amplified from the narrow, and ambiguous limits, which the Act, whence they are authorized, *is said* to confine them to. It has been said that this will probably be the case soon, by virtue of a new Act made expressly for them'. Dibdin, Charles, *The Younger* (1856), p. 112.

<sup>720</sup> Chandler, David (2012), p. 182.

<sup>721</sup> Cook, Dutton, 'The Illegitimate Drama', in *Time: A Monthly Miscellany of Interesting & Amusing Literature*, vol. 5, London: Kelly & Co (September 1881), p. 632. In 1813, *The Theatrical Inquisitor* reported that in the minor theatres 'performances are to be witnessed little inferior to some of the regular theatres, adding that the monopoly of the regular drama is on many accounts highly injurious and impolitic, and will probably very soon call for legislative interference'. *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 3 (November 1813), p. 198.

be of no more than three acts and contain a minimum of five songs (the Sans Peril and the Olympic obtained special burletta licences in this period), but these requirements were easily fulfillable by almost any type of dramatic piece. Considering the impossibility to exactly define what qualified as burletta, tacit permissions were given to a variegated repertoire of dramatic genres, including melodrama (or whatever name it assumed in the various theatres<sup>722</sup>), a genre easily adaptable to the dramatic and legal needs of the illegitimate stage<sup>723</sup>. As Frederick Elliott Warner remarked, ‘all that was required to “illegitimize” the genre was a certain degree of versification, and completion of the already extensive musical accompaniment with a few songs’<sup>724</sup>. Soon enough, melodrama began incorporating ordinary prose speech and gradually replaced burletta as the dominant genre at the minor theatres. Around 1820, illegitimate melodrama was utterly indistinguishable from its legitimate equivalent, at least from a formal point of view. But whereas the patent theatres mainly steered towards familiar domestic subjects, the minors revived the Gothic mode, drawing from a renewed surge in Gothic fiction as well as fresh cultural impulses coming from Germany. One of the consequences was the re-ignition of the old debate over German/Gothic supernaturalism, although this time the forces at play had changed, given that the Enlightenment system of values had been irreversibly eroded, especially on stage. In this period, illegitimate theatres made a decisive leap forward with respect to their centrality within the London theatre industry, their offerings matching and often outclassing those of their more prestigious rivals, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. As the remainder of this chapter will seek to illustrate, supernatural melodrama, the flagship genre of the minors, the feather in their cap, was an essential part of their irresistible success during the 1820s and beyond, allowing them to drive the final nail in the coffin of the patent system.

#### 4.2 The Vampire and the emergence of neo-Gothic melodrama

By the late 1810s, the Gothic seemed to be a moribund genre, especially on stage. Royal theatres had progressively tamed down its most hideous elements, channelling them into the nascent melodrama. Here the Gothic of old stamp dried up and assumed lighter and more ideologically

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<sup>722</sup> Sometimes bizarrely hybrid definitions were adopted, as in the case of Thomas Dibdin's ‘Melo-dramatic Burletta’ *The Vicar of Wakefield* (Surrey, 1817).

<sup>723</sup> Furthermore, the fact that there were so many theatres operating outside the Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction rendered controls basically impossible. It should be noted, however, that sometimes the minors spontaneously submitted works to the Lord Chamberlain's Office since this guaranteed them legal protection and a certain degree of cultural prestige.

<sup>724</sup> Warner, Elliott Frederick, ‘The Burletta in London's Minor Theatres During the Nineteenth Century, with a Handlist of Burlettas’, PhD dissertation, The Ohio State University (1972), p. 63.

innocuous forms that tended towards the pure marvellous, in what were to all intents and purposes early theatrical manifestations of the fantastic genre. But the Gothic days were far from over. The publication of texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and John William Polidori's *The Vampire* (1819), generally considered the last gasps of the Gothic, actually planted the seeds for its unexpected revival on stage, confirming Diego Saglia's remark that the Gothic is 'a spectral entity, an aesthetic which appears and disappears across the Romantic-period cultural continuum'<sup>725</sup>. The genre was revitalised by a new set of stories and characters that would eventually transcend their Gothic origins to become universal myths of the so-called mass or popular culture, with their early theatrical incarnations being crucial in this process. It only seems appropriate that these texts were mostly ignored by the snobbish patent theatres, still involved in their desperate crusade against the supposed decay of serious drama, whereas they were promptly exploited by the minor theatres, which understood that the supernatural, in all its forms, still exerted a powerful lure and seemed able to survive passing fashions. As a consequence, the 1820s witnessed an 'exceptional resuscitation of the Gothic supernatural' within a larger 'revivalist turn' that led these theatres to recover the 'spectacular, naïve models of melodrama's first decade'<sup>726</sup>. Now that they were much freer to use the spoken word, the minors were ready to fully exploit the spectacular possibilities of melodrama, a genre that they felt as their own, and resurrect its inherent Gothicism. As a matter of fact, the Gothic returned to its original 'German' roots (the term continued to be less a geographical than an aesthetic label, although German influences would be more significant than ever), namely as a macabre, esoteric, monstrous, shocking, at times grotesque, but always terrifyingly supernatural mode. Matthew Buckley plainly speaks of a true 'neo-Gothic fashion'<sup>727</sup> and mentions the introduction of gaslighting in the late 1810s as one of its main driving factors:

The additional force lent to melodrama by gaslight is hard to overstate: in its remediated mode, the lurid supernaturalism of the Gothic could be given fresh horror [...] Melodrama was not simply altered by gas: like the Gothic monsters that its advent revived, it was thrillingly, and through devilish *techné*, brought back to life. That producers and audiences should have responded to gas by starting over, returning to melodrama's most sensational, credulity-straining subgenres [...] should not surprise us at all.<sup>728</sup>

This revival of Gothic melodrama was spearheaded by James Robinson Planché's *The Vampire; or, The Bride of the Isles*, performed in the summer of 1820 at Samuel James Arnold's English Opera House. The original source of the work was John William Polidori's novella *The Vampyre*, written in

<sup>725</sup> Saglia, Diego, 'Staging Gothic Flesh: Material and Spectral Bodies in Romantic-Period Theatre', in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Fabio Liberto, Amsterdam: Rodopi (2014), p. 163.

<sup>726</sup> Buckley, Matthew, 'The Formation of Melodrama', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre 1737–1832*, ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2014), p. 472.

<sup>727</sup> Buckley, Matthew (2018), p. 25.

<sup>728</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

1816 while the author was in Switzerland as secretary and personal physician of Lord Byron and then published in the April 1819 issue of *The New Monthly Magazine*. Here it was mistakenly (but perhaps purposely) attributed to Lord Byron himself (who did not appreciate being associated with what he considered ‘some bookselling imposture’<sup>729</sup>), causing a misunderstanding it took decades to definitively clarify. Polidori drew inspiration from a folk belief common in the Balkans and Eastern European countries since at least the beginning of the eighteenth century and largely unknown in England until one century later, when it began to make some notable literary appearances<sup>730</sup>. Unlike other superstitions, this figure outlived the Enlightenment and attracted the interest of Gothic and Romantic writers for the way it tested the boundaries between Christianity and Paganism, reason and imagination. The protagonist of Polidori's story, Lord Ruthven, is an immortal undead who feeds on the blood of young and beautiful virgins, appearing not as the typically disgusting reanimated corpse of Gothic fiction but as an elegant aristocratic seducer. This irresistible demon lover, obviously inspired (not without a mild ironic touch) by the figure of Lord Byron himself<sup>731</sup>, became a Romantic icon and its influence on subsequent literary and popular culture, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2008-12), is incalculable. The tale was first dramatised not for the London stages but for what James Boaden called the ‘germanised French stages’<sup>732</sup> of Paris's Boulevard du Temple: on 13 June 1820, the novelist Charles Nodier, who had a certain familiarity with Gothic and fantastic themes, presented his three-act melodrama *Le Vampire* at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, obtaining a thunderous success. The work, on which also Pierre Carmouche and Achille de Jouffroy collaborated, instantly sparked a transnational vampire craze that spread like a contagious disease throughout Europe and was of course regarded

<sup>729</sup> Byron, George Gordon, Letter to Douglas Kinnaird (24 April 1819), in *Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1982), p. 194.

<sup>730</sup> Voltaire once wrote ‘What? Vampires in our Eighteenth Century? Yes [...] in Poland, Hungary, Silesia, Moravia, Austria and Lorraine – there was no talk of Vampires in London, or even Paris’. Quoted in Frayling, Christopher, *Vampyres: From Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, London: Faber and Faber (1991), p. 31. In the early nineteenth century, however, a bunch of works (in both verse and prose) were published that presented prototypical vampires which might have inspired Polidori, including Robert Southey's *Thalaba The Destroyer* (1801), John Herman Merivale's *The Dead Man of the Pest* (1802), John Stagg's “The Vampyre” (1810), Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) and Lord Byron's *The Giaour* (1813) and *A Fragment* (published in 1819, after *The Vampyre*, but written as early as 1816). Stagg's tale included an interesting short preface that explained the vampire legend to English readers: ‘The story of the *Vampyre* is founded on an opinion or report which prevailed in Hungary, and several parts of Germany, towards the beginning of the last century:—It was then asserted, that, in several places, dead persons had been known to leave their graves, and, by night, to revisit the habitations of their friends; whom, by suckosity, they drained of their blood as they slept. The person thus phlebotomised was sure to become a Vampyre in their turn; and if it had not been for a lucky thought of the clergy, who ingeniously recommended staking them in their graves, we should by this time have had a greater swarm of blood-suckers than we have at present, numerous as they are. Many and ingenious were the animadversions, both of the faculty and clergy, to adopt some probable reasons for the physical cause of such an uncommon phenomenon’. Stagg, John, *The Minstrel of the North; or, Cumbrian Legends. Being a Poetical Miscellany of Legendary, Gothic, and Romantic Tales*, London: Hamblin & Seyfang (1810), p. 261.

<sup>731</sup> ‘Ruthven’ was also the name of the libertine protagonist of Lady Caroline Lamb's novel *Glenarvon* (1816), in turn modelled on Lord Byron.

<sup>732</sup> Boaden, James (1825), vol. 2, p. 80.

with weariness by critics<sup>733</sup>.

Planché, then a young author struggling to emerge<sup>734</sup>, translated Nodier's play into *The Vampire; or, The Bride of the Isles*, thus bringing the story back to England. His condensed two-act version, billed as a 'Romantick Melo-Drama', was licensed on 25 July 1820 and on 9 August opened at the English Opera House, which, after its reconstruction in 1816 and the introduction of gas lighting (for the stage as well as the auditorium) in the following year, had become one of London's most fashionable theatrical venues. After a revival of the 'Grand Romantic Serious Ballet' *Raymond and Agnes; or, The Bleeding Nun* in the summer of 1819 it also placed itself at the forefront of the neo-Gothic trend. Although officially licensed to perform operas and light forms of musical drama, the English Opera House often resorted to melodrama, taking advantage of the fact that there was no clear-cut distinction between the two genres in this period (both mixed spoken dialogue with sung text)<sup>735</sup>. This is probably why Planché added nine songs and a new comic character, the superstitious drunkard McSwill, in order to make the play qualify as one of those entertainments approved by the Examiner of Plays. Frederick Burwick has emphasised the fact that Planché was 'effective in modulating the oppositions of comedy and terror, and, as Walter Scott often did, heightening supernatural effects through the beliefs of the common folk'<sup>736</sup>. This actually is a feature – typical of early English melodrama – that distinguished Planché's play from Nodier's, which attracted fierce criticism and parody also because of its ultra-serious tone (Roxana Stuart observed that '[t]he critical reaction to Planché's *Vampire* displayed none of the jealousy or moral outrage that the

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<sup>733</sup> The unprecedented interest in vampires and vampirism generated by Nodier's melodrama was addressed by *The New Monthly Magazine*, the journal where Polidori's tale had been published in the first place: 'Since the appearance of the story of the *Vampire*, the conversation of private parties has frequently turned on the subject; and the discussion has been prolonged and invigorated by the pieces brought out at the theatres, as well of Paris as of London. Vampirism, at one period, had almost superseded politics, at Paris, in the journals of that lively and inquisitive city, during an interval of national expectation. The French literati, whom nothing escapes, desirous of displaying their learning, have brushed off the dust of repose and oblivion from more than one story applicable to the enquiry [...] This article deserves attention, no less from its temporary interest, than from its peculiar character, as part of the history of the human mind. It is connected with notions of the most extensive and powerful influence; and may be traced from the days of the most enlightened classical antiquity. Nay, indeed, so far as the relative question of the re-appearance of the dead may be supposed to affect it, it is not altogether at rest to this day'. *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 14 (November 1820), p. 548.

<sup>734</sup> His last melodrama before *The Vampire* was the poorly received *Abudah; or, The Talisman of Oromanes* (Drury Lane 1820), one of those Oriental pieces that the Royal theatres typically offered as Easter entertainment in this period. Throughout his career, Planché would write, adapt, or collaborate on nearly 200 plays in a wide range of diverse genres.

<sup>735</sup> In his anonymously published *Briefes Eines Verstorbenen* (Letters from a Dead Man, 1830), Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, a German visitor to England, wrote that the English Opera House 'is neither elegant nor large, but the actors are not all bad. There was no opera, however; instead, we had terrible melodramas'. Quoted in Frayling, Christopher, *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, London: Faber and Faber (1991), p. 38. This confirms how, in the early nineteenth century, opera had been almost wholly absorbed by melodrama. As early as 1811, Walter Scott observed that '[t]he English Opera seems now in its wane before a still more unregulated anomaly, the modern Melo-Drama, in which all that can mingle, may'. Scott, Walter, 'Remarks on English Opera and Farce', in *The Modern British Drama*, 5 vols., vol. 5, London: William Miller (1811), p. iv.

<sup>736</sup> Burwick, Frederick (2009), p. 238.

French press had shown to Nodier's work'<sup>737</sup>). Yet many theatrical styles and traditions converged to make *The Vampire*. Apart from being the first true monster melodrama, a genre arguably pioneered by Lewis' *The Wood Daemon* (whose 1811 revival had been performed precisely at the English Opera House), *The Vampire* followed in the steps of early fantastic melodrama in its blend of horror and fantasy. The 'gloomy' Gothic is here counterbalanced by the 'sportive' Gothic (at some point McSwill narrates an old vampire story as if it were one of 'Mother Bunch's fairytales', starting with 'once upon a time'<sup>738</sup>) through the classic opposition between malign and benign supernatural forces, here taken to an unprecedentedly high level of stagecraft. At the same time, however, the play seemed aimed at evoking the drawing and absorbing quality of early Gothic supernatural shockers such as *Fontanville Forest* and *The Castle Spectre*. This is arguably confirmed by the nature of the changes introduced by Planché with respect to the original, all aimed at improving 'plausibility and motivation as well as accentuating the sense of temporal urgency'<sup>739</sup>, as far as the subject and Arnold's managerial directives allowed. His melodrama did not invite childish incredulity, such as those of Charles Dibdin, but strove towards the impassioned realism of early Gothic dramas. Actually, Planché was a student of art renowned for his attention to realistic costume, scenery, lighting and special effects. His *Vampire* therefore stood as a masterful exercise in Gothic credibility, also with regard to the supernatural, although for Planché vampires 'obviously were a bit of whimsy on a par with fairies and leprechauns'<sup>740</sup>.

The play starts with an 'Introductory Vision' heavily reminiscent of the opening oneiric scene of *The Wood Daemon*. According to *The European Magazine*, this sort of prologue was 'calculated to relieve the minds of the audience from any disagreeable exertion'<sup>741</sup>. As the curtain rises to slow music, the young Lady Margaret is discovered sleeping heavily on a rude sepulchre in the 'Basaltic Caverns of Staffa' (a small island of the Inner Hebrides mostly known for the celebrated Fingal's Cave<sup>742</sup>, that had also appeared in Charles Dibdin's *An Bratach, or, the Water Spectre*), feebly illuminated by moonlight streaming through a chasm opening to the air. The grave is that of 'bloody' Cromal, a criminal who had the infamous reputation for preying on young women. The

<sup>737</sup> Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 83.

<sup>738</sup> All quotations from the text are from Planché, James Robinson, *The Vampire; or, The Bride of the Isles*, in *The Hour of One: Six Gothic Melodramas*, ed. Stephen Wischhusen, London: Gordon Fraser (1975).

<sup>739</sup> Roy, Donald, 'Introduction', in *Plays by James Robinson Planché*, ed. Donald Roy, New York: Cambridge University Press (1986), p. 4.

<sup>740</sup> Roxana, Stuart (1994), p. 74.

<sup>741</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 78 (August 1820), p. 147.

<sup>742</sup> Planché was apparently dissatisfied with the Scottish setting chosen by Nodier and wanted to locate the story in Eastern Europe (where such superstitions existed), but the English Opera House's manager Samuel James Arnold objected to the proposed change. Arnold, who had planned to re-use a set of costumes from an earlier production (presumably of *Macbeth*), assured Planché that 'the public would neither know nor care', and its enthusiastic response confirmed he was right. Planché, James Robinson (1872), vol. 1, pp. 39-40. According to Montague Summers, the play's Scottish dresses were perfectly in tune with 'the true transpontine tradition of Ossian attire'. Summers, Montague, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. (1928), p. 307.

Spirit of the Flood Unda ‘rises through the ground’ and performs an incantation to summon her sister Ariel, the Spirit of the Air, who immediately ‘descends through the chasm, on a silvery cloud’<sup>743</sup>. The two discuss about the need to protect Margaret from the impending threat of Ruthven, the Earl whom she is bound to marry, because he actually is a bloodthirsty vampire:

ARIEL. Why, how now, sister? wherefore am I summoned?  
What in the deep and fearful caves of Staffs  
Demands our presence or protection?—Speak!

UNDA. Spirit of Air! thy sister Unda claims  
Thy powerful aid;—not idly from thy blue  
And star-illumin'd mansion art thou call'd  
To Fingal's rocky sepulchre—look here.

[*Pointing to Lady Margaret.*]

ARIEL. A maiden, and asleep!

UNDA. Attend thee, Ariel.  
Her name is Margaret, the only daughter  
Of Ronald, the brave Baron of the Isles.  
A richer, lovelier, more virtuous lady  
This land of flood and mountains never boasted.  
To-morrow Marsden's Earl will claim her hand,  
Renown'd through Europe for his large possession,  
His clerky knowledge, and his deeds of arms.

ARIEL. How came she in this den of death and horror?

UNDA. Chasing the red-deer with her father, Ronald,  
A storm arose; and, parted from her train,  
She sought a shelter here—calmly she sleeps,  
Nor dreams to-morrow's hymeneal rites  
Will give her beauties to a vampire's arms.

ARIEL. A vampire, say'st thou?—Is then Marsden's Earl——

UNDA. Thou knowest, Ariel, that wicked souls  
Are, for wise purposes, permitted oft  
To enter the dead forms of other men,  
Assume their speech, their habits, and their knowledge,  
And thus roam o'er the earth; but subject still  
At stated periods, to a dreadful tribute.

ARIEL. Ay, they must wed some fair and virtuous maiden,  
Whom they do after kill, and from her veins  
Drain eagerly the purple stream of life;  
Which horrid draught alone hath pow'r to save them  
From swift extermination

UNDA. Yes; that state

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<sup>743</sup> In Nodier's melodrama, the two benevolent entities (absent in Polidori's tale) were the Angel of the Moon Ituriel (a clear reference to Ithuriel, a guardian angel of Paradise who appears in Book IV of Milton's *Paradise Lost* along with an other angel, Zephon) and the Genius of Marriage Oscar, an ancient Ossian-like bard. Planché chose instead to adopt ‘Rosicrucian and Shakespearean names’. Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 75. Ryan D. Whittington, however, suggests that *Paradise Lost* might have also served as an important source for Planché's melodrama: ‘Engravings of scenes survive for *The Vampire; or, The Bride of the Isles* and were printed with later editions of the play's libretto. The tableau of Margaret being protected from the vampire in the English melodrama resembles the ways in which artists have imagined Ithuriel and Zephon protecting Adam and Eve from Satan. While no engravings exist of *Le Vampire's* staging, similar staging is likely, given the similar nature of their prologues’. Whittington, Ryan D., ‘Music to Save an Audience: Two Melodramatic Vampires of 1820 and the Music that Betrays Them’, in *All Around Monstrous: Monster Media in Their Historical Contexts*, ed. Verena Bernardi and Frank Jacob, Wilmington: Vernon Press (2019), p. 253.

Of nothingness—total annihilation!

Unda then reveals that the vampire is none other than Bloody Cromal, whose spirit ‘roams [...] in the form of Marsden's Earl’. In order to warn Margaret, the two spirits decide to ‘raise a vision to her sleeping sight’ (the device of the warning dream was the narrative trigger also in *The Wood Daemon*) and perform a charm to summon the vampire itself (in its original form):

CHORUS, *without*.—ARIEL and UNDA.

Appear! appear! appear!

[*The Vampire rises from the tomb of Cromal, and springs towards Margaret.*

VAM. Margaret!

ARIEL. Foul spirit, retire!

VAM. She is mine!

ARIEL. The hour is not yet come.

UNDA. Down, thou foul spirit;—extermination waits thee:

Down, I say.

[*Music.—The Vampire shuddering, sinks again into the tomb, and the scene closes.*

In the first act, Margaret meets Ruthven, whom she has never seen before, given that the wedding had been appointed by her father Ronald (who is much surprised to see that the Earl actually is his old friend Ruthven, whom he believed dead after an attack by a party of banditti, and not his elder brother). At first Margaret is horrified by her groom-to-be resemblance with the phantom of her vision, but then, overwhelmed by his mysterious powers of fascination, she grows inescapably attracted to him and consents to the union. Ruthven insists that the wedding is celebrated that same night instead of the following day as originally planned. He claims to have some urgent business to take care of in London, but the truth is that he cannot wait any longer to renew the sacrifice that allows him to continue to roam the earth, that is marrying a virgin and drinking her blood (‘Still must the fearful sacrifice be made, and suddenly, for the approaching night will find my wretched frame exhausted—and darkness—worse than death—annihilation is my lot!’). Meanwhile his presence is requested at another wedding, that between Effie, an amiable cottager, and Robert, one of Ronald's attendants. Ruthven tries to seduce and kill Effie but is mortally wounded by Robert (off stage). Before exhaling his last breath, he makes Ronald swear to place his dead body in the light of the moon and throw a ring ‘into the waves that wash the tomb of Fingal’ with a promise not to divulge this secret to anyone else. Ignorant of the true intent of this strange mystic rite, Ronald fulfils the oath, and thus closes Act 1. Before exhaling his last breath, Ronald later attacks Robert, throwing him into the sea in the revenge for the death of his friend (he nevertheless manages to survive by clinging to the rocks). Lord Ruthven, however, soon re-appears in perfect health (thanks apparently to the healing effect of the moon<sup>744</sup>) before the astonished Ronald, who understands that

<sup>744</sup> The changing moon, or ‘the lamp of night’, as Ruthven calls it, was by far the most important (and most beautiful)

he is some kind of ungodly demon and that his daughter is in serious peril. Before collapsing out of the rage shock, he implores Margaret not to marry Ruthven until the moon is set, hinting at the suspicions he is forbidden to utter plainly by the oath he took<sup>745</sup>. The vampire claims that Ronald is insane and gives order to his servants to bear him away. He gives the ring to Margaret and the wedding ceremony is arranged without further delay in the chapel of the Baron's Gothic castle. However, as the rites are ready to commence, Ronald, with the help of the returning Robert, providentially rushes in to suspend it and convince Margaret to wait until the fatal hour has elapsed, exciting Ruthven's fury and leading to a violent supernatural escalation:

RUT. I'll hear no more!—she is my bride betrothed:  
this madman would deprive me of her.

LADY M. [*indignantly*] No!—Why this violence?  
Wait till the hour is past.

RUT. Will you listen to his ravings?

RON. I do not rave. [*Loud thunder.—Another gust of wind blows the casement.*] See, see! The moon already rests upon the wave! one moment! but one moment!—— [*Detaining Margaret.*]

RUT. Nay, then, thus I seal thy lips, and seize my bride.  
[*Ruthven draws his poniard, and rushes on Ronald—Lady Margaret shrieks; when Robert throws himself between Ruthven and Ronald, and wrenches the dagger from his grasp.*]

LADY M. Hold! Hold!—I am thine;—the moon has set.

RUT. And I am lost!

[*A terrific peal of thunder is heard—Unda and Ariel appear—a thunder-bolt strikes Ruthven, who immediately vanishes through the ground—general picture.*<sup>746</sup>]

The vampire's sudden disappearance, made possible by a new stage mechanism appropriately called 'vampire trap'<sup>747</sup>, was the climactic high point of this fast-paced, heart-stopping melodrama. According to Diane Long Hoeveler, the trap was the 'most Gothic aspect of the drama' in that it suggest[ed] the immateriality of the material' and 'confirmed for the audience the continued

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element in *The Vampire's* scenery, being unanimously praised by contemporary critics. It would also have a decisive impact on the literary and iconographic development of the figure of the vampire in the subsequent decades. According to Nina Auerbach, the 'presiding moon', barely present in Polidori's tale and Nodier's melodrama, is 'Planché's most important addition to the vampire legend. [...] A corpse quivering to life under the moon's rays is the central image of midcentury vampire literature; fangs, penetration, sucking and staking are peripheral to its lunar obsession'. Auerbach identifies a precise source for such use of the moon: 'The Moon in nineteenth-century literature typically takes its nature from Shakespeare, particularly *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: it licences an enchanted eroticism, an extension of human power into a nonhuman realm, a lowering of the boundaries between fairies and mortals. The vampire comes to life under the same moon that gives Bottom an animal's head so that he can have intercourse with a fairy: it unites disparate orders of being'. Auerbach, Nina, *Our Vampires: Ourselves*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1997), pp. 24-6.

<sup>745</sup> The behaviour of Ronald, who cannot explicitly reveal Ruthven's identity but nevertheless finds a way to warn his daughter, might be read as a seemingly accidental metaphor for illegitimate theatre and its attempts to circumnavigate the legal restrictions on speech.

<sup>746</sup> In Nodier's melodrama an exterminating angel appears on a cloud as demonic phantoms rise out of the earth to seize Ruthven and a torrent of fire (a device frequently used in Paris's minor theatres) envelops the stage.

<sup>747</sup> Montague Summers quotes a short unattributed description of this device: 'A vampire trap consists of two or more flaps, usually india-rubber, through which the sprite can disappear almost instantly, where he falls into a blanket fixed to the under surface of the stage. As with the star trap, this trap is secured against accidents by placing another piece or slide, fitting close beneath when not required, and removed when the prompter's bell gives the signal to make ready'. Summers, Montague (1928), p. 306.

existence of the spiritual or transcendent realms in the midst of increasingly realistic dramatic fare'<sup>748</sup>. As a matter of fact, in terms of the emotional response it excited, the scene can arguably be compared only with the first appearance of Evelina's ghost in *The Castle Spectre*. As actor-manager John Coleman would write some years later: 'When I recall that gruesome Scottish horror feeding upon the blood of young maidens and throwing himself headlong through the solid stage, and vanishing into the regions below amidst flames of red fire, I protest I shudder at it now'<sup>749</sup>. *The European Magazine* praised the 'terrific grandeur' of the scene, remarking how the melodrama's whole scenery and machinery was 'infinitely superior to what we had erroneously conceived the capacities of *this* house could furnish'<sup>750</sup>. The critic of *The Stage* was of the same opinion and conceded that *The Vampire* had all the audience-attracting ingredients that contemporary legitimate dramas lacked:

Metaphorically speaking, a poet is said to be a painter. In speaking of *The Vampire*, as enacted last night, we may be allowed to assert, without the aid of a figure, that the painter is the poet. It is indeed to the painter, and his capable and clever assistant, the mechanist, that this Piece not only owes its salvation, but its brilliant success. As a fable, it is disgusting—as a Drama, it is deplorable; but as supplying an opportunity for the display of several beautiful scenes, and for some admirable specimens of machinery: it is any thing which the artist could wish, or which the audience seemed to desire. What a pity it is that the *Vision* was not sustained by poetry. [...] Spectacle is usurping the dominion of the Sister Muses; and from the empty benches which a good Tragedy or Comedy, well enacted, are almost sure to *command*, we cannot wonder that the Manager has had recourse to other means.<sup>751</sup>

Special praise was of course given to the unforgettable concluding scene:

The thunderbolt—or as Naturalists would call it, the flash of lightning—glancing from the clouds, and striking the Vampire into the earth with almost its own rapidity, is surely one of the most complete and finished *coup de theatre* that ever was exhibited in any stage at Paris or London. If all the rest had failed—if the audience were disposed, (and, as far as we could perceive they were not,) to condemn the piece, *this* alone would be its salvation.<sup>752</sup>

*The Cornucopia; or, Literary and Dramatic Mirror* focused instead on the pictorial beauty of Ruthven's 'death' at the end of the first act:

Those who have witnessed this representation at the English Opera House will no doubt remember it as one of the finest specimens of Scenic effect ever displayed at any Theatre. The blue-tinted moon beams shining on the ghastly visage of the expiring Ruthven; sparkling streaks of light upon his breast-plate, the dark trunks of the trees and masses of foliage, with their edges tinted with the illuminatory rays, and the attitude of grief in which Ronald is seen bending over

<sup>748</sup> Hoeveler, Diane Long, 'Victorian Gothic Drama', in *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Andrew Smith and William Hughes, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2012), p. 61.

<sup>749</sup> Quoted in Roy, Donald (1986), p. 4.

<sup>750</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 78 (August 1820), p. 148.

<sup>751</sup> *The Stage*, vol. 1, no. 23 (9 May 1821), p. 105.

<sup>752</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

the body; all combine to render it a subject of the deepest interest to the spectator.<sup>753</sup>

*The London Magazine's* comment was even more enthusiastic:

The hue of the sea-green waves, floating in the pale beam under an arch-way of grey weather-beaten rocks, and with the light of a torch glaring over the milder radiance, was in as fine keeping and strict truth as Claude or Rembrandt, and would satisfy, we think, the most fastidious artist's eye. It lulled the sense of sight as the fancied sound of the dashing waters soothed the imagination. In the scene where the moonlight fell on the dying form of Ruthven (the Vampire) it was like a fairy glory, forming a palace of emerald light: the body seemed to drink its balmy essence, and to revive in it without a miracle.<sup>754</sup>

Even the 'Introductory Vision', the most flamboyantly visionary part of the melodrama, was deemed not unfitting the rest of the work: *The Theatrical Observer* wrote that '[i]nterludes of this supernatural sort are too trite to be effective, but the present is almost an exception to the rule, and authorises a very honourable mention'<sup>755</sup>.

Considerable part of *The Vampire's* immense success was due to Thomas Potter Cooke's magnetic interpretation of the seductive yet sanguinary Ruthven, the first of several memorable supernatural roles for an actor endowed with 'that peculiar talent, which is sure to place every devil, vampire, spirit, or nondescript, in his own especial keeping'<sup>756</sup>. Cooke ended up playing this character hundreds of times and made it one of the most popular of the nineteenth century. Reviewers could not help but celebrate him: *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* wrote that Cooke 'personated this mysterious supernatural being with striking effect'<sup>757</sup>, while *The Theatrical Inquisitor* did not conceal a certain degree of surprise at his performative achievement:

Mr. T. P. COOKE embodied the *Vampire* with a grace and energy of which those to whom the more rugged branches of his acting are familiar will hardly think him capable. The fact, however, is just as we have stated it, and his performances of Ruthven will show to what extent a strong mind can push its ambition, and carry its success. Mr. COOKE wants even languor of style and deportment for the amatory portions of the character, but his skill and diligence were so ably directed, that not a single deficiency can be traced to his efforts.<sup>758</sup>

*The New Monthly Magazine* echoed this opinion:

Mr. T. P. Cooke, whom we have long regarded as an actor of unappreciated talent, has secured a high place in the public esteem, by his performance of the Vampire. In his fearful action—his triumphant smiles—and his very assumed softness of tone and demeanour—he gives us the

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<sup>753</sup> *The Cornucopia; or, Literary and Dramatic Mirror*, vol. 1 (November 1820), pp. 33-4.

<sup>754</sup> *The London Magazine*, vol. 2 (September 1820), p. 324.

<sup>755</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 17 (August 1820), p. 161.

<sup>756</sup> Undated review in *The Morning Post* quoted in Williams, Michael, *Some London Theatres, Past and Present*, London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington (1883), p. 141.

<sup>757</sup> *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (12 August 1820), p. 527.

<sup>758</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 17 (August 1820), p. 161.

idea of a being not of this world.<sup>759</sup>

Of course some critics turned up their noses and wondered about the appropriateness of bringing on stage a creature so terribly ambiguous as the ghost of an ancient murderer who assumes a visible bodily shape as only Satan was known to do. As Nina Auerbach has pointed out, ‘Ruthven is only a shell; the essence of the vampire is his cursed spirit, transforming him, onstage, from friend to ghost’<sup>760</sup>. But the idea that God could allow an evil spirit to hide in a human body and prey on innocent young girls to keep that form was simply unbearable at every level. *The London Magazine* expressed perplexity about this inter-mingling between the ordinary and the demonic:

As a mere fiction, and as a fiction attributed to Lord Byron, whose genius is chartered for the lands of horrors, the original story passed well enough: but on the stage it is a little shocking to the feelings, and incongruous to the sense, to see a spirit in human shape,—in the shape of a real Earl, and, what is more, of a Scotch Earl—going about seeking whom it may marry and then devour, to lengthen out its own abhorred and anomalous being.<sup>761</sup>

According to *The New Monthly Magazine*, the vampire was the most ‘appalling of the whole corps demoniaque’, much more hideous than any other superstition:

The belief in the existence of vampyres is one of the most extraordinary and most revolting superstitions which ever disturbed the brains of any semi-barbarous people. It is the most frightful embodying of the principle of evil, the most terrific incarnation of the bad demon, which ignorance and fanaticism ever suggested to the weak and the deluded. It displays superstition in its grossest and most unrelieved horrors.—Other creatures of fanatical creation have a mixture of good and bad in their composition—their mischief is sometimes distinguished by sportiveness and mingled with good humour—they are malicious, but not malignant—and the lightness and triviality of their spite against human nature is often united with an airiness of movement and a spirituality of character which render them amusing, and often highly poetical.—Puck, Will-o'-th'-wisp, the Bogles, the Ogres, the Nixies, and *id genus omne*, if they are to be considered as emanations of the Evil principle, are at least inspired with much of his drollery, and only a small portion of his gall and malignity;—the Gnomes are sulky and splenetic persons, but there is a certain impotence about them which prevents their becoming very terrific;—the Lamiaë and the Larvæ of the ancients were, indeed, horrid creations—but the latter were mere shadows, which takes off much of their monstrosity—but the Vampyre is a corporeal creature of blood and unquenchable blood-thirst—a ravenous corpse, who rises in body and soul from his grave for the sole purpose of glutting his sanguinary appetite with the life-blood of those whose blood stagnates in his own veins. He is endowed with an incorruptible frame, to prey on the lives of his kindred and his friends—he reappears among them from the world of the tomb, not to tell its secrets of joy or of woe, not to invite or to warn by the testimony of his experience, but to appal and assassinate those who were dearest to him on earth—and this, not for the gratification of revenge or any human feeling, which, however depraved, might find something common with it in human nature, but to banquet a monstrous thirst acquired in the tomb, and which, though he walks in human form and human lineaments, has swallowed up every human motive in its brutal ferocity. The corporeal grossness, the substantiality “palpable to feeling as to sight,” of this monster of superstition, renders it

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<sup>759</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 14 (September 1820), p. 322.

<sup>760</sup> Auerbach, Nina (1997), p. 23.

<sup>761</sup> *The London Magazine*, vol. 2 (September 1820), p. 323.

singularly terrific, and lays hold on the mind with a sense of shuddering and sanguinary horror which belongs to few of the aërial demons of imagination, however ghastly or malignant.<sup>762</sup>

In a previous article, the same journal had anticipated criticism against the immoral nature of the vampire superstition, claiming, however, that Planché had treated the subject more judiciously than Polidori:

The celebrated story of The Vampire, which has been successfully dramatized at Paris, has supplied materials for one of the best melo-dramas, we have ever seen at this or any other theatre. The superstition on which it is founded, is one of the most appalling at which the blood has ever curdled with a chill and mysterious pleasure. A being in whom death and life are strangely mingled—with all the coldness of the grave and all the seeming immunities of existence—sustained by the blood of female victims whom he first is permitted to fascinate—has a spell far more fearful than ordinary spectres. The author of the piece should not, however, have moralized on the fiction, by insinuating that “*for wise purposes,*” the spirits of the wicked were permitted to live so long as they paid for their existence by a dreadful crime. The scheme of moral government which should grant existence to the guilty, on condition of the mortal agonies of innocent victims, would be somewhat incomprehensible to our human sympathies. The idea itself has so much of the disgusting, that there appeared considerable hazard in its reputation on the stage. The danger has, however, been admirably avoided in the new drama—where the literal design of the fiend is so little obtruded on us, that fell throughout only a pleasing horror.<sup>763</sup>

Nonetheless, these preoccupations (which in any case seemed less strong in England than in France) became secondary with respect to the addictive allure of this extraordinary figure and its first theatrical incarnation. In fact, some reviews of Planché's melodrama, such as the one that appeared in *The New Bon Ton Magazine*, even ventured to recognise some sort of moral or cautionary value in the vampire myth, claiming the play was both ‘entertaining and instructive’<sup>764</sup> (the latter being an adjective very seldom associated with Gothic plays, let alone Gothic plays produced at illegitimate theatres), while *The Examiner*, somehow following Voltaire's satirical vision of churchmen as vampires, regarded vampirism as a metaphor through which to explore morality:

We do not mean to horrify any of our readers, old or young, with saying that our spectre in hat and boots, is at all in the most probable taste of the improbable; though appalling from his singularity, and from a mixture of the familiar with the unaccustomed, and death with life, which is the most ghastly of irrational fancies; we only speak of him as awakening the feelings above mentioned in a general point of view. And yet we are not all sure he is not to be met with. If there are not *vampires* who suck the blood, there are vampires who waste the heart and happiness of those they are connected with. There are vampires of avarice, vampires of spleen, vampires of debauchery, (who are Princess too, by the eye) vampires in the shape of selfishness and domestic tyranny!<sup>765</sup>

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<sup>762</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 7 (January 1823), pp. 140-1.

<sup>763</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 14 (September 1820), p. 321.

<sup>764</sup> *The New Bon Ton Magazine*, vol. 5 (September 1820), p. 324.

<sup>765</sup> Quoted *ibid.*.

The English Opera House thus became ‘the vampire theatre, par excellence’<sup>766</sup>, but in the following months *The Vampire* was frequently performed at provincial theatres (Bath, Newcastle) and even at the Anthony Street Theatre of New York. It also influenced Nodier's subsequent productions of *Le Vampire* (which was revived in 1823 with the same cast<sup>767</sup>), while a German adaptation by Heinrich Ludwig Ritter, called *Der Vampyr; oder die Todten-Braut*, was produced in Karlsruhe in March 1821. Planché himself wrote that *The Vampire* was still ‘a stock piece’ as late as the 1870s<sup>768</sup>, proving the most popular of the nearly 200 plays he wrote during his long career. Not unpredictably, the work spawned a handful of sequels, imitations and parodies in England as well as all around Europe<sup>769</sup>. Planché himself wrote *Giovanni, the Vampire!!!; or, How Shall We Get Rid Of Him?*, a burletta for the Adelphi staged in early 1821 which humorously combined the vampire theme with the popular Don Juan legend. In the text's prefatory note, Planché recognised the inherent affinity between the two figures:

The public will readily acknowledge the wonderful resemblance which exists between the notorious Don Giovanni, and the supernatural being aforesaid; not only, in their insatiable thirst for blood, and penchant for the fair sex, but in the innumerable resuscitations they both have, and still continue to experience.<sup>770</sup>

Meanwhile other authors dealt with the vampire motif from a serious perspective. William Thomas Moncrieff, for example, first staged his melodrama *The Vampire*, unashamedly based on both Nodier's and Planché's versions, at the Coburg on 22 August 1820, only 13 days after the premiere of the English Opera House piece. The Coburg (later renamed the Royal Victoria and eventually known as the ‘Old Vic’) opened in 1818 on Waterloo Road, south of the Thames, under the management of the controversial Joseph Glossop. It rapidly secured its reputation as a privileged site for sensational Gothic extravaganzas that could appeal to the target local public (the working-class audience of Lambeth and Southwark), to the point of gaining the nickname of ‘Blood Tub’<sup>771</sup>.

<sup>766</sup> Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 254. It was on this stage that, on 18 May 1897, Bram Stoker staged a dramatic reading of his *Dracula* in order to protect the novel's theatrical copyright.

<sup>767</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>768</sup> Planché, James Robinson, vol.1 (1872), p. 40.

<sup>769</sup> In France at least six concurrent parodic versions of *Le Vampire* were staged within a few weeks from its premiere. The most curious and amusing vampire burlesque, however, arrived in 1822, when François Alexis Blache presented his ballet-pantomime-*divertissement* in one act *Polichinel Vampire* at the Théâtre Porte-Saint-Martin. Montague Summers quoted a critic of the time saying ‘There is not a theatre in Paris without its Vampire!’ Summers, Montague (1928), p. 303.

<sup>770</sup> Quoted in Grey, Thomas S., ‘The Gothic Libertine: The Shadow of Don Giovanni in Romantic Music and Culture’, in *The Don Giovanni Moment: Essays on the Legacy of an Opera*, ed. Lydia Goehr and Daniel Herwitz, New York: Columbia University Press (2006), p. 81.

<sup>771</sup> Moody, Jane (2007), p. 34. The theatre was known as ‘Royal’ Coburg since in 1816 it had managed to obtain the patronage of Princess Charlotte of Wales, King George's only child with Queen Caroline and therefore the heiress presumptive to the throne, and her husband, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg. The Princess, however, died in childbirth on 6 November 1817, before the Coburg even opened, and Prince Leopold soon lost interest in the theatre. The Coburg, however, continued to claim this royally bestowed authority and clearly positioned itself in contrast to

In the early days of the theatre, Moncrieff was the principal in-house playwright, and the year 1820 marked his definitive consecration as one of the leading authors of illegitimate melodrama thanks to a series of big hits that demonstrated the versatility of his writing, namely *Ivanhoe!*; or, *The Jewess* in January, *The Lear of Private Life!*; or, *Father and Daughter* in April, *The Shipwreck of the Medusa*; or, *The Fatal Raft!* in June, *The Ravens of Orleans*; or, *The Forest of Cercotte* in July and *The Vampire* itself in August. The backbone of *The Vampire's* plot remained more or less the same as that of Nodier's and Planché's plays (with a few, and mostly unfortunate, alterations and additions), with Ruthven – here renamed Ruthwold – being played by Henry Stephen Kemble, son of Stephen Kemble and nephew of John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons. The places of Ariel and Unda are taken by Terra, the Genius of the Earth, and Lunaria, a Moon Spirit, the latter embodying an obvious illogicality since ‘the moon is contradictorily both the ally and the enemy of the vampire’ given that ‘[a]lthough Ruthwold is revived by the moon's rays, Lunaria explains she does this very unwillingly’<sup>772</sup>. The moment of Lunaria's prophetic incantation during the usual opening vision manifestly shows how the play was basically a poor rewriting of its antecedents:

INCANTATION.—LUNARIA.

Vampires, by virtue of the mystic power,  
 The spirits of the moon at this dread hour,  
 Hold over ye, my spell-fraught summons hear,  
 Before this maiden's sleeping eyes appear.

*[A distant clock strikes One.—It is echoed. The shadows half raise themselves from their tombs; regard Terra with a threatening look, and sink back as the echoes die away. The Vampire, in a long mantle, darts from behind the tombs and flies towards Malvina, exclaiming “Malvina!” Terra throws himself before her.]*

TER. Avaunt! the genius of the earth spell-binds thee!—thou art powerless to——  
 VAM. She is mine!

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the legitimate power, not only at a theatrical level: ‘The Theatre's choice of Leopold and Charlotte as patrons was itself a clever manoeuvre to discomfort the royal patentees, but it was also a potentially political one. The “Royal” Coburg was the south bank's mirror image of the Royal theatres on the Covent Garden side but the “royals” referred to were the displaced Coburg dynasty, made defunct at the moment of Charlotte's death and forever removed from any chance of British succession. By memorializing this abortive monarchy, the Royal Coburg Theatre was placing itself within the local languages of popular culture as definitively anti-Hanoverian. Every Coburg playbill stuck upon a wall or posted in the press was a riposte to Drury Lane and Covent Garden and their royal protectors. The Coburg's naming was a subversion of the economic and political monopolies of the Royal theatres. Furthermore, as a space of public subversion, the Coburg was situated beyond the reach of the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, whose authority stopped on the north bank of the Thames’. Worrall, David (2006), p. 209. As a matter of fact, Coburg frequently excited the wrath of the Royal theatres with direct affronts: in 1820, for example. Glossop engaged Junius Brutus Booth, a classic tragic actor with an established reputation as legitimate actor, to play Richard III in Moncrieff's melodramatic adaptation of Colley Cibber's influential version of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. In this production, Booth recited plain speeches with only a minimum of musical accompaniment and Glossop was prosecuted and subsequently fined £ 50 for infringement of the Licensing Act. Such episodes continued from time to time over the following years, even when the management changed hands. Rowell, George, *The Old Vic Theatre: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1993), p. 19.

<sup>772</sup> Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 95.

TER. She is Heaven's! and thou wilt shortly become the prey of the Invisible!

VAM. The Invisible!

[shuddering.]

TER. Aye, the clock shall strike—the moon shall rise—no victim shall be immolated, and thou wilt be the slave of the Invisible!

[*The Vampire is compelled to retire, menacing them, and repeating “The Invisible!” Terra descends through a trap—Lunaria ascends in a glory; the moon rises; the whole scene is illumined with her beams.*<sup>773</sup>

The Coburg audience, composed ‘mainly of teen-age boys, much like the audience for today's slasher films’<sup>774</sup>, seemed especially captivated by vampire plays: in 1822, Edward Fitzball, a young, up- and-coming playwright who had recently settled in London after obtaining some success at the Theatre Royal, Norwich, produced an adaptation of Robert Southey's poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), turning it into an Eastern Gothic melodrama filled with ‘hair-breadth escapes from the fangs of demons and enchanters, the pains of hunger and thirst, the temptations of magical delusions, and the tortures of lamenting and hopeless love’<sup>775</sup>. The play constitutes an important chapter in the history of stage vampires since it was the first to feature a female vampire (or rather vampiric spirit), namely Zeinah, Thalaba's ‘nurturing mother [turned] into a murderous demon’ summoned by the sorceress Kawla (whereas in Southey's poem it is Thalaba's bride Oneiza who is transformed into a vampire)<sup>776</sup>. Moreover, Fitzball wanted to outclass his predecessors and ‘ordered brisk appearances and disappearances up and down vampire traps’, relying on ‘the principle that the public cannot have too much of a good thing’<sup>777</sup>. This principle was even more eagerly embraced in the anonymous *The Three Vampires; or, Maids Beware of Moonshine* (Coburg, 1823)<sup>778</sup>, significantly advertised as an ‘entirely New Operatic, Melo-Dramatic, Terrific, Vampiric, Monstrous, Frankensteinish, Horrific Romantic Burletta, comprising much *Moonshine*, and more Myrth, written under the *Lunar* influence, but not by a *Lunatic*’<sup>779</sup>. Yet Planché's *Vampire* ended up

<sup>773</sup> Moncrieff, William Thomas, *The Vampire: A Drama, in Three Acts*, in Richardson's New Minor Drama, 4 vols., vol. 3, London: Thomas Richardson (1829), pp. 11-2.

<sup>774</sup> Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 105.

<sup>775</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 5 (August 1823), p. 42.

<sup>776</sup> Burwick, Frederick (2009), p. 255.

<sup>777</sup> Disher, Maurice Wilson, *Blood and Thunder: Mid-Victorian Melodrama and Its Origins*, London: Muller (1949), p. 96. This melodrama apparently was above average in quality: ‘This is a very excellent and interesting melo-drama [...] The magnificence with which it is got up deserves the highest commendation, and the success which it has met with has well repaid the proprietor for his liberality. The author is Mr. Ball, and he has most admirably dramatised this powerful fiction of a bold imagination. [...] The scenery is uncommonly grand, and is far beyond any thing exhibited on this stage for a length of time. The first scene, the *Sepulchre of Zeinah* (the mother of *Thalaba*), by moonlight, with the awful incantation of the enchantress, and appearance of the spectre of *Zeinah*, was magnificent and impressive. One is really surprised to find so much talent any where out of the “national theatres,” yet a liberal expenditure will always command excellent artists, and these have been manifestly at work in the scenery and machinery of “*Thalaba*”. The acting was also superior to what we in general find at this theatre’. *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 5 (August 1823), pp. 41-3.

<sup>778</sup> The title might suggest a possible connection with Nicholas Brazier, Gabriel Lurieu and Armand d'Artois de Boumonville's one-act farce *Les trois vampires, ou le claire de la Lune* (Thatre des Variétés, 1820).

<sup>779</sup> ‘Advertisement’ in *The Morning Post* (3 September 1823) quoted in Forry, Steven Earl, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

casting its long shadow also over pieces that did not explicitly deal with undead bloodsuckers: in the anonymous *The Red Dæmon of the Harz Forest; or, The Three Charcoal Burners* (Coburg, 1821), for instance, the titular monster, a mongrel creature between Planché's Ruthven and Lewis's Wood Dæmon inspired by an episode in Walter Scott's novel *The Antiquary* (1816), promises Martin Waldeck, a poor charcoal burner, boundless wealth in exchange for the blood of a young female victim to be immolated every month on its altar. Martin resolves to sacrifice his intended bride Angela, but when the fatal night arrives, he is struck with remorse and falls himself a prey to the Red Dæmon. *The Drama* observed that 'the sudden appearance of the *Dæmon*, and his disappearance with *Martin* were [...] well managed'<sup>780</sup>, probably referring to yet another spectacular use of the vampire trap.

The patent theatres, for their part, were undoubtedly fascinated by the new figure of the vampire but avoided directly engaging with it. Moncrieff himself wrote a two-act farce for Drury Lane entitled *The Spectre Bridegroom; or, A Ghost in Spite of Himself* (1821), admittedly inspired by one of the tales in Washington Irving's *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon Gent* (1819-20), but its life was short-lived. In the play, the protagonist Nicodemus is mistakenly believed to be a vampire and this superstition becomes an object of laughter. Ruthven is instead the telling name of a character in Charles Edward Walker's melodrama *The Warlock of the Glen*, first acted at Covent Garden in December 1820. The work does not feature vampires, but, as Roxana Stuart has aptly remarked, it 'shares its Scottish locale, gothic ambience, and interest in the supernatural with vampire plays'<sup>781</sup>. To these texts a five-act neoclassic tragedy by nineteen-year-old poet St. John Dorset (pseudonym of Hugo John Belfour) should also be added: simply called *The Vampire*, it appeared in print in 1821 but remained unstaged. The text abounds with graphic violence and murder, but the title character is not a vampire (this is in fact a mere disguise adopted by the lustful Persian prince Abdalla), as the author specifies in the prefatory 'Advertisement':

IN submitting this Tragedy to the perusal of a generous public, it may be deemed superfluous to premise, that the chief personage of the drama is no blood-sucker. A *goût* so barbarous and *bizarre*, however it may assimilate with the usual horrors of the melo-drama, must be very derogatory to the chaste dignity of the tragic muse.<sup>782</sup>

Intriguingly, Dorset claims he drew inspiration from an evocative passage in *The Examiner's* review of Planché's *Vampire* discussing the metaphorical implications of vampires:

The *Examiner* newspaper, in noticing the melodrama of *The Vampire*, as performed last season

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(1990), p. xii.

<sup>780</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 7 (October 1821), p. 304.

<sup>781</sup> Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 97.

<sup>782</sup> Dorset, St. John, *The Vampire. A Tragedy in Five Acts*, 2nd ed., London: C. and J. Ollier (1821), page unnumbered.

at the English Opera-House, makes use of the following language:—

“There are Vampires who waste the heart and happiness of those they are connected with, Vampires of avarice, Vampires of spleen, Vampires of debauchery, Vampires in all the shapes of selfishness and domestic tyranny. What is the seducer and abandoner of a trusting young girl, but a Vampire not sufficiently alive to the harm of his own cruelty? What is a husband who marries for money, and then tramples upon his wife, but a Vampire? What is the ‘poisonous bosom-snake’ of Milton but a female Vampire, wearing a man’s heart out by holding him without loving him?”

The above observations, in conjunction with other circumstances, afforded the original idea of the present production. The incidents are wholly a matter of invention, and the author has taken advantage of an obscurity in the Egyptian annals during a portion of the tenth century, to lay his scene in that kingdom.<sup>783</sup>

The attempt to create a vampire for the legitimate theatre, however, was an obvious misfire. The ‘moral Vampire’, as Dorset called it, was a lifeless theoretical concept simply unfit for the blood-and-thunder Romantic stage. *The Dublin Inquisitor*, for example, claimed the character lacked the powerful ‘demonic’ quality of other pseudo-Byronic tragic heroes:

[I]t is to the character of Abdalla we are particularly attracted; in him we were led to expect that deep intensity of passion that preys upon the vital warmth of the constitution, till feeling is withered and nature subdued by its corroding influence—that inclination to wind round the inmost recesses of the heart, to enter into its secret thoughts, and prey in silence and unobserved upon its dearest affections. Such is the idea we had formed of the moral vampire, and we will say, without hesitation, that in the character before us were completely disappointed. There is nothing of that energy to mark the passionate struggles, or that cunning which should characterise the insinuating designs of the destroying spirit. With none of the greatness of mind, the towering ambition, or the godlike pride, “sublime even in guilt,” which mark the character of the daring Bertram, we look upon Abdalla as a being in whom there is little interest, and still less to admire.<sup>784</sup>

In order to see a proper vampire play on the legitimate stage one had to wait until Fitzball’s *Thalaba the Destroyer* was revived, with more elaborate special effects and a large array of animals from the Surrey Zoological Gardens (including horses, bulls, elephants, ostriches, a camel and a ‘necromantic peacock’<sup>785</sup>), at Covent Garden in 1836.

Planché’s *Vampire* had undoubtedly raised the bar to a new level of theatrical excellence, serving as a template for all authors seeking to explore the recent technological, formal or generic advancements of illegitimate drama through the lens of the supernatural Gothic. Ghosts, the most typically Gothic supernatural characters, enjoyed new life and vigour in this period (the vampire itself was actually identifiable as a spectral revenant, although ‘a product of reincarnation, not resurrection’<sup>786</sup>), to the point that Diego Saglia has defined the 1820s as the decade of the

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<sup>783</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>784</sup> *The Dublin Inquisitor*, vol.1 (May 1821), p. 374.

<sup>785</sup> *The Spectator*, vol. 9 (26 November 1836), p. 1136.

<sup>786</sup> Auerbach, Nina (1997), p. 22.

‘sensational proliferation of ghost melodrama’<sup>787</sup>. Apart from their evergreen allure, melodramatic spectres and phantoms were perfect to test the new developments in stage lighting, stage machinery and special effects, which had opened new possibilities for the investigation of the fluid boundary between the perceptible and the imperceptible, between the material and the immaterial, and ultimately between reality and illusion. Matthew Buckley too has recognised that ‘Ghost melodrama had not enjoyed currency for a decade [...], yet it found new impact in theatres now far more capable of producing—through enhanced lighting effects such as projection and the employment of coloured fire—its necessary illusory force’<sup>788</sup>. Thomas Dibdin, for example, became lessee manager of the Surrey in 1816 (Elliston had left in 1814) and, quite uncharacteristically of him, began to assiduously explore horrific ghostly territories with melodramatic adaptations of more or less recent Gothic works (often previously unstaged), such as *The Bride of Lammermoor; or, the Spectre at the Fountain* (1819)<sup>789</sup>, *The Prophecy; or, The Giant Spectre* (1820)<sup>790</sup>, *Alonzo the Brave and the Fair Imogene* (1821)<sup>791</sup>, *Narbonne Castle; or, The Mysterious Mother* (1821)<sup>792</sup> and *The Mysterious Marriage; or, The Heir of Roselva* (1821)<sup>793</sup>. This had to do with the fact that illegitimate theatres had now gained new courage and strength. *Alonzo the Brave and the Fair Imogene*, an old ballet-pantomime of Dibdin's transformed into a full-fledged melodrama for the Surrey (and then again revived in 1826 at Sadler's Wells with the addition of an aquatic scene<sup>794</sup>), is emblematic of how the minors came to exploit the relaxation of the rules regarding performance of spoken plays in order to improve the quality of their productions, even old ones, as Dibdin himself recalled in his *Reminiscences*:

I had, it may be remembered, (though not very likely,) in early days, produced a serious ballet pantomime at Sadler's Wells, from Mr. M. G. Lewis's tale of “Alonzo and Imogene:” the whole of that piece, particularly effective, was told in action. It struck me that if, in these more modern days of convenient melo-dramatic licence, I were to add dialogue and songs explanatory of the song, the romance would be more intelligible and more effective, as well as better adapted to display the talents of the very superior company of performers the Surrey could boast: I therefore reproduced it as my closing piece this season: it instantly became a great favourite: and I have lately brought it out once more at Sadler's Wells, its ancient cradle, where it remains an approved drama, *sui generis*, even unto this day.<sup>795</sup>

<sup>787</sup> Saglia, Diego (2015), pp. 269-93.

<sup>788</sup> Buckley, Matthew (2014), p. 472.

<sup>789</sup> An adaptation of Walter Scott's historical novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819).

<sup>790</sup> An adaptation of Horace Walpole's Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), with much of the dialogue taken from Robert Jephson's tragic adaptation *The Count of Narbonne* (Covent Garden, 1781). A review noted that ‘every point of the romance, comic as well as terrific, is transferred to the stage, where they appear still more effective than in the novel’. *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (15 January 1820), p. 47.

<sup>791</sup> An adaptation of Matthew Gregory Lewis's ultra-popular eponymous ballad included in *The Monk* (1796).

<sup>792</sup> An adaptation of Horace Walpole's tragedy *The Mysterious Mother* (1768). On this see Worrall, David (2014), pp. 1-19.

<sup>793</sup> An adaptation of Harriet Lee's drama *The Mysterious Marriage; or, The Heirship of Roselva* (1798).

<sup>794</sup> Burwick, Frederick (2020), p. 34.

<sup>795</sup> Dibdin, Thomas, vol. 2 (1827), p. 194.

But if the neo-Gothic wave soon spread like wildfire to all minor theatres, the patent theatres' reaction was, instead, initially rather feeble and limited itself to a much criticised revival of *The Castle Spectre* at Drury Lane in March 1823. *The Drama*, for example, took the occasion to deliver some of the harshest comments on the play ever written:

When this “romantic play” (such is its title) was originally represented, it was barely rescued from condemnation by the providential interference of a ghost in the last act. We are not exactly sure whether impending damnation ought to be ranked amongst those perplexities which HORACE considered worthy of supernatural interference; but, of this we are certain, that there never was a case where damnation was more abundantly deserved. The representation of such plays as the “*Castle Spectre*” is an indirect insult upon any audience (not excepting a holiday crowd) which can be gathered together in a national theatre. We will not waste our censure upon it, but briefly say, that its situations are improbable, its sentiments fantastically mawkish, and its dialogue the essence of trash; but the author is gone, and his works, as if from a grateful attachment, are following him.<sup>796</sup>

Never as in this period the remonstrations expressed in this review had been so out of touch with the public mood. At this point it was crystal clear that the patent theatres were always one or more steps behind market and popular sentiments, while those critics who were still anchored to an old-fashioned concept of serious national drama were only fighting windmills. On the contrary, the neo-Gothic wave helped the minor theatres to make a decisive leap forward in importance within the Romantic theatrical panorama. This became even more apparent a few months later, in July 1823, when the English Opera House presented a brand new monster melodrama destined to leave a permanent mark on popular culture.

#### 4.3 *Illegitimate Frankensteins*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) seemed to provide a perfect synthesis of all the Gothic and techno-Gothic<sup>797</sup> discourses over the supernatural that had inflamed the cultural debates of the previous two decades. In the context of the resurgence of Gothic theatre in the 1820s, the dramatisation of Shelley's apparently unstageable novel represented the ultimate challenge. This difficult task was entrusted to an unlikely author, Richard Brinsley Peake, mainly known for his highly humorous pun-filled farces. His three-act *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, labelled as a ‘Melo-Dramatic Opera’ in the copy submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's

<sup>796</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 4 (April 1823), pp. 189-90.

<sup>797</sup> According to Marjean D. Purinton, also Planché's *The Vampire* possessed a peculiar techno-Gothic quality in its relation to early nineteenth-century medical discourses on blood. See Purinton, Marjean D., ‘Theatricalized Bodies and Spirits: Techno-Gothic as Performance in Romantic Drama’, *Gothic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (August 2001), pp. 134-55.

office, premiered on 28 July 1823 at the English Opera House. Peake took the liberty to undertake a ‘radical reorganization of the genealogical relationships in the original text’<sup>798</sup> and make some relevant additions, notably the character of Fritz, Frankenstein's clownish servant<sup>799</sup>, and a band of cheerful gypsies. The piece roughly maintained the chief episodes of the novel, including the Creature's first awakening in Frankenstein's laboratory, by far the play's most significant moment, regarded by *The London Magazine* as ‘the most perfect masterpiece of Melo-dramatic ingenuity that we ever in any piece or on any stage witnessed’<sup>800</sup>:

*The sleeping Apartment of Frankenstein. Dark. The Bed is within a recess between the wings, enclosed by dark green curtains. A Sword (to break) hanging. A Large French Window; between the wings a staircase leading to a Gallery across the stage, on which is the Door of the Laboratory above. A small high Lattice in centre of scene, next the Laboratory Door. A Gothic table on stage, screwed. A Gothic chair in centre, and Footstool. Music expressive of the rising of a storm. Enter Frankenstein, with a Lighted Lamp, which he places on the table. Distant thunder heard.*

FRANK. This evening—this lowering evening, will, in all probability, complete my task. Years have I laboured, and at length discovered that to which so many men of genius have in vain directed their inquiries. After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I have become master of the secret of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. With so astonishing a power in my hands, long, long did I hesitate how to employ it. The object of my experiments lies there (*Pointing up to the laboratory.*)—a huge automaton in human form. Should I succeed in animating it, Life and Death would appear to me as ideal bounds, which I shall break through and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. I have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit. (*Storm.*) A storm has hastily arisen!—'Tis a dreary night—the rain patters dismally against the pains—'tis a night for such a task—I'll in and attempt to infuse the spark of life.<sup>801</sup>

What follows is a slow emotional build-up enhanced by unnerving audio-visual effects aimed at recreating the ‘dreary night of November’ described in Shelley's novel. The Creature's presence is suggested by a chilling blue flame, a common sign of supernatural activity as well as a techno-Gothic effect indicating electrical discharge, and the emphatic reactions of Frankenstein and Fritz, who see it come to life while the increasingly loud music almost covered up their voices, conveying the frenzy and danger of the situation:

*Music.—Frankenstein takes up lamp, cautiously looks around him, ascends the stairs, crosses the gallery above, and exits into door of laboratory.*

<sup>798</sup> Mishra, Vijay, *The Gothic Sublime*, Albany: State University of New York Press (1994), p. 207.

<sup>799</sup> As for Planché's *Vampire*, the introduction of low comedy was more a legal necessity than anything else. However, not all commentators appreciated this kind of additions: the critic of *The Literary Gazette* thought ‘[t]o be relished, this Drama ought to have been entirely of the preternatural and terrible cast, with such variety as softer emotions and music could give. But the buffoonery of Fritz is too violent a contrast, and it interrupts the feeling which the principal action is intended to inspire’. *The Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.*, vol. 7 (2 August 1823), p. 494.

<sup>800</sup> *The London Magazine*, vol. 8 (September 1823), p. 322.

<sup>801</sup> All quotations from the text are from Peake, Richard Brinsley, *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823), in *Seven Gothic Dramas*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, Athens: Ohio University Press (1992).

*Enter Fritz, trembling, with a candle.*

FRITZ. Master isn't here—dare I peep [...] (*Runs against the chair and drops his light, which goes out.*) There, now, I'm in the dark. Oh my nerves.

*A blue flame appears at the small lattice window above, as from the laboratory.*

What's that? O lauk; there he is, kicking up the devil's own flame! Oh my Cow! I'll venture up—oh my cottage! I'll climb to the window—it will be only one peep to make my fortune.

*Music.*—Fritz takes up footstool, he ascends the stairs, when on the gallery landing place, he stands on the footstool tiptoe to look through the small high lattice window of the laboratory, a sudden combustion is heard within. The blue flame changes to one of a reddish hue.

FRANK. (*Within.*) It lives! it lives!

FRITZ. (*Speaks through music.*) Oh, dear! oh, dear! oh, dear!

*Fritz, greatly alarmed, jumps down hastily, totters trembling down the stairs in vast hurry; when in front of stage, having fallen flat in fright, with difficulty speaks.*

FRITZ. There's a hob—a hob-goblin, and 20 feet high!—wrapp'd in a mantle—mercy—mercy—  
*Falls down.*

*Music.*—Frankenstein rushes from the laboratory, without lamp, fastens the door in apparent dread, and hastens down the stairs, watching the entrance of the laboratory.

FRANK. It lives!

After a moment of apparent tranquillity in which Frankenstein reflects aloud about the terrible product of his experiments and how it does not fulfil his expectations ('The dreadful spectre of a human form—no mortal could withstand the horror of that countenance'), the creature finally makes his long-awaited entrance on stage:

Sudden combustion heard, and smoke issues, the door of the laboratory breaks to pieces with a loud crash—red fire within.

FRITZ. Oh—Oh.

(*Runs out hastily*)

*Music.* The Demon discovered at door entrance in smoke, which evaporates---the red flame continues visible. The Demon advances forward, breaks through the balustrade or railing of gallery immediately facing the door of laboratory, jumps on the table beneath, and from thence leaps on the stage, stands in attitude before Frankenstein, who had started up in terror; they gaze for a moment at each other.

FRANK. The demon corpse to which I have given life!

*Music.*—The Demon looks at Frankenstein most intently, approaches him with gestures of conciliation. Frankenstein retreats, the Demon pursuing him.

Its unearthly ugliness renders it too horrible for human eyes!

[*The Demon approaches him.*]

Fiend! Do not dare approach me—avaunt, or dread the fierce vengeance of my arm wrecked on your miserable head—

*Music.*—Frankenstein takes the sword from the nail, points with it at the Demon, who snatches the sword, snaps it in two and throws it on stage. The Demon then seizes Frankenstein—loud thunder heard—throws him violently on the floor; ascends the staircase, opens the large window, and disappears through the casement. Frankenstein remains motionless on the ground.—Thunder and lightning until the drop falls.

The scene had an unquestionably Gothic effect: as a review of the *London Morning Post* claimed, '[t]here is something in the piecemeal resurrection effected by Frankenstein, which, instead of creating that awful interest intended to arise from it, gives birth to a feeling of horror'<sup>802</sup>. Intriguingly, the nameless monster (identified in the *dramatis personae* as ——, though often

<sup>802</sup> *The London Morning Post* (29 July 1823).

referred to as a ‘demon’) was impersonated by none other than T. P. Cooke, who set aside the role of the elegant seducer to become the techno-Gothic character par excellence, a ‘huge automaton in human form’ that erased the boundary between science and supernatural. There are a few remarkable differences between the creature of Shelley and the creature of Peake: whereas the former develops a human-like conscience as well as language skills, the latter is wholly mute, appearing as a remorseless killing machine. Moreover, on stage the creature's physical aspect was not hideous and revolting as in the novel, indeed quite the opposite: he was the living embodiment of Neoclassical beauty. Like a sort of Herculean hero, Cooke had long black hair and wore a classical cotton tunic and a large toga that was removed during the performance to reveal his extraordinary athletic physique. He was thoroughly Michelangelesque in his heroic posturing and display of muscular strength. The only supernatural touch was provided by the light blue greasepaint smeared all over his body (in the novel, instead, the creature has a yellow skin). At a strictly visual level, Cooke's Creature was very different from all future incarnations of the character, but its naïvety and suffering countenance would prove highly influential. The actor's performance was admired, among others, by Mary Shelley herself, who attended a performance of the play on 29 August 1823: ‘Cooke played ——'s part extremely well; his seeking, as it were, for support; his trying to grasp at the sounds he heard; all, indeed, he does was well imagined and executed’<sup>803</sup>. Steven Earl Forry has rightly suggested that ‘the most formidable influence on this role is that of Caliban in *The Tempest* because, like him, Frankenstein's Creature ‘represents nature devoid of nurture, the senses devoid of mind’<sup>804</sup>, although the most immediate model seems, rather, the benign and dumb savages of more recent melodramas, in particular the character of Orson famously played by Joe Grimaldi<sup>805</sup>. From him Cooke apparently learned the ability to convey a wide gamut of emotions without speaking a word. This becomes especially obvious in mute scenes such as that in which the creature reacts to the sound of Felix De Lacey's flute (also Caliban, Orson and the Wild Man in Charles Dibdin the Younger's 1809 eponymous aqua-drama are particularly sensitive to music):

*Music.—The Demon cautiously ventures out—his mantle having been caught by the bush, he disrobes himself, leaving the mantle attached to the rock; he watches Felix and Agatha with wonder and rapture, appears irresolute whether he dares to follow them; he hears the flute of*

<sup>803</sup> Shelley, Mary, *Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, ed. H. H. Harper, Whitefish: Kessinger (2005), p. 126.

<sup>804</sup> Forry, Steven Earl (1990), p. 22.

<sup>805</sup> Louis James has argued that early dramatic incarnations of Frankenstein's monster ‘were to bring together a curious grouping of theatrical types, including the statue, the Wild Man, the Clown; and, related to these, the stage sailor and the fairground freak. Diverse as these Monsters may appear, they share a cluster of characteristics. They are ambivalent in identity, hovering between the human and the alien. They are physically powerful, and at the same time verbally inarticulate, sometimes mute. They respond ecstatically to music, and their emergence on the stage is directly related [...] to the rise of melodrama’. James, Louis, ‘Frankenstein's Monster in Two Traditions’, in *Frankenstein: Creation and Monstrosity*, ed. Stephen Bann, London: Reaktion Books (1994), p. 83.

*Felix, stands amazed and pleased, looks around him, snatches at the empty air, and with clenched hands puts them to each ear—appears vexed at his disappointment in not possessing the sound; rushes forward afterwards, again listens, and, delighted with the sound, steals off, catching at it with his hands.*

The condition of muteness initially keeps these almost bestial beings to a state of prelapsarian innocence, in which there is no knowledge of good and evil. Unlike Orson (and unlike Caliban), however, Frankenstein's Creature soon chooses the path of pure evil, driven by the desire for revenge. He goes on a murder spree and even displays a sadistic pleasure in his ferocious actions, such as when he sets fire to the De Lacey cottage 'with malignant joy' or when he cold-heartedly kills Frankenstein's love Agatha. The latter scene is another masterpiece of tension and cruel irony: in order to mitigate the effect of its crude violence, the murder occurs in a see-through scene 'reflected in the glass', in which 'Agatha appears on her knees with a veil over her head.—The Demon with his hand on her throat—she falls—the Demon disappears—after tearing a locket from Agatha's neck'. Eventually, both the creature and the creation perish in an apocalyptic mountain-top confrontation in the icy north (more similar to the conclusion of Aeschylus's tragedy *Prometheus Bound* than to that of Shelley's novel<sup>806</sup>):

*Music.—Frankenstein discharges his musket.—The Demon and Frankenstein meet at the very extremity of the stage.—Frankenstein fires—the avalanche falls and annihilates the Demon and Frankenstein.—A heavy fall of snow succeeds.—Loud thunder heard, and all the characters form a picture as the curtain falls.*

Although James William Wallack's performance as Frankenstein received unanimous positive comments in the press, there is no doubt that Cooke's creature was the undisputed show stealer. By 1850, he had played the role for at least 365 times<sup>807</sup>. Critics were quite divided as regards the merits of the play, but they all agreed in judging Cooke's performance as a masterpiece in melodramatic acting:

The acting in the two leading characters was perhaps the best ever seen in Melodrama [...] Mr. T. P. Cooke [...] has proved himself to be the very best pantomime actor on the stage. He never speaks;—but his action and his looks are more than eloquent. The effect of music upon him is affecting and beautiful in the extreme. He looks gigantic—and so contrives his uncouth dress and hair as quite to warrant the belief that he is more than human. While he is on the stage, the audience *dare* not bliss, nay—scarcely breathe.<sup>808</sup>

The monster in the hands of Mr. T. P. Cooke is of appalling interest, and the deep silence of the audience during his presence on the stage is the best panegyric to his talents: he has to execute a task of no ordinary difficulty; and, although he has not the faculty of speech imparted to him, he conveys to the audience, by the energy of his action and gestures, a perfect knowledge of the

<sup>806</sup> Chemers, Michael, *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness*, London and New York: Routledge (2018), p. 58.

<sup>807</sup> Forry, Steven Earl (1990), p. 11.

<sup>808</sup> *The London Magazine*, vol. 8 (September 1823), p. 323.

very extraordinary and novel character he represents.<sup>809</sup>

The acting of T. P. COOKE was most excellent. As it is a character so completely out of nature, it is impossible to judge of it by the regular rules of criticism: but it is unquestionably the finest piece of ballet acting we ever saw:—it is second only to the performance of the late EMERY in *Caliban*.<sup>810</sup>

Only the reviewer of *The Literary Gazette*, who dismissed the play as ‘merely passable’ and ‘overpraised’<sup>811</sup>, was a bit perplexed because Cooke did not exactly have the appropriate physique du rôle while nonetheless recognising the versatility of his mimic talents:

T. P. Cooke, as the “man new made,” is as blue and frightful as possible. His entré is capital; and if the piece could have been kept up to that pitch, it would have been highly impressive. But the actor could not raise himself to the imaginary standard, for he is only five feet so many inches, while every body describes the Monster as appalling in stature and dreadful in form. Mr. Cooke does all that can be done to realize this, and his pantomime (for he does not speak) is exceedingly fine, especially in his becoming first acquainted with the nature of fire, of sound, &c.<sup>812</sup>

The most lengthy and enthusiastic review of Cooke's performance appeared instead in *The Drama*, which praised it as a perfectly balanced blend of Fuselian sublimity and lurid German supernatural horror, in which speech would have been not only superfluous, but detrimental:

The frightful, nameless, and speechless creation of *Frankenstein*, was sustained with appalling truth and force, almost with truly Germanised horror, by Mr. COOKE. With the art of a FUSELI, he powerfully embodied the horrible, bordering on the sublime or the awful. His exhibition of giant strength, of towering gait, and of reckless cruelty, contrasted with the fiend's astonishment on hearing a “concord of sweet sounds,” and on beholding female forms, or in saving a human being from drowning, was masterly and characteristic. His method too of dressing the *Vampire* form was also admirable. His whole appearance was fearful to behold, and is almost out of our power to describe. The green and yellow visage, the watery and lack-lustre eye, the long-matted straggling black locks, the blue livid hue of his arms and legs, shrivelled complexion, straight black lips, and the horrible ghastly grin that sickened over his features, all formed a picture of the terrific, from which we really turned with shuddering. A daily critic, in his remarks upon Mr. T. COOKE's personation, observed, “that in the museum at Florence is a wax representation of the great plague in that city, where the bodies of the dead and dying “strew the hungry church-yard,” if one of them were made to “live and move, and have a being, it would be an exact counterpart of this horrible incarnation.” In the scene, when the philosopher had completed his work, with imparting life to what was before a lifeless mis-shapen mass, the newly-created being's style of rushing on the stage amidst flame was truly terrific. Its subsequent change of feelings, with the varied scenes and treatment to which it is exposed, display admirable discrimination in the performer. Those who are acquainted with Mr. Cooke's peculiar style of acting, and the ability with which he sustained the somewhat similar character of the *Vampire*, may well imagine how much he makes of this part; and they may not lament, as speech would diminish the delusion, by bringing the monster nearer humanity, that the actor has nothing to say. In a word, it is an unequalled performance, and will deservedly elevate Mr. Cooke to the

<sup>809</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 84 (August 1823), p. 181.

<sup>810</sup> *The Mirror of the Stage; or, New Dramatic Censor*, vol. 3 (4 August 1823), pp. 12-3.

<sup>811</sup> *The Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.*, vol. 7 (2 August 1823), p. 493.

<sup>812</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 494.

highest rank in this particular part of his profession.<sup>813</sup>

But Cooke's presence alone is not enough to explain why *Presumption* proved such an enduring favourite among English theatre-goers. In fact, the play always aroused rather contrasting feelings. *The London Magazine* wrote that *Presumption*'s success was 'as strange and mysterious as the being which it brings before us' because '[t]he piece has been damned by full houses night after night, but the moment it is withdrawn, the public call it up again—and yearn to tremble once more before it'<sup>814</sup>. Surely there was a certain degree of mistrust derived by the unsavoury reputation of the source novel, which had mostly received thoroughly negative reviews. The first critics of *Frankenstein* had immediately linked the immoral horror it depicted with Godwinian atheism, materialism and Jacobinism, also because the book bore a dedication to William Godwin. As Graham Allen explains, 'contemporary reviews [...] invariably point to *Frankenstein*'s association with William Godwin and by doing so register the novel's generic and ideological status as a Godwinian novel'<sup>815</sup>. Although Godwinian radical ideas were surely less current in the 1820s than they were in the 1790s (by this time Godwin himself had rejected his former pro-revolutionary views), they were still one of the dreaded bugbears of English conservatives. *The Literary Panorama*, for instance, wrote that *Frankenstein* is 'a feeble imitation of one that was very popular in its day,—the St. Leon of Mr. Godwin. It exhibits many characteristics of the school whence it proceeds [...] and it exhibits a strong tendency towards *materialism*'<sup>816</sup>. Similarly, *The British Critic* noted that '[t]his is another anomalous story of the same race and family as Mandeville' and that it has 'neither principle, object, nor moral', this being aggravated by the fact that the author is a woman<sup>817</sup>. *The Monthly Review* dismissed the novel as '[a]n uncouth story, in the taste of the German novelists, trenching in some degree on delicacy, setting probability at defiance, and leading to no conclusion either moral or philosophical', adding that '[i]n some passages, the writer appears to favour the doctrines of materialism'<sup>818</sup>. *The Quarterly Review* went so far as to argue that such a 'tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity' was the product of an insane mind:

It is piously dedicated to Mr. Godwin, and is written in the spirit of his school. The dreams of insanity are embodied in the strong and striking language of the insane, and the author, notwithstanding the rationality of his preface, often leaves us in doubt whether he is not as mad as his hero. Mr. Godwin is the patriarch of a literary family, whose chief skill is in delineating the wanderings of the intellect, and which strangely delights in the most afflicting and humiliating of human miseries. His disciples are a kind of *out-pensioners of Bedlam*, and, like 'Mad Bess' or 'Mad Tom' are occasionally visited with paroxysms of genius and fits of

<sup>813</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 5 (August 1823), pp. 30-1.

<sup>814</sup> *The London Magazine*, vol. 8 (September 1823), p. 322.

<sup>815</sup> Allen, Graham, *Shelley's Frankenstein*, London and New York: Continuum (2008), p. 79.

<sup>816</sup> *The Literary Panorama, and National Register*, vol. 8 (June 1818), p. 412.

<sup>817</sup> *The British Critic*, vol. 9 (April 1818), pp. 432; 438. *Mandeville* (1817) is a novel by William Godwin.

<sup>818</sup> *The Monthly Review*, vol. 35 (April 1818), p. 439.

expression, which make sober-minded people wonder and shudder.<sup>819</sup>

The fact that *Frankenstein* is set in Germany, the land of diablerie, occultism and Rosicrucianism, only reinforced the prejudices<sup>820</sup>. It should not surprise anyone, therefore, that an urgent need arose to clarify the message and meaning of the plot while adapting it for the stage. In particular, the roles of protagonist and antagonist are very confused and ‘present[ed] difficulties for the Manichean world of melodrama’, prompting Peake to solve this ambiguity ‘by substituting for an incarnated moral order (the hero) a divine moral code’<sup>821</sup>. This is obvious from the title’s emphasis on the vice being exposed in the story, namely presumption, as if to connect Peake’s play ‘to the older tradition of morality plays, where human desire to play God invariably led to disaster’<sup>822</sup>. Frankenstein’s megalomaniac, hubris-driven attempt to defy the natural order and imitate God by creating life is unmistakably depicted as being reprehensible, his recourse to alchemy and occult sciences being condemned in accordance with the negative connotation given to German supernaturalism. This is made explicit by Fritz, the comic buffoon and therefore the story’s moral mouthpiece<sup>823</sup>: whereas Frankenstein perceives himself as a modern Prometheus, Fritz observes that ‘like Doctor Faustus, my master is raising the Devil’. Later on, Frankenstein himself feels he has been driven by demonic impulses in his forbidden mission: ‘It’s the Devil – for I’m sure *he’s* at the bottom of it, and that makes me so nervous’. This confirms how also illegitimate Gothic melodrama was now striving for the respectability that derived from the use of spoken dialogue, staying away from any moral ambiguity being a key step in this process. As Diego Saglia puts it, melodramatic adaptations of *Frankenstein* blended ‘mesmerizing spectacular aesthetics with clearly separated spheres of good and evil’ and ‘largely conservative ideological inclinations’<sup>824</sup>. Actually, in September 1823 *Presumption* was produced for 12 nights at the Royalty Theatre under the more explicit title of *Frankenstein; or, The Danger of Presumption*, and the following year it was even revived three times at Covent Garden by permission of Samuel Arnold. Perhaps never had the legitimate and illegitimate theatre been so close, and even interchangeable. Mary Shelley herself appreciated the

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<sup>819</sup> *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 18 (January 1818), p. 382.

<sup>820</sup> As John R. Davis explains, ‘*Frankenstein* revived and refocused the long-standing Gothic fascination with Germany and German tales. It also reflected many notions circulating about Germany. Frankenstein himself, possibly modelled on well-known early German scientists such as Paracelsus, and reminiscent of Faust, was the embodiment of German learning. While reflecting current research into animal magnetism and the chemical or biological basis of life, *Frankenstein* also symbolised deep-seated British fears about German learning, and can certainly be interpreted in the light of religious doubts in Britain about German scholars and universities’. Davis, John R., *The Victorians and Germany*, Bern: Peter Lang (2007), p. 63.

<sup>821</sup> Forry, Steven Earl (1990), p. 21.

<sup>822</sup> Mishra, Vijay (1994), p. 207.

<sup>823</sup> Guerra, Lia, “‘This Nameless Mode of Naming the Unnamable...’: Frankenstein a Teatro’, in *Il teatro della paura: Scenari gotici del romanticismo europeo*, ed. Diego Saglia and Giovanna Silvani, Roma: Bulzoni (2005), p. 192.

<sup>824</sup> Saglia, Diego, ‘Enter *Monsieur le Monstre*: Cultural Border-Crossing and *Frankenstein* in London and Paris in 1826’, in *Transmedia Creatures: Frankenstein’s Afterlives*, ed. Francesca Saggini and Anna Enrichetta Soccio, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press (2018), p. 157.

changes and added the word ‘presumption’ in a passage of her 1831 revised edition of the novel. Opinions were divided with regard to the ultimate message of the play. *The Literary Gazette* lamented that ‘there is nothing to move the heart since the Creature ‘is a thing with which we can have no sympathies in common’ and ‘Frankenstein is also removed from natural affections’<sup>825</sup>. *The London Morning Post* did not like the way certain delicate themes were handled:

We have not that taste for the monstrous which can enable us to enjoy it in the midst of the most startling absurdities. To Lord BYRON, the late Mr. SHELLEY, and philosophers of that stamp, it might appear a very fine thing to attack the Christian faith from a masked battery, and burlesque the resurrection of the dead, by representing the fragments of departed mortals as starting into existence at the command of a man; but we would prefer the comparatively noble assaults of VOLNEY, VOLTAIRE, and PAINE.<sup>826</sup>

The majority of critics, however, warm-heartedly praised Peake's attempts to introduce moral clarity. *The Theatrical Observer* was pleased to note that ‘[t]he moral here is striking. It points out that man cannot pursue objects beyond his obviously prescribed powers without incurring the penalty of shame and regret at his audacious folly’<sup>827</sup>, while *The Morning Post* claimed that

[i]n the novel the rigid moralist may feel himself constantly offended, by the modes of reasoning, principles of action, &c. – But in the Drama this is all carefully kept in the back ground. Nothing but what can please, astonish, and delight, is there suffered to appear; Frankenstein despairingly bewails his attempt as impious, and suffers for it; partial justice is rendered; and many more incidents in the novel might have been pourtrayed, of harrowing interest!<sup>828</sup>

*The London Magazine* defended *Presumption* by dismissing any charge of immorality and blasphemy as ridiculous:

Something has been said of the impropriety of the production;—and one paper has hinted, with a singular critical sagacity, at the *impiety* of the drama and novel:—surely, nothing can be more idle than such a strain of objection! The moral, if it be needful to require it in this case, is so glaring, as almost to disturb the mystery and interest of the work:—we trust, *we* shall not be thought *impious* for so expressing ourselves. A man, by study, creates a being and gives it life:—he is unable to give it sense, understanding, purpose, or any of those harmonizing qualities which fit it for existence—and the creator falls a victim to his imperfect creature!—Putting the improbability out of the question—where is the vice of all this?—We own we are unable to detect it. A foolish placard was stuck about the streets, professing to come from a knot of “friends of humanity,” and calling on the fathers of families, &c. to set their faces against the piece. If this bill was seriously intended,—it was ludicrous enough. The answer on the part of the theatre was managerial and absolute;—and *Presumption* fills the theatre still with grumbling and money.<sup>829</sup>

<sup>825</sup> *The Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.*, vol. 7 (2 August 1823), p. 494.

<sup>826</sup> *The London Morning Post* (29 July 1823).

<sup>827</sup> *The Theatrical Observer*, 1 August 1823.

<sup>828</sup> *The Morning Post*, 30 July 1823.

<sup>829</sup> *The London Magazine*, vol. 8 (September 1823), p. 323. The same opinion was expressed by the critic of *The Examiner*, who even accused Peake and the English Opera House management of excessive prudishness for ‘[w]e do not like the pursuit of attainable knowledge to be termed impious or presumptuous’. *The Examiner* (3 August 1823),

The ‘foolish placard’ mentioned by the critic probably was part of the boycott campaign against *Presumption* mounted by the notorious London Society for the Prevention of Vice, which urged Londoners to avoid attending the play because of its supposedly inappropriate contents and dangerous doctrines<sup>830</sup>. However, as Forry argues, once again the target was more Shelley's novel than Peake's melodrama, which rather ‘suffered from what can only be called guilt by association’<sup>831</sup>. Eventually, Samuel Arnold himself published a letter in the 12 August 1823 issue of *The Theatrical Observer* in which he defended his production on the ground that ‘the *Right Honorable the Lord Chamberlain* sanctioned the Piece by granting his Licence, which Licence would certainly *have been withheld*, had the Drama been of an IMMORAL TENDENCY’, adding – with a bit of exaggeration – that ‘not one Critic has objected to it on the score of morality’<sup>832</sup>. Such initiatives by no means undermined the success of *Presumption*; in fact, they did nothing but enhance the public's curiosity to see the play, leading to multiple revivals at both the English Opera House and Covent Garden. At the same time, Shelley's own literary career received a considerable boost.

Just like *The Vampire* (with which it was sometimes paired, in what was perhaps the most exciting ‘horror double bill’ of the 1820s<sup>833</sup>), *Presumption* generated its own hideous progeny of *Frankenstein*-based shows, mainly parodies and burlesques such as Peake's own *Another Piece of Presumption* (Adelphi, 1823) or the anonymous *Humgumption; or, Dr. Frankenstein and the Hobgoblin of Hoxton* (Surrey, 1823), *Presumption and the Blue Demon* (Davis's Royal Amphitheatre, 1823), *Frank-in-Steam; or, The Modern Promise to Pay* (Olympic Theatre, 1824) and *Frankenstein; or, The Monster* (Surrey, 1827)<sup>834</sup>. A more serious early attempt at imitation was instead Henry M. Milner's *Frankenstein; or, The Demon of Switzerland* (Coburg, 1823), whose text,

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p. 505.

<sup>830</sup> One leaflet read: ‘Do not go to the Lyceum to see the monstrous Drama, founded on the improper work called “Frankenstein.”—Do not take your wives and families—The novel itself is of a decidedly immoral tendency; it treats of a subject which in nature cannot occur. This subject is pregnant with mischief; and to prevent the ill-consequences which may result from the promulgation of such dangerous doctrines, a few zealous friends of morality, and promoters of this Posting-bill, (and who are ready to meet the consequences thereof) are using their strongest endeavours’. Quoted in Forry, Steven Earl (1990), p. 5.

<sup>831</sup> *Ibid.* As Douglas William Hoehn suggests, however, the protesters' ‘primary consideration seemed not to have been the morals or messages of *Presumption!* as much as the virile spectacle of the scantily-clad T. P. Cooke’, deemed inappropriate for female spectators. Hoehn, Douglas William, ‘The First Season of *Presumption!*; or, *The Fate of Frankenstein*’, *Theatre Studies*, vols. 26-27 (1979-81), p. 85.

<sup>832</sup> *The Theatrical Observer* (12 August 1823)

<sup>833</sup> Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 102.

<sup>834</sup> In these versions the Creature was variously re-interpreted: ‘The Monster appeared as a Hobgoblin, as the “Blue Demon of the Strand and the Cut”, as the composite product of “The Promethean bodkin of Mr. Frankinstitch”, as a resuscitated bailiff, dug writ in hand by Frank-in-Steam from the grave where he had been buried in a trance, as the dwarf who impersonates the statue of Aesop’. Nitchie, Elizabeth, *Mary Shelley: Author of Frankenstein*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press (1953), p. 228.

however, has not survived. It was a very curious version: *The Drama* noted that the Creature was ‘endowed with speech and ‘the milk of human kindness’ (in the story he saved Frankenstein from death on two different occasions before eventually perishing in a fire in a ruined church where he had taken refuge in the attempt to escape from an angry mob of peasants), but its impersonator, Henry Bengough, ‘was so heavily laden with speeches, tinged with moral maxims, that he appeared lost in a mist’<sup>835</sup>. Special emphasis was indeed again given to the moral appropriateness of the story: as a playbill for the melodrama read,

[i]n the Construction of the New Melo-Drame, [...] every care has been taken to avoid any points that might be deemed objectionable in Principle and Morality; and the Manager trusts, that instead of being offensive to the Feelings of the most Fastidious of the most, this Drama will be found to convey an instructive Lesson, through the Medium of the most Novel and Impressive Effects.<sup>836</sup>

The piece, conceived as an afterpiece to *Thalaba the Destroyer*, was quickly set aside, but a few years later Milner reprised the subject freely adapting Jean Toussaint Merle and Béraud Antony's *Le Monstre et le Magicien*, an 1826 melodrama of the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin in which none other than Thomas Porter Cooke was engaged to play the Creature<sup>837</sup>, into *The Man and the Monster!; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (sometimes listed as *Frankenstein; or, The Man and the Monster!*), a two-act ‘Peculiar Romantic, Melo-Dramatic Pantomimic Spectacle’ staged at the Coburg Theatre in July 1826. This second version, very serious and rather faithful to Shelley's novel, left a deeper mark and, even more than *Presumption*, established an essential blueprint for the visual iconography of the Frankenstein story as it would later be developed in film and other popular media. In fact, by the 1830's Milner's melodrama was taken as ‘the standard stage version’<sup>838</sup>. For the first time, the (dumb) Creature, played by Richard John O. Smith, was animated on stage in front of a mesmerised audience:

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<sup>835</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 5 (August 1823), pp. 43-4.

<sup>836</sup> Quoted in Wischhusen, Stephen (1975), p. 103.

<sup>837</sup> Parisian playgoers really lost their mind for Cooke's Creature. Planché wrote that “‘monstre bleu,” the colour he painted himself, became the fashion of the day’. Planché, James Robinson, vol. 1 (1872), p. 90. A writer of *The New Monthly Magazine* commented with some disdain the popularity of *Le Monstre et le Magicien* and similar supernatural melodramas in the French capital: ‘There is at Paris, where all extremes meet, a kind of sub-theatrical public, which makes amends for the severity of the orthodox dramatic code, by running wild after the most extravagant violations of all rules, and the strangest outrages on feeling and taste. Thus the members of this living paradox keep the balance even, and avenge the beautiful and the romantic. If they turn away with disgust from the Weird Sisters, and defy the magic in the web of Othello's handkerchief, they doat on Mr. Cooke in the Monster, and consecrate ribands to his fame. If they refuse to pardon the grave-diggers in Hamlet, they seek for materials of absorbing interest in the charnel-house which no divine philosophy illumines. If they refuse to tragedy any larger bounds of time than their own classical poets could occupy with frigid declamations, they will select three days from distant parts of a wretched and criminal life, in order to exhibit in full and odious perfection, the horrors which two fifteen years of atrocity can accumulate and mature’. *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 21 (December 1827), p. 511. This critic, however, forgot – or pretended to forget – that the prevailing theatrical climate in Paris was pretty much the same than that in London.

<sup>838</sup> James, Louis (1994), p. 89.

*The Interior of the Pavillion.—Folding Doors in the Back. On a long Table is discovered an indistinct Form, covered with a black coat. A small side Table, with Bottles, and Chemical Apparatus,—and a brazier with fire.*

FRANKENSTEIN is discovered, as if engaged in a Calculation.

FRAN. Now that the final operation is accomplished, my panting heart dares scarcely gaze upon the object of its labours—dares scarcely contemplate the grand fulfilment of its wishes. Courage, Frankenstein! glut thy big soul with exultation!—enjoy a triumph never yet attained by mortal man! (*Music.—He eagerly lays his hand on the bosom of the figure, as if to discover whether it breathes.*) The breath of life now swells its bosom.—(*Music.*) As the cool night breeze plays upon its brow, it will awake to sense and motion. (*Music.—He rolls back the black covering, which discovers a colossal human figure, of a cadaverous livid complexion; it slowly begins to rise, gradually attaining an erect posture, Frankenstein observing with intense anxiety. When it has attained a perpendicular position, and glares its eyes upon him, he starts back with horror.*) Merciful Heaven! And has the fondest visions of my fancy awakened to this terrible reality; a form of horror, which I scarcely dare to look upon:—instead of the fresh colour of humanity, he wears the livid hue of the damp grave. Oh, horror! horror!—let me fly this dreadful monster of my own creation! (*He hides his face in his hands; the Monster, meantime, springs from the table, and gradually gains the use of his limbs; he is surprized at the appearance of Frankenstein,—advances towards him and touches him; the latter starts back in disgust and horror, draws his sword and rushes on the Monster, who with the utmost care takes the sword from him, snaps it in two, and throws it down. Frankenstein then attempts to seize it by the throat, but by a very slight exertion of its power, it throws him off to a considerable distance; in shame, confusion, and despair, Frankenstein rushes out of the Apartment, locking the doors after him. The Monster gazes about it in wonder, transverses the Apartment; hearing the sound of Frankenstein's footsteps without, wishes to follow him; finds the opposition of the door, with one blow strikes it from its hinges, and rushes out.*)<sup>839</sup>

Richard John Smith was known as ‘O’ Smith after Obi, a rebel Jamaican slave he played in John Fawcett's pantomime *Obi; or, Three-Finger'd Jack* (Haymarket, 1800), an experience that may have served as a dry run for his acting in Milner's melodrama for the character was depicted as a savage, Orson-like ferocious monster. This further reinforced the visual link between Frankenstein's Creature and the figure of the wild man. A critic observed that his performance as Shelley's monster was ‘not much inferior’ to that of T. P. Cooke<sup>840</sup>. Like him, O. Smith frequently played villainous, monstrous or infernal characters, sometimes the very same as his rival. In 1827, for instance, Smith replaced Cooke in various revivals of *Presumption* at the English Opera House. *The Stage* even claimed that Smith brought the Creature to life in a more convincing way:

As a *melo-dramatic* actor, Mr. SMITH has decidedly no equal on the boards, at least in the peculiar line which he has chosen—that, in which, the wild, the terrific, and sublime, are the prominent features. In the representation of parts of this description, “he stands superior, and alone.” His towering form, deep and sepulchral voice, dark features, and expressive eye, are particularly fitted to infuse into them that mysterious coloring, so necessary to their due effect

<sup>839</sup> All quotations from the text are from Milner, Henry M., *Frankenstein; or, The Man and the Monster!*, in *The Hour of One: Six Gothic Melodramas*, London: Gordon Fraser (1975).

<sup>840</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 21 (August 1827), p. 333.

upon the mind. They oppress the auditor with an indefinable feeling, an unearthly chilliness, a secret wonder, a painful thrill; effects which we defy any other actor to produce. [...] Of his *Monster* in the celebrated piece of "*Frankenstein*," we think we are not asserting too much, when we say that it was fully equal to the representation of the character by Mr. COOKE,—and that, without being in any way, a copy. It should, of course, be remembered, that Mr. COOKE had identified the part as his own, in consequence of his being its original representative. The *character* was *indeed* a *novelty* to the English stage, and equally so to the theatrical public at large, we cannot therefore wonder that Mr. COOKE's embodiment of the man monster, was considered to be a prodigy of acting, and that it should be set down, both by auditor and critic, as a masterpiece in its line. The just difference is, that, although his representation was truly powerful, masterly, and in parts not to be equalled, yet it wanted, in the whole, the wild sublimity, the terrific grandeur, and the revengeful ferocity infused to it by Mr. SMITH; feelings, it must be allowed, more in accordance with the ideas an audience would entertain of what such a being, such a chimera, encompassed of the powers of speech, or of reason, should be.<sup>841</sup>

Curiously enough, Milner shifted the main setting from Switzerland to Italy. The story unfolds in and around the estate of the Prince del Piombino near the foot of Mount Etna, Sicily, and the final showdown precisely takes place on top of the erupting volcano, which recalled one of the most common set pieces of Sadler's Wells:

*The Summit of Mount Etna—the Crater occupies the middle of the stage—near it is the Pathway from below—in very distant perspective are seen the sea and towns at the foot of Etna—the Volcano during the scene throws out torrents of fire, sparks, smoke, &c. as at the commencement of an eruption.*

*(The Monster ascends from below, faint from loss of blood and overcome by fatigue—he is followed by Frankenstein, whom he immediately attacks and stabs with the dagger he had taken from his wound—as Frankenstein falls, Emmeline rushes in shrieking and catches his lifeless body—the Monster, attempting to escape, is met at every outlet by armed Peasantry—in despair he rushes up to the apex of the mountain—the Soldiery rush in and fire on him—he immediately leaps into the Crater, now vomiting burning lava, and the lava Curtain falls.)*

Especially thanks to *The Man and the Monster!*, Milner became the Coburg's top dramatist, with at least 56 new pieces produced between 1821 and 1829<sup>842</sup>. He showed a peculiar talent for refurbishing established older plays (a skill much appreciated at the minors), especially those with supernatural subjects. In 1822, for example, he had already demonstrated his taste for exaggerated Gothic spectacle with *The Enchanted Castle; or, The Sleeping Beauty*, a sort of horror reworking of Skeffington's *The Sleeping Beauty* so packed with weird creatures and blue-fire effects to repulse

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<sup>841</sup> *The Stage; or, The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 1 (October 1828), pp. 111-2. The article examined the main differences in the acting styles of Cooke and Smith: Mr. SMITH has by many been compared to that admirable melo-dramatic actor Mr. T. P. COOKE, but improperly, and unjustly. For although, with regard to *stature*, they are formed in the same mould, yet their style of acting, their voices, their features are completely dissimilar. The open countenance and manly features of the latter, his powerful voice, the freedom and boldness of his action, are most excellently adapted to the display of the ingenuous feelings of the true hearted *tar*, the frank, and liberal sincerity of the *soldier*, or the passionate-warmth of the devoted *lover*; but for the faithful representation of the fiercer passions of uncontrollable hate, savage malignity, and unsatiated revenge, we consider his powers totally incompetent, and must, in strict justice, award the palm to Mr. SMITH, who alone can truly depict the darker imaginings of atrocious guilt, conscious crime, and agonizing heart-rendering remorse'. *Ibid.*

<sup>842</sup> Rowell, George (1993), p. 22.

critics<sup>843</sup>. In June 1826, some weeks before the debut of *The Man and the Monster!*, Milner presented a version of *Alonzo the Brave and the Fair Imogene: or, The Spectre Bride* that went head to head with the one simultaneously produced by Thomas Dibdin at Sadler's Wells. This 'Legendary Romantic Melodrama' was thoroughly saturated with Gothic trappings and blue-fire effects, especially with regard to scenes involving the Bleeding Nun. In 1829 Milner engaged the Undine motif in *The Spirit of the Waters; or, Undine and the Goblin Page*, which outshone Charles Farley's 1821 melodrama on the same subject by displaying, among its many wonders, an epic battle between elemental forces of water and fire in the Black Valley, 'which [was] filled, by the influence of the Water-King, with a rolling torrent', being then 'instantly changed by the Fire-King into one of liquid fire, and, finally, by the Water-King, into a limpid sheet of azure'<sup>844</sup>. At the same time, Milner shamelessly challenged the authority of the patent theatres by turning Shakespeare's plays into illegitimate melodramas such as *The Lovers of Verona; or, Romeo and Juliet* (1826), *The Three Caskets; or, The Jew of Venice* (1827) and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1828).

The Parisian sensation *Le Monstre et le Magicien*, which totalled 96 performances, was also loosely translated by John Atkinson Kerr and staged in October 1826 as *The Monster and Magician; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* at the New Royal West London Theatre, the smallest of the minor theatres. The piece however did not meet with success, being performed only four times. Here Dr. Frankenstein is explicitly described as an alchemist, and the Creature is brought to life through a cabbalistic ritual involving the appearance of a 'Genie of the Tomb' in a Gothic graveyard, a scene that Diane Long Hoeveler has compared to 'the conjurations of the Wandering Jew in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*'<sup>845</sup>:

([...] *Frankenstein now commences his operations—thunder—lightning—he is surrounded by a circle of fire.*)

FRAN. Genie whom I have subjugated, obey the voice of thy master.

*Storm increases, the Monument crumbles to atoms, and the Genie appears surrounded by flames, holding a Vase in its hand.*

GEN. What would you with me?

<sup>843</sup> The review that appeared in *The Drama* is particularly telling: 'To all appearance Bedlam had broke loose. We really must beg of Mr. MILNER to present us with something a little more rational—to be less sparing of his pompous announcements in the bills of "magic fairies"—"thunderbolts"—"gushing waters"—"subterranean fires"—"fiery dragons"—"fiery spectres"—and "bronze castles"—such false blazonry and lying delusions we are astonished he can practise. For ourselves we candidly acknowledge, that to sit out such another performance as the "*Enchanted Castle*," would be impossible—our nerves are much too weak to permit it—and we really must depute some kind friend to take our accustomed seat for Mr. M.'s future pieces, as our auricular organs "recoil back" with horror at the thoughts of the purgatory we then endured'. *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 3 (June 1822), p. 47.

<sup>844</sup> *The Dramatic Magazine*, vol. 1 (1 April 1829), p. 45.

<sup>845</sup> Hoeveler, Diane Long, 'Nineteenth-Century Dramatic Adaptations of Frankenstein', in *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, ed. Andrew Smith, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2016), p. 181.

FRAN. You already know—that Vase encloses the reward of my labours.  
 GEN. Madman! What do you require!  
 FRAN. That it should be mine!  
 GEN. I know to what ambitious extent thy presumption soars—but tremble wretched mortal!  
 FRAN. Heed not me—but give as I command!  
 GEN. 'Tis my duty to obey a power more potent than my own, your happiness is cancelled beyond recall, and only in death will you again behold me.

*The Storm increases, the Genie becomes enveloped in a flame of fire, Pietro utters a shriek and runs off, Frankenstein stands exultingly.*<sup>846</sup>

Even more thoroughly than the novel, melodramatic adaptations of *Frankenstein* fully embraced necromancy, alchemy, immortality and other recognisably Rosicrucian themes, hinting at devices such as the elixir of eternal life first introduced in William Godwin's *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799). In this respect, Kerr's melodrama was even more explicit in establishing a connection between the reanimation of dead matter described in *Frankenstein* with the necromantic rituals associated with German occult societies in order to stress the perverse and demonic nature of such unholy experiments. This became a common theme at minor theatres in this period: in *Wake Not the Dead ; or, The Spectre Bride* (Coburg, 1824), for example, a nobleman turns to an enchanter to reanimate his dead wife by means of mystic spells and diabolic incantations<sup>847</sup>.

After snow avalanches and volcanic explosions, Kerr transferred the final confrontation between Frankenstein and the Creature off the Italian coast of the Adriatic Sea during a terrible storm (a similar sea scene was also adopted in an 1826 revival of *Presumption* at the English Opera House, perhaps in order to exploit the new taste for nautical melodrama, and became a permanent feature of the play<sup>848</sup>):

*A vessel is seen in the midst of the waves exposed to a violent tempest—on the deck of which is seen Jansken, Petrusco, and Mariners.*

*Frankenstein appears in a small boat, which is tossed to and fro, by the billows; on beholding him, those in the ship utter an exclamation of joy.*

JAN. He's escaped the Casyle's flames but how to gain the vessel!—providence protect thou.

FRAN. Yes, yes, if contrition is entitled to commiseration, it will—it will.—

*Throwing a rope towards Frankenstein which he vainly attempts to seize, the boat from a sudden gust of wind being driven at a still greater distance from the vessel.*

<sup>846</sup> Kerr, John Atkinson, *The Monster and Magician; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, in Forry, Steven Earl, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1990), p. 210.

<sup>847</sup> The reviewer of *The Drama* thought that the author of this melodrama, George Almar, 'has evidently had in view the popular romance of "*Frankenstein*;" and in furtherance of his aim, has contrived by the agency of materials dissimilar only in respect to sex, and the creative power employed, to exhibit the direful consequences of a successful perversion of the course of nature; imaginative in fact; but not less calculated to shew the wisdom that limits our desires, and the impotency of hope, when irrationally excited'. *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 7 (October 1824), p. 56. Frederick Burwick noted that 'Almar's production created many terrifying surprises by exploiting the contemporary fascination with galvanic reanimation of the corpse'. Burwick, Frederick (2020), p. 34.

<sup>848</sup> Cox, Jeffrey N. (1992), p. 386.

*The boat is again compelled towards the ship and Jansken endeavours a second time to convey the rope to Frankenstein, but is again disappointed—at this moment the Monster appears on the rock uttering a shout of demonic joy on beholding him, Frankenstein utters a shriek of despair.*

*The Monster darts from the rock into the boat, seizes Frankenstein—a moment after a thunderbolt descends and severs the bark, the waves vomit forth a mass of fire and the Magician and his unhallowed abortion are with the boat engulfed in the waves.*<sup>849</sup>

In the same way Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* sparked new interest in German folklore in connection with the rising fantastic genre, the neo-Gothic vogue spearheaded by the several melodramatic versions of *The Vampyre* and *Frankenstein* reopened Pandora's box and reignited the English mania for Teutonic horror<sup>850</sup>, paving the way for a new wave of literary and theatrical imports that reached its pinnacle around the mid-1820s. The German Gothic, with all its multifaceted connotations, was back. As a matter of fact, the vampire myth explored by Planché had its literary roots in late eighteenth-century German Romanticism, namely in certain poems of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Gottfried August Bürger and Joseph von Eichendorff; in fact, the first literary representation of a vampire dates back to a poem by Heinrich August Ossenfelder entitled *Der Vampir* (1748), where the protagonist is characterised as a sinister sexual predator who threatens to drink the lifeblood of a young Christian maiden. Later authors such as Ludwig Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Ernst Benjamin Salomo Raupach developed and reinvented the vampire figure in widely famed Gothic/Romantic prose works. A playbill for *The Vampire* announced that '[t]he effect produced upon crowded audiences [by the melodrama] is perfectly electrical'<sup>851</sup>. The adjective 'electrical' is especially meaningful in this context. A few years earlier, the term '*electric*' had been used to define German Gothic in a review of Matthew G. Lewis's novel *The Bravo of Venice* (1805), in which bookshelves filled with Gothic fiction were compared to 'a galvanic battery'<sup>852</sup>. Of course it is superfluous to stress the importance of contemporary discourses on electricity and galvanism to the conception of *Frankenstein*, a story famously influenced by German

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<sup>849</sup> Kerr, John Atkinson (1990), p. 226.

<sup>850</sup> The two phenomena were linked by Walter Scott, who curiously regarded *Frankenstein* as the English text more akin to the 'FANTASTIC mode of writing' invented by the Germans: 'Our English severity of taste will not easily adopt this wild and fantastic tone into our own literature; nay, perhaps will scarce tolerate it in translations. The only composition which approaches to it is the powerful romance of *Frankenstein*, and there, although the formation of a thinking and sentient being by scientific skill is an incident of the fantastic character, still the interest of the work does not turn upon the marvellous creation of Frankenstein's monster, but upon the feelings and sentiments which that creature is supposed to express as most natural—if we may use the phrase—to his unnatural condition and origin. In other words, the miracle is not wrought for the mere wonder, but is designed to give rise to a train of acting and reasoning in itself just and probable, although the *postulatum* on which it is grounded is in the highest degree extravagant. So far *Frankenstein*, therefore, resembles the *Travels of Gulliver*, which suppose the existence of the most extravagant fictions, in order to extract from them philosophical reasoning and moral truth'. Scott, however, specifies that the German fantastic is devoid of moral implications and 'claims no farther object than to surprise the public by the wonder itself'. *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, vol. 1 (July 1827), pp. 72-3.

<sup>851</sup> Quoted in Stuart, Roxana (1994), p. 78.

<sup>852</sup> *The Critical Review*, vol. 5 (July 1805), p. 255.

horror fiction, notably ghost stories. This link to the German Gothic was even more manifest in Peake's *Presumption*, which 'brought out Germanic resonances and added Gothic trappings'<sup>853</sup> that served as inspiration for subsequent dramatisers of the story. In this respect, *Frankenstein* constituted a crucial point of intersection between the German and the English Gothic tradition, kicking off a new phase in which a rich variety of German works dealing with the supernatural flooded into England. Although prejudices remained, times had changed significantly and the almost total ostracism of German plays from the English theatre, which lasted about two decades, came to an end. The advent of German Romantic opera, in particular, seemed to fulfil, at least theoretically, the impossible dream of reconciling the mass demand for German Gothic horrors with the need to provide morally unassailable entertainments, giving new fuel to the flame of English supernatural melodrama, especially at the illegitimate theatres, whose social and cultural weight was continuing to grow unabated.

#### 4.4 Der Freischütz and the return of German supernatural horror

During the mid-1820s, the number of literary and theatrical importations from Germany, which after 1800 had waned considerably, began to rise again. After the Napoleonic era had somehow stained the reputation of French literature, the English intellectual world turned its eyes to German culture, completely re-evaluating it and devoting unprecedented attention to it<sup>854</sup>. Suffice it to consider the astounding proliferation of German literature anthologies including the translated tales of Adelbert von Chamisso, Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, the Brothers Grimm, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Wilhelm Hauff, among others. This phenomenon cannot be disjointed from the second surge in Gothic plays; in fact, it can be intriguingly linked to the amazing success that German operas with Gothic subjects obtained in late-Romantic England. Opera was indeed the vehicle for the return of German supernatural horror on the English stage, sparking renewed popular interest in the theme. This should not come as a total surprise: in this period, English and German plays resembled each other in many ways, especially with regard to their marked generic hybridity, which made it almost impossible to establish where melodrama

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<sup>853</sup> Crook, Nora, 'Mary Shelley Author of *Frankenstein*', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter, Oxford: Blackwell (2000), p. 59.

<sup>854</sup> The periodical press played an instrumental role in this process: 'Antipathy towards German literature, expressed in publications such as the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, related to doubts about exaggerated spiritualism, and religious adventurousness. Around 1820, however, such associations began to work in favour of German works, rather than against them. Journals playing an important role in the discussion of German works included the *Edinburgh Review* (founded 1802), the *Quarterly Review* (1809), *Blackwood's* (1817), the *London Magazine* (1820), the *Westminster Review* (1825) and the *Foreign and Quarterly Review* (1827). [...] Gradually, other journals also recognised the changing appetite of readers, and turned their attention towards Germany'. Davis, John R. (2007), p. 64.

ended and opera began. As a matter of fact, although it ostensibly derived from France, English melodrama had developed in a way that made it more akin to German melodrama and opera, or, rather, *Singspiel*. The *Singspiel*, a kind of opera-like musical drama that featured considerable portions of spoken dialogue interspersed with sung numbers (therefore inherently similar to melodrama), was the most immediate predecessor of German Romantic opera, which is generally regarded as having begun with E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Romantische Zauberoper* ('Romantic magic opera') in three acts *Undine* (Berlin Schauspielhaus, 1816), an adaptation of Fouqué's celebrated fairy-tale novella bearing the same name. In 1821, composer Carl Maria von Weber continued the Romanticisation of the *Singspiel* form and created *Der Freischütz* ('The Marksman', literally 'The Free Shooter'), a three-act opera written to a libretto by playwright Friedrich Kind and clearly influenced by Hoffman's *Undine*, especially with regard to the theme of the interference of supernatural agents in human affairs. Kind loosely drew the scheme of his libretto from an eponymous Gothic short story (in turn based on an old German legend) by Johann August Apel included in the first volume of the *Gespensterbuch* ('The Book of Ghosts', 1810), a best-selling collection of folktales edited by Apel himself and Friedrich Laun. The plot, set in Bohemia at the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), revolves around a young forest ranger named Max who needs to demonstrate his marksmanship in a trial conceived by Cuno, the old head ranger to the Prince Ottokar of Bohemia, and thus prove his worthiness to inherit his position and marry his daughter Agathe. However, Max has just lost a marksmanship contest to the peasant Kilian and starts doubting his shooting abilities. He therefore becomes the target of the machinations of a villainous fellow ranger, Caspar, who has secretly sold his soul to Samiel, the Black Huntsman (otherwise the Devil). Caspar has almost reached the time of reckoning when he must resign himself to Samiel and now wants to offer Max's soul in exchange for his in order to prolong his life. He convinces Max to go with him to the Wolf's Glen to forge seven magic bullets, six of which can hit whatever the marksman wishes, whereas the seventh belongs to Samiel himself, who can guide it as he pleases (this last detail is however intentionally kept secret by Caspar). The next day Max shoots perfectly. At the trial, Prince Ottokar sets a white dove sitting on a branch as the target. Agathe, who had a premonitory dream in which she was a white dove shot down by Max, cries out to warn him, but the ranger shoots his seventh bullet at the dove as it flies away. Agathe shrieks and falls to the ground, but, miraculously, she is not injured: the bridal wreath given to her by an old hermit has deflected the bullet to the heart of Caspar, who was concealed in a tree. Caspar's body is thus immediately carried off by Samiel to the Wolf's Glen. Max confesses what he has done and the Prince decrees his banishment from the country, but at the intercession of the hermit he is given a year of penitence, after which he can marry Agathe. The Prince forgives him and all celebrate the

victory of the forces of good over evil<sup>855</sup>.

*Der Freischütz* premiered on 18 June 1821 at the Schauspielhaus in Berlin and drew universal acclaim. In the months immediately following, it was performed in several other German cities and throughout Europe, bringing huge international fame to both Weber and Kind. Of course echoes of the opera's incredible success reached England, but theatre managers were somehow intimidated by the rich complexity and multifaceted character of such an extraordinary theatrical cornucopia. As Christina Fuhrmann explains, *Der Freischütz* 'uneasily straddled English theatrical conventions, being '[t]oo German for the King's Theatre'<sup>856</sup>, too melodramatic for the major theatres and too operatic for the minors', and therefore ended up 'languish[ing] on London's theatrical drawing board'<sup>857</sup>. That it was a German work certainly added to the mistrust. However, it soon appeared obvious that *Der Freischütz* had all the right (Gothic) ingredients to storm the London theatre scene, and so it did, although a few years later than expected (the success of the dramatisations of *The Vampyre* and *Frankenstein* probably served as the decisive push factor, along with the publication of Apel's 'Der Freischütz' in the third volume of the anonymous 1823 anthology *Popular Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations*, where it was translated by Thomas De Quincey as 'The Fatal Marksman'). Although traditionally uninterested in adapting foreign opera, minor theatres were the first to concretely step forward to bring *Der Freischütz* to an eagerly awaiting public of English theatregoers. Managers immediately abandoned the idea of producing a faithful adaptation of the opera and decided instead to turn it into an outright Gothic melodrama, exploiting the inherent melodramatic quality of the work, with its dark forest setting, persecuted lovers, scheming villain, catchy folk songs and mysterious supernatural elements. The first stage adaptation was *The Fatal Marksman; or, The Demon of the Black Forest*, an anonymous melodrama hastily produced at the Coburg in February 1824 that proved a laughable disaster. One had to wait until the summer to see the *Freischütz* craze really explode with full force. Willing to continue his winning streak, Samuel J. Arnold put up his own version (probably adapting the libretto himself), titled *Der Freischütz; or, The Seventh Bullet*, at the English Opera House on 22 July 1824, in what would become the greatest hit in the history of the theatre, surpassing even *The Vampire* and *Presumption*<sup>858</sup>. The semi-

<sup>855</sup> The plot of the opera significantly diverges from that of Apel's tale. Kind introduced new characters (notably the holy hermit) and turned the tragic end, in which the bride-to-be is fatally hit by one of the charmed bullets and the marksman ends up in a madhouse, into a definitively happy one. See Henderson, Donald G., *The Freischütz Phenomenon: Opera as Cultural Mirror*, Bloomington: Xlibris (2011), pp. 46-50.

<sup>856</sup> For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, The King's Theatre was the venue devoted to the performance of all-sung Italian opera in London.

<sup>857</sup> Fuhrmann, Christina, 'Continental Opera Englished, English Opera Continentalized: *Der Freischütz* in London, 1824', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2004), pp. 119-20.

<sup>858</sup> This had been prophetically anticipated by *The Theatrical Observer*: 'The Vampire, if we recollect right, was the first of a species of drama produced here, which has since become periodical. *Frankenstein* partook of the same wild and original character, and now we have *Der Freischütz*, which surpasses both in novelty. The music, alone, is sufficient to render it popular'. *The Theatrical Observer* (24 July 1824).

legitimate English Opera House surely was the best place to host *Der Freischütz* since the witty ambiguity between operatic and melodramatic offerings was one of its characteristic traits. The role of the diabolic Zamiel (Samiel), in this version entirely spoken, was of course given to Thomas Porter Cooke, who played the part ‘fearfully well’<sup>859</sup> and even personally directed the melodramatic parts of the opera. Apart from Weber's memorably gripping musical score, the production's main selling card was the long episode in the Wolf's Glen, which was retained virtually verbatim from the original German text (whereas other passages and elements of the opera necessitated some changes to facilitate fruition)<sup>860</sup>. With its spoken dialogue over orchestral accompaniment and horrifying supernatural effects (reinforced by an ‘unusually darkened auditorium’<sup>861</sup>, just like in a phantasmagoria show), the scene was pure Gothic melodrama:

*Stage quite dark. A craggy glen, surrounded by high mountains covered with fir, down the side of one of which, at R. U. E., falls a cascade. The full moon is shining dimly. In the foreground an old blasted tree, 4th E. L., of which the withered wood shines with phosphoric light. Another withered tree on L. S. E., on a lower knotty branch of which an owl is sitting. CASPAR discovered, with a pouch and hanger, busily engaged in making a circle of black stones; in the middle of which is placed a scull [sic], an eagle's wing, a crucible, and a bullet mould. Distant thunder heard.*<sup>862</sup>

After a chorus of invisible spirits, Caspar proceeds to summon Zamiel:

*[At the end of chorus the clock strikes twelve. The circle being finished, CASPAR within it, draws his hanger round the circle of black stones, and at the twelfth stroke strikes it into the scull.*

CAS. *[Raising the scull on the hanger at arm's length.*

Zamiel, Zamiel, hear me, hear!

By the enchanter's scull, appear!

Zamiel, Zamiel, hear me, hear!

*[A subterranean noise is heard—a rock [...] splits asunder, and ZAMIEL appears in the opening—the owl vanishes—CASPAR kneels before him.*

ZAM. Why callest thou?

*[Music.*

CAS. *[Agitated.]*

Thou know'st to-morrow's sun

Will see my respite run.

ZAM. To-morrow!

CAS. Three years longer let me live!

ZAM. No!

CAS. I will another victim give.

ZAM. Whom?

CAS. One, who, till now, would never dare

Within thy dark and dreary realms appear.

ZAM. What does he seek?

<sup>859</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 12 (September 1824), p. 392.

<sup>860</sup> Fuhrmann, Christina, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2015), p. 115.

<sup>861</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>862</sup> All quotations from the text are from Anonymous, *Der Freischütz; or, The Seventh Bullet*, London: Thomas Dolby (1825).

CAS. To be supplied  
With bullets thou wilt guide.

ZAM. Six shall achieve—  
The seventh deceive.

CAS. Dark spirit of the hour,  
By thy mysterious power,  
Then turn the seventh aside,  
And let it kill his bride.

ZAM. O'er her I have no power.

CAS. Will he suffice to pay?

ZAM. He may.

CAS. Grant this delay!  
But three years to be free,  
And Rodolph shall thy victim be.

ZAM. The boon I grant; but hear and know,  
With me to-morrow—he or thou.

*[A peal of thunder is heard, and repeated in echo. ZAMIEL vanishes,—the rock closes. The scull and hanger sink, and in their place a flask and a hearth, with lighted coals and faggots, rise out of the earth, within the circle. The moon becomes red.]*

Soon after Rodolph (Max) joins Caspar inside the glen and immediately two ghostly apparitions, that of his mother and that of his beloved Agnes (Agathe), appear in the attempt to warn him away, but to no avail. Then the moment of the casting of the magic bullets arrives and Caspar forces Rodolph into the magic circle:

[RODOLPH waves his hand.]

CAS. Hush! Every moment is precious.  
*[The moon is darkened, except a narrow rim.]*

Mark me, then, and learn the art.

*[Taking the crucible, and pulling out the ingredients from his pouch.]*

First, this lead — then, this glass, stolen from a church-window — some quick-silver — three charmed balls which have already hit their mark — the right eye of a lap-wing — and the left of a lynx.— Probatum est.—Now for the blessing of the balls.

*[CASPAR, bowing down his head, while kneeling over the hearth of flaming coals, three separate times before he commences. [...] A greenish white flame issues from the crucible—a cloud passes over the moon, and entirely obscures her light.]*

THE CASTING OF THE BULLETS *[Music.]*

CAS. *[Casting the bullet, and letting it fall from the mould, exclaims aloud.]* One!

ECHO. *[Answering, R.]* One!

ECHO. *[L.]* One!

ECHO. *[R.]* One!

ECHO. *[L.]* One!

*These four echoes answer in repetition on the casting every bullet, growing gradually more and more hideous.—At ONE, night-birds flutter and hover over the circle, and strange faces and heads of monsters appear starting out of the rocks, and almost instantly vanish from sight.*

CAS. *[The same ceremony as before.]* Two!

ECHOES. Two!

*[At TWO, the Witch of the Glen enters from R., threatening CASPAR, walks round the circle, and exit, L. U. E.—various reptiles appear from separate entrances, and surround the*

*circle—also serpents flying in the air.*

CAS. Three!

ECHOES. Three!

*[At THREE, a storm and hurricane break down trees—the night-birds, as also the faces and heads of monsters re-appear momentarily.]*

CAS. [Faltering.] Four!

ECHOES. Four!

*[At FOUR, whips cracking, the rattle of wheels and tramp of horses are heard, and two wheels of fire roll over the Glen from R. U. E. to L. U. E.]*

CAS. [With great agitation.] Five!

ECHOES. Five!

*[The audience part of the theatre, as well as the stage, are now in complete darkness.]*

*[At FIVE, neighing, barking, and huntsmen's cry are heard; amid discordant and eccentric music, supposed to accompany the wild chase in the air: the misty forms of a skeleton stag, skeleton horsemen and hounds pass over the magic circle in the clouds, to a*

#### HUNTING CHORUS OF INVISIBLE SPIRITS [...]

CAS. Horror!—'tis the wild chase in the air—a fearful omen! Six!

ECHOES. Six!

*[At SIX, a tremendous storm of thunder, lightning, hail, and rain—meteors dart through the air, and over the hill—trees are torn up by the roots—the torrent foams and roars, and turns to blood—the rocks are riven—the serpents, birds, reptiles, re-appear—the female spectre re-enters, R., and crosses to C. at back of stage—all the faces and hideous heads are visible at every entrance on L. and R.—the Witch of the Glen darts forth from L., and all the horrors of the preceding numbers are accumulated, to deter the FREISCHUTZ from the completion of his object.]*

CAS. [In agony.] Seven!

ECHOES. Seven!

*[At SEVEN, CASPAR is struggling on the ground, the hearth of lighted coals scattered around the circle—a tree is rent asunder, L., wherein ZAMIEL appears surrounded by a tremendous shower of fire—ZAMIEL discharges two rifles at one time, and the curtain drops.—The audience part of the theatre and stage-lights full on.]*

Mary Shelley, who saw the play two or three times at the English Opera House, was particularly enraptured by the incantation scene and mentioned it in her novel *The Last Man* (1826). In a letter to her friend Thomas Hogg, she wrote that it 'would have made Shelley scream with delight'<sup>863</sup>, well knowing her late husband's love for the supernatural and Gothic. The scene of Caspar's eventual demise at the end of the third act was equally impressive, although quicker and less elaborate:

*[ZAMIEL rises in a fiery car, and the back part of the stage becomes entirely illumined with crimson fire. ZAMIEL drags CASPAR into the car.]*

ZAM. SIX shall achieve—

SEVEN deceive.

*[ZAMIEL and CASPAR descend through the stage in flames of fire—the crimson hue disperses, and the forest view again becomes serene.]*

Arnold's *Der Freischütz* certainly fulfilled its high expectations, in one way or another: to the

<sup>863</sup> Bennet, Benny T. (ed.), *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 3 vols., vol. 1, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (1980), p. 450.

reviewer of *The New Monthly Magazine*, it was one of the greatest accomplishments of the illegitimate theatre, given that ‘[a] more spirited and a more successful was certainly never made by the Proprietor of a Summer Theatre’<sup>864</sup>. As a matter of fact, as late as the 1880s Michael Williams wrote that ‘old playgoers invariably associate *Der Freyschütz* with the Lyceum—whilst they rarely refer to the Lyceum, without reverting to the glories of *Der Freyschütz*’<sup>865</sup>. This in spite of the fact that things did not immediately go smoothly. As Henry Phillips (who played Rollo, a new character created for the purpose of singing Caspar's music<sup>866</sup>), recalled, at the premiere some technical issues during the performance of the complex incantation scene made the audience jeer<sup>867</sup>, but on the following night these difficulties were overcome and the opera ‘gained momentum’<sup>868</sup>, thus contradicting *The London Literary Gazette's* prediction that the opera ‘will never please the public or reward the proprietor’<sup>869</sup> as it had happened in Germany. The critic justified his claim on the ground that ‘the Germans are more easily satisfied than we are [...] our tastes are “wide as the Poles asunder”’<sup>870</sup>. Apparently, however, the tastes of the English were not so different from those of the Germans. This is why some commentators revived old arguments about German Gothic and expressed their dismay at the exceedingly German diabolism portrayed in *Der Freischütz: The Harmonicon* wrote that the opera is ‘as wild as the forests of the country that gave it birth, and as full of demoniacal horrors as a melo-dramatist of Deutschland could contrive’<sup>871</sup>, while *The World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons* asserted that ‘a greater specimen of stupidity and childish

<sup>864</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 12 (September 1824), p. 391.

<sup>865</sup> Williams, Michael (1883), pp. 141-2.

<sup>866</sup> ‘It is an old remark that English singers cannot act, and English actors cannot sing—therefore the German *Caspar* is split into two portions for the English stage, and *Caspar* acts and *Rollo* sings, the poor singer being made into an underling sort of accomplice to the master-villain *Caspar*’. *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, vol. 6 (1824), p. 385.

<sup>867</sup> ‘[I]t being the first night the owl's wings were stiff, and one only flapped when it screamed, so *the owl got hissed*. The next mishap arose from the skeleton horses and dogs, which stuck fast in the middle of the stage, and so *they got hissed*; the red fire was held too near the nose of Zamiel, and set him coughing, so *he got hissed*’. Phillips, Henry, *Musical and Personal Recollections During a Half a Century*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: Charles J. Skeet (1864), p. 86. The ultra-elaborate scenery and stage machinery of the Wolf's Glen episode faithfully adhered to the original conception of Weber, who was personally involved in the design of the scene and always had a very precise idea of how to manage its overwhelming supernaturalism: The composer was soon in lively dispute with the painter; the arrangements of the Wolf's Glen afforded subject for animated discussion. The spectral and fantastic visions, according to the views of the decorator, were only to be faintly indicated, as shadowed forth by a convulsion of the elements; Weber insisted upon a real, palpable, and unmistakable scene of horror. “Your intentions are too delicate,” he said, “for such a subject. They would be more fitting for Hamlet or Macbeth. What has my music to do with misty forms and grinning rocks? Give me my owl with flaming eyes, real fluttering bats; spare neither spectres or skeletons; and let the horrors go crescendo by every ball.” The painter's idea, however, that the wild hunt should grow, as it were, out of the thickly-gathering smoke of the fire, in which the balls were cast, he approved at once. Finally, the two artists came to a thorough understanding; and Weber was accustomed afterwards to declare, that his intentions had never been so comprehended as they had been by the painters and machinists of Berlin’. Weber, Max Maria von, *Carl Maria von Weber: The Life of an Artist*, trans. J. Palgrave Simpson, 2 vols., vol. 2, London: Chapman and Hall (1865), pp. 210-11.

<sup>868</sup> Fuhrmann, Christina (2015), p. 116.

<sup>869</sup> *The London Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* (24 July 1824), p. 477.

<sup>870</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>871</sup> *The Harmonicon, A Journal of Music*, vol. 2 (August 1824), p. 168.

non-sense never came under our notice<sup>872</sup>. *La Belle Assemblée* expressed resignation in respect of the supernatural overload characterising the play:

As to acting and language of *Der Freischütz*, they have totally given way to the *more important* circumstances of scenic horrors, which are managed with the greatest ability. The last scene of the second act presents a most appalling aspect: the war of elements, a chase of skeletons, the shrieks of owls and bats, and the whole animal kingdom of fabled monstrosity, in the most terrific action. If such pieces as *The Vampire* and *Frankenstein* are to be tolerated, *Der Freischütz* must be patronized; and, to say the truth, great cost has been expended upon it.<sup>873</sup>

Yet, whether appreciated by critics or not, *Der Freischütz* obtained unanimous consensus from London playgoers (including Mary Shelley herself), and soon other minor theatres immediately rushed to mount their own version of the opera, with more or less significant changes in the plot. On 30 August 1824, Astley's Amphitheatre presented J. H. Amherst's *Der Freischütz; or, The Seven Charmed Bullets*, mostly notable mainly for the presence of Andrew Ducrow's renowned horse troupe and a trained stag named Salamander. John Kerr's *Der Freischütz; or, Zamiel, the Spirit of the Forest* (West London Theatre, 1824) and Edward Fitzball's *Der Freischütz; or, The Demon of the Wolf's Glen, and The Seven Charmed Bullets* (Surrey, 1824) followed shortly afterwards. Unable to compete with the technical apparatus and musical expertise of the English Opera House, all these versions retained little or none of Weber's score and chose instead to emphasise the gruesome and sensational aspects of the source story, at the same time offering simpler plots, a clearer separation between good and evil and a more straightforward didactic rhetoric<sup>874</sup>. The main aim was to render the work more accessible to the working-class and lower-middle-class audiences who frequented the minor theatres. Mission accomplished, one could say: the Surrey version, described by Fitzball as a 'decided melodrama' in which 'not one note of Weber's music was introduced, except the Huntman's and Bridal chorusses', with an entirely original plot, ran for about 120 nights and was later revived in 1827, when Elliston became lessee of the Surrey a second time<sup>875</sup>. According to the review of *The Drama*,

The scenery was in many parts superior even to what we have witnessed at the Lyceum. The incantation scene was really introduced in a style of surpassing splendor: owls flapping their wings, serpents hissing in the air—shadows moving and every concomitant of terror and diabolism were summoned into requisition to give energy and effect to this awful and impressive scene.<sup>876</sup>

But what really marked a break with the past is that *Der Freischütz's* success at the minors was so

<sup>872</sup> *The World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons*, vol. 1 (September 1824), p. 134.

<sup>873</sup> *La Belle Assemblée; or, Court and Fashionable Magazine*, vol. 30 (August 1824), p. 87.

<sup>874</sup> Fuhrmann, Christina (2015), pp. 80-3.

<sup>875</sup> Fitzball, Edward, *Thirty-Five Years of a Dramatic Author's Life*, 2 vols., vol. 2, London: T. C. Newby (1859), pp. 177-80.

<sup>876</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 6 (September 1824), pp. 398-9.

massive to immediately induce both Drury Lane and Covent Garden to produce their own versions, in possibly the most shameless and barefaced attempt to closely follow their illegitimate competitors to date. On the one hand, the fact that the two patent theatres ‘pushed the opera in the same melodramatic direction as their minor theatre competitors’<sup>877</sup> constituted an implicit acknowledgement that they had lost their leading role in shaping the taste of English audiences. On the other, however, both theatres wished to take this opportunity to demonstrate that they were better equipped to convey the richness and complexity of Weber's music, thus asserting their undisputed superiority (as Christina Fuhrmann emphasises, ‘fidelity became a tool in theatrical competition’ and ‘[b]oth patent theatres stayed closer to Weber than previous adaptations’<sup>878</sup>). On 14 October, Covent Garden presented *Der Freischütz; or, the Black Huntsman of Bohemia* (later printed as *The Freyschütz; or, the Wild Huntsman of Bohemia*), with libretto adapted by experienced James Robinson Planché and music arranged by amateur dramatist and composer Barham John Livius. Livius, who had met Weber during his travels in Germany, sought to ‘preserve entire and uninjured the delicate and beautiful structure of [his] music’<sup>879</sup>. As for the libretto, the alterations were mostly aimed at further disambiguating the moral character of the original plot (even more thoroughly than was done at the minor theatres), as explained in Livius's prefatory remarks to the published text of the opera:

Various objections having been taken against the German drama, especially with reference to poetical justice, and to the moral, the author of this Opera has been induced to vary considerably from the original. In justification of the liberties he has taken, it may be observed, without referring to various other defects, that the hero of the German author is represented as of a feeble undecided character; half saint, half sinner; he is easily prevailed on to employ foul means to accomplish his purpose, and is timid only as to the process of procuring those means; he tampers with the devil in a sort of half-and-half manner, as if he would sell half his soul, and retain the other half to be saved upon. In the last act, he appears in the light of a condemned culprit; and although by an act of ill-merited grace, he is permitted to hope for the hand of his mistress, after a year's probation, yet the audience are left in doubt whether, though he gain his wife, he has not lost his soul, and they go away quite at a loss to determine whether he be ultimately to be saved or damned; or, indeed, whether he be worthy of either. Attempt has been made in the present Opera, to obviate this glaring defect, so far at least as was possible, in writing a drama under the trammels of music already composed. It has been endeavoured to describe the hero of the piece inflexible in virtue—firm in resisting temptation, and spurning all base and sinister means of obtaining success; his confidence on Providence remains unshaken, and his steadfastness and constancy meet with their merited reward.<sup>880</sup>

Besides, the character of Zamiel underwent a change intended to downplay the intense diabolic nature of the character (it should be remembered that, a few years earlier, the Dark Knight of the

<sup>877</sup> Fuhrmann, Christina (2015), p. 83.

<sup>878</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>879</sup> Livius, Barham, *The Freyschütz; or, the Wild Huntsman of Bohemia. A Romantic Opera, in Three Acts, altered from the German by Barham Livius, Esq.*, London: John Miller (1825), pp. vii.

<sup>880</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v-vi.

Forest, a fiend-like figure, had been completely removed from Charles Robert Maturin's tragedy *Bertram* at Drury Lane):

A veil of uncertainty has been thrown over the evil power invoked and he appears shrouded in the fanciful and picturesque superstition of "the Wild Huntsman," that favourite hero of the forest legends of Germany. This has been thought preferable to making him stalk plain Devil about the stage, as he does in most of the German theatres, prying through doors and windows, and popping his head out of brakes and bushes, like Peeping tom of Coventry.<sup>881</sup>

Great attention was of course devoted to the Wolf's Glen scene, an almost exact replica of that of the English Opera House, but with more powerful technical resources as well as Charles Farley's usual meticulous superintendence of special effects. The description of the Wolf's Glen at the beginning of the second act may give an idea of the superior quality of Covent Garden's scenery and machinery:

*The Wolf's Glen. A deep Ravine amongst the Mountains, the precipitous sides of which form the Wings, and from which spring here and there a few Firs; towards the front of the Stage, a hollow Oak; further back, a blighted Tree, with one branch extending nearly across the Stage, on which is perched a large white Owl. Other Birds of Prey are seen upon the other Trees and Points of the Rocks, and Bats are flitting about. At the back, a Waterfall is foaming over the Rocks, upon which a strong effect of Moonlight falls. The Moon itself is seen struggling amid dark and heavy Clouds.*<sup>882</sup>

The proper incantation is then accompanied by the usual parade of wild beasts, nocturnal birds, gigantic skeletons, inexplicable blue lights and preternatural atmospheric phenomena. However, a crucial change was introduced in the plot: it is Killian who enters the Wolf's Glen, while Wilhelm (Max) rejects any demonic aid to regain his shooting skills, preserving his melodramatic purity (and being later rewarded for his firmness of soul). The result did not disappoint the audience, repaying the expense of the production. *La Belle Assemblée* wrote that '[t]he incantation-scene is a picture at which even warlocks and gnomes might shrink astonished at man's ingenuity'<sup>883</sup>, while *The Drama* assured that

[t]he most effective scene [...] and the one in which Covent Garden sets at immeasurable distance all its minor competitors, was that which is termed the incantation scene. The fluttering of pinions, the moving of shadows, and the association of owls, ravens, and all birds and animals calculated to inspire terror, constituted, perhaps, the most perfectly repulsive display of diabolism ever exhibited on stage. The gradual darkening of the moon and the commencement of the storm in this scene is cleverly managed; and the tremendous crashes, as of rocks, or other immense bodies falling, produce an effect in all probability far beyond that which the devisers counted upon. The skeleton stag hunt in the air—the colossal skeleton of fire, the demons, dragons, serpents, toads, &c. &c. were all well versed in their respective parts, and consequently

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<sup>881</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vi-vii.

<sup>882</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>883</sup> *La Belle Assemblée, or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, no. 194 (November 1824), p. 221.

were most effective.<sup>884</sup>

The conclusion was more elaborate, with an especially ingenious pantomime scene in which Caspar falls into the clutches of the Wild Huntsman in spectacular fashion:

[Caspar] *rushes towards a group of Hunters, who are standing before the tree. They fly from him with horror—he staggers and supports himself by clinging to a projecting, withered branch. The stage darkens; the thunder rolls; the tree disappears; and the figure of the WILD HUNTSMAN is seen in its place, grasping CASPAR by the hand that seized the withered branch, which has become the arm of the Demon. A terrible crash of thunder follows; the HUNTSMAN disappears with CASPAR. The stage becomes rapidly light again, and the curtain falls upon a general picture.*<sup>885</sup>

Covent Garden's *Der Freischütz* proved to be something of a commercial windfall, running 52 nights during its first season and being frequently revived hereafter. The manager of the theatre, Charles Kemble, was so delighted with this result that in 1826 he decided to commission Weber himself to write a new opera for production there, *Oberon; or, The Elf King's Oath*, again with a libretto by Planché. Unfortunately, shortly after the premiere the composer died of tuberculosis, his already precarious health having been fatally undermined by the stress and pressure of producing the work (Planché called it 'the deathless work of a dying man'<sup>886</sup>). In a letter to Planché, Weber had confessed that he felt uncomfortable to adjust himself to the demands of English opera, which he perceived to be substantially different from German opera. This was due to the fact that, also at the patent theatres, opera was often a mere disguise for melodrama, the only genre that brought considerable revenue: as Planché admits in his autobiography, '[m]y great object was to land Weber safe amidst an unmusical public, and I therefore wrote a melodrama with songs, instead of an opera, such as would be required at the present day'<sup>887</sup>. In spite of the blatantly supernatural character of its plot, however, *Oberon* fell short in comparison with *Der Freischütz*, generating far less enthusiasm. The main reason might be that the enchanted fantasy world of *Oberon* held little appeal to an audience that longed for German Gothic horror: as *The New Monthly Magazine* wrote, '[t]he subject itself of the Freyschütz was more favourable [...] It had its supernatural agency too; but that supernatural agency was truly German'<sup>888</sup>.

<sup>884</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol 7 (October 1824), p. 46.

<sup>885</sup> Livius, Barham (1825), p. 55.

<sup>886</sup> Planché, James Robinson, vol. 1 (1872), p. 72. Weber had planned a full performance of *Der Freischütz* for 5 June 1826, but it never took place because he died precisely on that day.

<sup>887</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>888</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 18 (June 1826), p. 239. Planché himself wrote that '[n]othing but the Huntsman's Chorus and the diablerie in "Der Freischutz" saved that fine work from immediate condemnation in England'. Planché, James Robinson, vol. 1 (1872), p. 80. Moreover, *Oberon* was partially spoiled by the imprudent decision to hold a grand rehearsal open to the public the night before its premiere: 'Nothing could be more injudicious than this aristocratic preparative. All the world knows that the sight of a rehearsal is of all things the most direct contrivance for destroying all interest in the true representation: actors and actresses, in their every-day clothes, moving about in the strong light of the stage, and in the strong contrast of the high-coloured stage scenery, alternatively giving the

The last version to appear, on 10 November 1824, was that of Drury Lane. The manager was none other than Robert William Elliston, who five years earlier had crowned his dream of becoming manager of the theatre. Many perceived his appointment as the greatest encroachment of the illegitimate theatrical world into the legitimate one until that moment<sup>889</sup>. Critics put a magnifying glass on literally everything Elliston did, and *Der Freischütz* was no exception. But in spite of the fact that it was the last to be produced (also because the Examiner of Plays George Colman the Younger had objected to some passages considered inappropriate from a religious point of view<sup>890</sup>), this version was the most commercially successful, with 72 performances in the first season alone<sup>891</sup>, and 140 performances overall<sup>892</sup>. The libretto was prepared by George Soane, who re-wrote much of the dialogues, whereas Henry Rowley Bishop (who in 1842 would become the first British composer to be awarded a knighthood) newly arranged the music. The most interesting casting choice was to have O. Smith play *Zamiel*, defined by *The Theatrical Observer* ‘the *ne plus ultra* of devils’<sup>893</sup> (it is intriguing to note that the two most famous impersonators of Frankenstein's Creature, Thomas Porter Cooke and O. Smith, both played this role within a few months of each other). Inevitably, also in this version the true highlight was the casting of the magic bullets, which introduced some remarkable novelties, including a fleeting appearance of the Demon of the Hartz Mountain, another legendary monster of German folklore, which scene artist Clarkson Stanfield conceived as a gigantic figure that ‘rose to the whole height of the stage and formed a phantasma never surpassed in the history of dramatic mechanism’<sup>894</sup>.

*The lead begins to boil up and hiss, and sends forth a white green flame. The moon turns blood-red.*

*CASPAR casts the first ball, and says ONE! which is repeated by the echo. Thunder and lightning follow, and the fire shoots up in one broad pyramid of light.*

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idea of corpses and mendicants; generally forgetting their parts (a kind of stage etiquette on these occasions), and always going through their recitation without emphasis or action, the whole being, intentionally, of the least impressive nature possible. At this disastrous exhibition a number of persons of the highest rank in society and in literature were summoned to be present; the result was, beyond all question, a feeling of weariness, discontent, and disappointment. None of the music seemed striking; nothing of the drama seemed effective; the acting, of course, went for worse than nothing, and the scene-painter carried off the applause’. *The Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1 (May 1826), p. 535.

<sup>889</sup> As Jane Moody explains, ‘[i]n a variety of ways, Elliston's management marked a cultural and social watershed. The patrician, aristocratic world of patent management [...] was suddenly faced with the prospect of a lessee who had acquired his capital producing illegitimate drama on the Surrey side. Drury Lane was now in the hands of a watchmaker's son, a ruthless modern cultural entrepreneur’. Moody, Jane (2007), pp. 127-8.

<sup>890</sup> Fuhrmann, Christina (2015), p. 84.

<sup>891</sup> Genest, John, *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, 10 vols., vol. 9, Bath: Carrington (1832), p. 285.

<sup>892</sup> Henderson, Donald G. (2011), p. 111.

<sup>893</sup> *The Theatrical Observer* (21 May 1825), p. 154.

<sup>894</sup> Raymond, George, *Memoirs of Robert William Elliston, Comedian*, 2 vols., vol. 2, London: John Mortimer (1845), p. 389.

*He casts a second ball, saying TWO!—Echo as before. The moon is completely eclipsed; two fiery wheels roll over the scene, and various meteors shoot about in the air, crossing each other in every direction.*

*He casts a third ball, saying THREE! Echo as before. The Demon of Hartz Mountain appears in the distance. This is a gigantic figure, carrying in one hand a blazing pine tree; the whole scene changes to one dark-green hue.*

*He casts a fourth, saying FOUR! Echo as before. Flames burst out from all parts of the earth; the crack of whips, tramp of horses, groans and shouts of laughter are heard from the air and below the earth.*

*He casts the fifth ball, saying FIVE! Echo as before. The Wild Host rush [sic] through the air, and the whole scene changes to blood-red. Violent thunder.*

CAS. Horror!—The wild huntsmen! Stand firm, or we are lost! [...]  
We must go on! Woe!

*He pours the sixth ball, and the lightning strikes him. Echo repeats WOE! Every crag is crowded with figures of the dead in their shrouds, and appear as so many skeletons, which, after a moment, drop to pieces and disappear.*

CAS. (*in violent agitation.*) Help, Zamiel! Seven.

*He casts the seventh bullet, and echo repeats SEVEN! ADOLPH is flung to the earth; CASPAR rushes out of the circle, and catches hold of the blasted oak.*

CAS. Zamiel!

[*The Tree changes to ZAMIEL, who seizes CASPAR.*

ZAM. Here!

*A clock strikes ONE! Rocks are shivered, trees are torn up and set on fire. The cataract overflows, and meteors flit across the air.<sup>895</sup>*

Although not mentioned in the published text, the scene apparently also featured ‘an immense fiery serpent’ that ‘twist[ed] his tortuous form across the stage, followed by a flame-clade warrior’<sup>896</sup>. It was probably the version of *Der Freischütz* that leaned more decidedly toward grotesquerie and exaggeration, tempering ‘[t]he terror and delight of Burke's sublime’ with ‘an absurdity that would inform the works of the Surrealists of the twentieth century and beyond’<sup>897</sup>. Nevertheless, its supernatural machinery did not escape criticism. *The New Monthly Magazine* wrote that the incantation scene, in which ‘a cataract of real water acts the part of a torrent of fire, skeletons rise from the ground, and the whole stage is in terrific motion’, is ‘better conceived at Drury-Lane’ but more completely executed at Covent-Garden’ because ‘the intermediate horrors are tiresome and

<sup>895</sup> Soane, George, *Der Freischütz: A Romantic Opera, in Three Acts*, London: Simpkin & Marshall (1825), pp. 28-30.

<sup>896</sup> *The Times* (11 November 1824), p. 2.

<sup>897</sup> Barush, Kathryn R., ‘Painting the Scene’, in *The Oxford Book of Georgian Theatre 1737-1832*, ed. Julia Swindells and David David Francis Taylor, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2014), p. 282.

ineffective compared to those of Mr. Farley', whereas 'the monsters are better at Covent Garden; but Drury-Lane has, by far, the finer devil in the mysterious person of Mr. O Smith'<sup>898</sup>. In general, commentators were particularly hostile to the adaptations of *Der Freischütz* produced by the Royal theatres, expressing bewilderment at such unashamed melodramatic portrayals of German demonic horror on the two most prestigious national theatres. In a review of Covent Garden's *Der Freischütz*, *The Drama* once again addressed the irreparable divide between the public's tastes and critics' opinions:

this theatre was anxious to entertain the winter visitors of the metropolis with a piece of which its summer residents had manifested an unbounded approbation. The experiment has been decidedly successful. A fuller house than that of this evening we have rarely witnessed, and seldom noticed greater exertion on the part of the management to produce a piece with such full and effective support: *dare* we say we wish they had been exerted in a *better* cause?—We mean so far as *public taste* is concerned—for in this view of it, we really begin to murmur and to exercise that privilege of discontent, which, as Englishmen, we hold to be one of the chief *rights of man*. To confess the truth, we have no honest liking for the German Drama, whether in the shape of tragedy or opera; and whether the incidents are of this world or the world of romance, it may be, perhaps, that we are of a temperament that has no sort of sympathy with spectres of the night and *Black Huntsmen* of the Forest; or that our reason is too stubborn to submit to *all* monstrous demands that are made upon it; or that there is no correspondent chord in our bosom that vibrates with all these super-human attacks upon our sensibility. Be the cause what it may, such is the fact; we have an utter distaste to the modern theatricals of the German school, and we know of no one of its productions ever exhibited on the stage, that we could refer to, as abating our aversion one jot.<sup>899</sup>

In a similar vein, *The European Magazine* claimed that Drury Lane's *Der Freischütz* did not live up to the hype, causing disappointment and embarrassment, and harshly attacked Robert Elliston, held responsible for having brought the theatre to its lowest point ever in cultural authority and prestige:

It is really melancholy to observe the total incapacity which seems to pervade the entire management of this great establishment—on the boards of which Shakspeare once triumphed with unrivalled glory, over which the genius of Sheridan shed a brilliant lustre, and which the classical taste of Kemble resplendently adorned—when we reflect on the humiliating contrast which its present condition affords. Poor old Drury is fast declining, not only from the superiority it once held, for that has been gone long ago, but to a level below that of the minor theatres—making up for its poverty of intellect and its perverted taste, as well as it can, by tawdry pageants and tinsel attractions—sorry substitutes for wit and poetry! Since the large houses have encroached upon the prerogatives of the smaller—and that has been ever since the former have outgrown all reasonable dimensions—the number of regular play-goers has evidently diminished: they now seldom visit the theatre but upon particular occasions, when some striking novelty is presented. It is quite impossible for those who enter into the true spirit of the drama, who duly estimate the value of the stage, and who are capable of appreciating the benefits which this species of public amusement might be made the means of conferring, not to lament the change which has been effected in the character of our national theatres. The present lessee of Drury Lane has done more than any other man towards corrupting the public taste. He has introduced a system of quackery degrading to the stage, pernicious to its best interests, and

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<sup>898</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 12 (December 1824), p. 536.

<sup>899</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol 7 (October 1824), pp. 41-2.

destructive to the moral uses for which it was designed. *Der Freischütz*, after going the round for several months of all the theatres in London, has actually been brought out at Drury, when it is as stale as mackerel a month old, and when every body is almost sick of the very name of it! And *how* has it been brought out? We would not be too hard upon the establishment; but really after emblazoning a list of the principal performers engaged, and provoking the publication of a rival list—after boasting of vast preparations, and the Lord knows what—after delaying the opening of the theatre for weeks beyond the usual period, and raising expectations of the wonders to be performed, to the highest pitch—after all this, and a vast deal more, who would have imagined so complete an exposition of weakness, so bungling a specimen of management, as this theatre has presented. It opened with a grand horse-piece, pompously announced—as usual. Where is it now? *Der Freischütz* was next to astonish by the superiority of its representation over that at other theatres. It has been produced—and is, in almost every respect, inferior to the same performance at the English Opera and Covent Garden.<sup>900</sup>

*The London Magazine* simply dismissed both legitimate productions of *Der Freischütz* as inferior to that of the English Opera House, rebuking the widespread *Freischütz* fever:

We are beginning to get very sick of this very good music,—or rather of the fuss that is made about it by those who, under the pretence of doing honour to the genius of Weber, and of fostering the musical taste of the country, are paying only the most rigid attention to the galleries, and to the silver that is caught from the lovers of melo-dramatic effect. Every little and every large theatre in England, is now casting the magic balls, and hell is ranging from one extremity of the country to the other. The piece at Drury-lane, with very great pretensions, is no better than that at Covent-garden, and not half so good as the piece at the English Opera House, which had the merit of being the *first* production in every sense of the word. [...] The only thing in which the present opera surpasses any of its brothers, is in the noise, light, and fog, of its hell, and in the consumption of its gunpowder.<sup>901</sup>

Of course there was also the usual train of burlesques and travesties (‘Never there was a fitter subject for lampoon than this barbarous German production’<sup>902</sup>), notably *He Fries-it; or, The Seventh Charming Pancake*, advertised as ‘An entirely new demoniacal, caballistical, Germanical, inhumanical, frying-panical, horrible, incorrigible, hot-porridgible Melodrama including ‘crickets, bats, and balls, a real donkey race in the air, cats howling, skeletons cavorting, and an Irish hoolie’<sup>903</sup>, and *Der Freischütz Travestie* (1824) by Septimus Globus (pseudonym for T. A. Apel), which seems to have been staged in 1825 at the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, as a ‘Muse-sick-all and see-Nick Extravaganza in Three Acts’ entitled *Der Freyshot; or, Number Seven*. A sparkling satire of the exaggerated accumulation of horrors and grotesqueries of Weber's opera, the work features apparitions of several bizarre monsters, including ‘Frankenstein, the Cholera Morbus, the Ghost of the Property Tax and Mother Goose with rotten eggs’. The author also hilariously pokes fun at the enormous quantity of fire effects that usually accompanied the incantation scene on the London stage:

<sup>900</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 86 (November 1824), pp. 461-2.

<sup>901</sup> *The London Magazine*, vol. 10 (December 1824), pp. 647-8.

<sup>902</sup> *The Monthly Critical Gazette*, vol. 1 (November 1824), p. 573.

<sup>903</sup> Henderson, Donald G. (2011), p. 112.

*A Tree is rent asunder by a Fire-bolt, and burns to Fire-wood. A Fire Balloon in clouds of fire, discharges fire-balls.—Enter a Fire-Officer with fire-policy, and firemen in fire new jackets with a fire-engine—they take up the fire-plug—every thing takes fire, and the engine works fire-works.—Enter a bailiff inflamed, with a Fieri-facias.—Enter the Fire-master with his fire-stick, fire-brush, fire-pan, fire-shovel, and other fire-irons. The Torrent turns to a sea of fire, with a fire-ship. The rocks turn to fire-stone. Enter Fire-arms, firing. Enter St. Anthony's fire. Enter a Fire-eater.—Enter Watchmen, with rattles, calling 'Fire!' More fire comes in and none goes out.—Enter ZAMIEL in a sheet of fire!*<sup>904</sup>

Regardless of the remonstrations of purists of legitimate drama, both the Covent Garden and the Drury Lane *Der Freischütz* turned out to be tremendous cash cows, starting a new vogue for foreign opera. As *The Theatrical Observer* noted, 'the piece possesses many *magical* qualities, and amongst others, the singularly valuable one of transmitting the Managers *red fire*, &c. into *gold*'<sup>905</sup>. No wonder, therefore, that an obsessive search for the next *Der Freischütz* began. Weber's opera also prepared the ground for a whole new set of German stories which started to reach the stage beginning in the mid- to late 1820s. In particular, it contributed to generate new interest in one specifically German supernatural subject: the Faustus legend. Since the early eighteenth century, Faustus had frequently appeared in English pantomimes and harlequinades, where its demonic contents were comically toned down, but at the turn of the century it acquired new prominence as a serious Gothic myth. Pseudo-Faustian Gothic plays (Maturin's *Bertram*, Lewis's *The Wood Daemon*, the *Frankenstein* adaptations) were very popular. The 1820s marked then an unprecedented increase in public fascination with the legend, also thanks to *Der Freischütz*, which itself can be interpreted as '[a] folk-version of the Faust tale'<sup>906</sup>. A major impulse of course came from the several English translations of the first part of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragic drama *Faust* (1808) that appeared between 1820 and 1823, including the anonymous *Faustus: from the German of Goethe*, published in 1821 by Boosey and Sons and recently (and controversially) attributed by some scholars to Coleridge<sup>907</sup>. This edition probably formed the basis for Henry Milner's melodrama *Faustus; or, The Demon's Victim* (Coburg, 1824), whose text unfortunately has never been published, just like that of the anonymous pantomime *Dr. Faustus and the Black Demon; or, the Seven Fairies of the Grotto* (Adelphi, 1823). Both these works received scant attention from both the public and critics, but this was certainly not the case with *Valmondi; or, The Unhallowed Sepulchre*, a 'Romantic Burletta Spectacle' that opened at the Adelphi on 14 October 1824, when the rage for *Der Freischütz* was at its peak. The whole of the music was composed by George

<sup>904</sup> Globus, Steptimus, *Der Freischütz Travestie*, London: C. Baldwyn (1824), p. 34.

<sup>905</sup> *The Theatrical Observer* (21 May 1825), p. 154.

<sup>906</sup> Hoeveler, Diana Long (2010), p. 75.

<sup>907</sup> See Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Faustus, From the German of Goethe*, ed. Frederick Burwick and James C. McKusick, Oxford: Clarendon Press (2007).

Herbert Rodwell, although the conception of the piece should probably be credited to his brother James Thomas Rodwell, playwright and lessee of the Adelphi since 1819. The plot is based on Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), generally considered the last of the classic English Gothic novels, in which the eponymous anti-hero seals a Faustian bargain with the Devil in exchange for prolonged life. The novel had actually already been dramatised in 1823 by Benjamin West at the Coburg (and later revived at Sadler's Wells), but this version was surprisingly sober and ineffective if compared to the kind of melodramas usually staged there, the only true supernatural effect being the thunderbolt that strikes Melmoth at the end. *Valmondi*, instead, was a grandiloquent (and very expensive) horror show clearly indebted to recent productions of *Der Freischütz*, also for its extensive use of music. Described as a 'monstrous melo-dramatic abomination [...] written expressly up to the measure of the audience'<sup>908</sup>, this Gothic burletta was a very free adaptation in which 'the main incidents of "Melmoth," are necessarily violently compressed in order to condense a story occupying four volumes into an entertainment of three hours'<sup>909</sup>. It begins with the nobleman Kelmar seeking to release himself from the diabolic compact he has entered into with Malech, the Demon of Death, which has granted him immortality and boundless wealth, but at the cost of making him subject to whatever bodily or mental torture the Demon chooses to inflict on him. In order to do so, he must find someone who accepts to take his place. He eventually chooses Valmondi, a ruined gamester rendered desperate by the recent loss of his wife Matilda. At midnight they enter the graveyard of a ruined abbey (replete with the ghosts of murderers and their victims) and perform a black magic ritual so that Valmondi can seal the deal with Malech. This lengthy scene, termed as 'The Invocation', figuratively equivalent to the Wolf's Glen episode in *Der Freischütz*, concludes with Malech (aided by his demonic servant Zuric and other macabre apparitions) forcing Valmondi to prostrate himself:

KELMAR.

And now to guard me from all harm,  
I'll try the last most potent charm.  
Three drops of blood from murder'd babe,  
A venom'd snake—a mad dog's tooth—  
A hand of son, who slew his sire—  
A scorpion's sting—the gall of toad—  
A mother's heart who kill'd her child: —  
But still the charm I'd higher raise,  
The blood of guilt will make it blaze.

*Kelmar pierces his own arm with the dagger; the fire immediately blazes up.*

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<sup>908</sup> *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 40 (November 1852), p. 563.

<sup>909</sup> *The Portfolio*, vol. 4 (27 November 1824), p. 178.

And now I throw the charm is spun  
If Malech will, the deed is done.

VALMONDI.

Oh Kelmar! I can bare this no longer.

*A flight of ravens pass across.*

*Bats, owls, ravens, with many loathsome and terrific objects, are seen fleeting in the air, while the ground becomes covered with frogs, toads, serpents, and other reptiles.*

*After a tremendous crash, the unhallowed sepulchre bursts, and Malech is discovered. Kelmar crouches on the earth before him.*

CHORUS (*without*) [...]

*As Valmondi is going to bow, the noise in the air and beneath the earth becomes outrageous. The grave in the centre of the stage, opens, and Valmondi's wife appears warning him not to bow. Malech stamps, and Matilda's phantom sinks into the earth again. Valmondi falls.*

DEMONS (*without*).

Rejoice! rejoice and bless this hour,  
Valmondi bows to demon's pow'r:  
But more he'll ask, and more he'll yield—  
His blood is ours—the bond is seal'd:  
Then shout it through our mystic state,  
That Malech rules his future fate.

*Zuric appears bearing Valmondi's child. Valmondi tries to approach it, but is struck back by phantoms, who start from their graves. The windows of the abbey become illuminated, and shew most hideous apparitions. The birds and reptiles screech more wildly than ever. Valmondi, exhausted with terror, sinks on the earth.—The curtain falls.<sup>910</sup>*

Finally released from the compact, Kelmar dies, while Valmondi can now enjoy his recently acquired wealth. Malech, however, starts to persecute him, inducing him to commit evil actions, notably the seduction of Elvina, the daughter of the Baron of Hardenberg, already destined to marry her beloved Albert. The intervention of Malech ruins the wedding ceremony between the two and the blame falls on Valmondi, who is arrested by the Inquisition and condemned to death at the *auto-da-fé*. He is however rescued in extremis by Malech, who urges him to commit more terrible crimes: he murders Elvina's father, and just as he is about to kill Elvina herself, he is eventually carried off by the Demon 'amidst sheet of fire and the discordant yells and shrieks of demons hungry for their prey'<sup>911</sup>.

That the Adelphi management placed much hope in *Valmondi* is testified by the fact that a huge

<sup>910</sup> Rodwell, George Herbert, *Songs, Duets, Glees, Chorusses, Invocation, &c. in a New Romantic Burletta Spectacle, called Valmondi; or the Unhallowed Sepulchre!*, London: W. Glindon (1824), pp. 14-6.

<sup>911</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 7 (October 1824), p. 55.

amount of time and money was spent for the preparation of this piece, to the point that the opening of the season was delayed due to the alterations and improvements required in the theatre. The scenery, ‘re-decorated, in a most novel and expensive Style’, was ‘painted by several Artists, of the first-rate Talent’, while ‘every Care has been taken to render the machinery correct and imposing’ and ‘the dresses have been constructed with every Attention to Propriety and Splendour’; furthermore, the play featured ‘perhaps the most numerous and effective chorus ever heard on the English stage’ (several choristers of the Italian Opera House as well as other singing talents were engaged to increase the size of the Adelphi chorus)<sup>912</sup>. It is believed that it was due to the anxiety and fatigue in arranging for representation *Valmondi*, that James Rodwell contracted the ailment that eventually caused his death on 14 March 1825<sup>913</sup>. Last but not least, before the premiere the public was informed that ‘the Piece has been written with a view of at once gratifying the ruling Taste of the Day, and of conveying a Moral Lesson in the Shape of an amusing Spectacle’<sup>914</sup>. The critic of *The Portfolio* agreed with this remark and stated that ‘three hours of more rational and glowing delight can no where perhaps be spent in the presence of dramatic horrors, than in this splendid little theatre’<sup>915</sup>. *The Drama* acknowledged that ‘the story of this piece is still more horrible than that of “*Der Freischütz*”’ and eulogised James Villiers's interpretation of Malech, claiming that, ‘[c]ompared with this grim figure, the *Zamiel* of the *Freischütz*, with his red cloak and hat and

<sup>912</sup> Playbill of *Valmondi* in Rodwell, George Herbert (1824), page unnumbered. Other changes were described in *The Drama*: ‘A dress circle has been formed, and the whole has been entirely redecorated in rather a novel and tasteful manner. The gilt ornaments to the front of the boxes are laid on a ground composed of rose-colour and white stripes giving it a pleasing appearance of lightness and elegance. The private boxes are lined with rich crimson flock paper with silk draperies to correspond. The proscenium gives the appearance of a variegated fan, most richly embossed with burnished gold, and the scenery is equally superb. The orchestra has been enlarged sufficiently to contain a band of upwards of forty performers, it being the intention of the proprietors to spare no expense in the musical department; the chorusses being on the same scale as those of the Italian Opera: the other parts of the company have been equally attended to, as, in addition to the numerous favourites of last season, many new and approved performers have been added; in fact, nothing which could contribute either to the amusement or comfort of the audience has been neglected’. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>913</sup> Baker, H. Barton, ‘The Home of Melodrama’, in *London Society. An Illustrated Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature for the Hours of Relaxation*, vol. 47 (1885), p. 146. Rodwell really devoted all his energies to the play and can be ultimately considered a victim of the ultra-busy, overly competitive theatrical milieu of his era: ‘In consequence of the Opera of *Der Freischutz* becoming so popular, the Manager, in compliance with the prevailing taste of the town, produced the splendid piece of *Valmondi*: so attentive was Mr. Rodwell to the interests of the theatre, that his time was completely divided in decorating the house, altering the boxes, &c. and constructing the different scenes of *Valmondi*. During the whole of the mornings Mr. R. was seen on the scaffold, giving directions to the painters, carpenters, &c. until they went to dinner, when he used to retire to his closet and write a scene, scarcely allowing himself time for refreshment, he then again attended the mechanics till they quitted the theatre at six o'clock: the close of his evenings were then employed in study. [...] His intense study and abstemious disposition brought on a train of disorders that all the skill of his physicians could not counteract; and although so young and so very temperate, yet he was attacked with the gout, dropsy, extreme debility, and with delirious symptoms, all of which, combined, produced his dissolution’. Egan, Pierce, *Pierce Egan's Anecdotes (Original and Selected) of The Turf, the Chase, the Ring, and the Stage: The Whole Forming a Complete Panorama of the Sporting World, Uniting with it a Book of Reference and Entertaining Companion to the Lovers of British Sport*, London: Knight & Lacey (1827), pp. 40-1.

<sup>914</sup> Rodwell, George Herbert (1824), p. 4.

<sup>915</sup> *The Portfolio*, vol. 4 (27 November 1824), p. 178.

feathers, is but a *petit-maitre*, and the deep sepulchral tones of his voice add considerably to the terrific impression'. Also *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* recognised that *Valmondi* ranked especially high in the display of German supernatural horror:

Really, if this same charnel-house taste continues much longer, it will require some strength of nerves to enter a theatre; for all our playhouses seem to be contending which shall have the honour of producing the most terrific, ghastly, and appalling scenes; nor is the Adelphi by any means the most unsuccessful competitor for the prize. [...] The incantation scene was pushed to the very extremity of horror; the sudden appearance of the fiend at the nuptials is well managed; the procession of the *auto-da-fé* is a splendid and almost interminable pageant; and, as a climax to the preceding, the closing scene seemed one sheet of vivid fire. The music is, in many parts, appropriate and effective; and the piece is well acted throughout, especially the characters of Maleck (Villiers) and Valmondi (Power).<sup>916</sup>

Minor theatres were always one step ahead of their legitimate competitors, who now regarded them not only with a snobbish disdain but also with sincere admiration and envy for their ability to catch the prevailing taste of the times. This is eloquently demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that *Valmondi* provided an important showcase for Tyrone Power, the Irish actor who played the titular protagonist, giving his career a boost:

Crowded houses, and a well-filled exchequer, delighted the manager, while the actor, as the hero of this farrago, was too happy, for the moment, to win the public approbation, which he had long wooed in vain under a more legitimate form. Such are the anomalies of taste, and the eccentricities of fortune. This very Valmondi, which his own better sense repudiated, while enraptured audiences lavished their applause, proved in the sequel a valuable stepping-stone. It drew on him again the notice of Mr. Charles Kemble, and opened the road to Covent-Garden.<sup>917</sup>

The Faust mania continued during the following months. Finally, in 1825, a straightforward adaptation of Goethe's *Faust* was produced by George Soane, the librettist of the Drury Lane *Freischütz*, with James William Wallack (the Victor Frankenstein of Peake's *Presumption*) in the lead. Now almost forgotten, Soane was a prolific, above average dramatist as well as a leading name of the second wave of Gothic plays. He had actually 'immersed himself in all types of German Gothicism'<sup>918</sup>, starting his writing career with Gothic novels such as *The Eve of St. Marco* and *Knight Daemon and Robber Chief*, both published in 1812 and influenced by the works of Schiller and Goethe, among others. His first attempts at playwriting, the melodrama *The Peasant of Lucerne* (1815) and the tragedy *The Bohemian* (1817), never reached the stage. *The Drama* described the former as 'a blasted heath without a single flower to enliven its wildness or redeem its sterility' and the latter as 'a mass of blood and horror, bordering in some parts upon burlesque, and

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<sup>916</sup> *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (23 October 1824), p. 686.

<sup>917</sup> *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 40 (November 1852), pp. 563-4.

<sup>918</sup> Frank, Frederick S. (1981), p. 158.

thoroughly unfitted for the important purpose of public amusement'<sup>919</sup>. The first play by Soane to be accepted for performance was *The Innkeeper's Daughter* (Drury Lane, 1817), a domestic melodrama very different in tone from his previous efforts. In the preface of another melodrama, *Rob Roy, the Gregarach* (Drury Lane 1818), loosely based on Walter Scott's historical novel *Rob Roy* (1817), Soane defended himself against the charge of being a proponent of German horror, remarking that German drama actually had its roots precisely in English drama:

Some objections have been raised against the horrors of this piece, which have been styled German;—objectionable they may be, but certainly they are not German. It was my intention to have fully entered into this subject; to have proved from the example of the Grecian as well as the old English dramatists, that I have not trespassed beyond the proper limits, but illness of mind as well as of body make me, for the present, decline so arduous a discussion; yet, I would give one warning to the incautious reader who has been deceived for the last ten years by the cry of German horrors.—There are not twelve plays of horror amongst all their popular dramatists collected; and those twelve fall infinitely below the horror of “King Lear;” moreover, their school is founded on our old English dramatists, though after all, they are far inferior to either Webster or Marlow.<sup>920</sup>

Soane was proficient in Italian, French and German and built a strong reputation as scholarly translator of foreign works into English, often adapting them for the stage, such as in the case of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811). In 1822, Soane began a metrical translation of Goethe's *Faust* but completed only the first 576 lines, notwithstanding the positive feedback he had received by the German poet himself. In 1825, however, Soane returned to the text to adapt it into a three-act ‘Romantic Drama’ for Drury Lane simply titled *Faustus* (later rechristened *The Devil and Dr. Faustus*). This version of the story, written in collaboration with actor Daniel Terry, who stole the show in the role of Mephistophiles<sup>921</sup>, bears very faint resemblance to the original source (it is

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<sup>919</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 3 (June 1822), pp. 21-2.

<sup>920</sup> Soane, George, *Rob Roy, the Gregarach. A Romantic Drama, in Three Acts; as Performed at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane*, London: Richard White (1818), p. vi. The name of Soane, nevertheless, would be forever associated with the German Gothic, to the point that, in a review of Peake's *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, a critic declared that Shelley's novel would surely have been better dramatised by Soane: ‘Mr. PEAKE [...] may be a very smart person at the making up of little lively interludes and summer operas, but he is certainly not equal to themes so fearful as the story of *Frankenstein*. It is a magic circle where he must not tread; it is too bold a task for him to attempt the calling “spirits from the vasty deep,” or to dally with the forbidden secrets of the grave, or of summoning up from the gloomy and mysterious recesses of a dark and fitful imagination its fearful and appalling creations, it is beyond his genius to conceive, or his powers to comprehend. The only person fit for such task, as the dramatising “Frankenstein,” would have been GEORGE SOANE, from whose hands the whole would have come forth with if not increased effect, at least unaccompanied by those nonsensical frivolities, which are so unsparingly interlarded by Mr. PEAKE, and which greatly detract from the interest of the piece. It is a subject so well adapted for the Germanic temperament of Mr. SOANE, that we are surprised that he has never made use of it’. *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 5 (August 1823), pp. 32-3.

<sup>921</sup> This actually was a double role since O. Smith (*Der Freischütz's* Zamiel) played Satan in its original form at the beginning and end of the play, two brief cameos in which it appeared in ‘dusky angelic majesty’, whereas Daniel Terry played its human incarnation, Mephistophiles. *The Examiner* (23 May 1825), p. 321. *The Theatrical Observer* acknowledged that ‘[t]he short quaint manner in which Mr. Terry plays *Mephistophiles*, is irresistible, and well deserved the applause he met with [...] but *Mephistophiles* the second, is a thing totally unworthy the talents of that excellent devil, Mr. O. Smith’. *The Theatrical Observer* (21 May 1825).

mostly set in Italy and even features Giacomo Casanova among its *dramatis personae*). The twists of the plot are outweighed by the visual complexity of special effects, notably the complicated machinery that created the illusion of Mephistophiles's ability to teleport himself and Faustus to any place on the planet. This occurs for the first time between Scene I and Scene II of the first act, when Mephistophiles takes Faustus from the Drachenfels mountain to Venice in order that he might meet Adine, the Italian maiden he has seduced :

FAUS. Bear me to Venice—to Adine

MEPH. Bravo!

'Tis the high flood of carnival. I'faith!

We shall have sport, brave sport; your hand; hold fast.

Pass earth; pass sky;

Time stand; space fly;

'Till before us Venice lie.

*Music. The Scene suddenly changes to*

## SCENE II.

*[The preceding Scene is suddenly involved in wreck, and as the last cloud vanishes, FAUSTUS and MEPHISTOPHILES are discovered in the place of St. Marc, in Venice, FAUSTUS still holding by the demon, but sunk into a state of stupefaction. The scene is decorated with all the preparatory splendour and gaiety of the approaching carnival. Day is dawning, and as the strain of wild and fearful music (to which the change has taken place), ceases, the Demon speaks.*

MEPH. Rouse, thee, Faustus; thou'rt in Venice; look up!

Thy command, scarce uttered, is obey'd.

Own, now, the devil's a man of his word.

FAU. 'Tis real; I do not dream.

The powers, who control our mortal earth,

I do command.<sup>922</sup>

The play was reportedly crammed with scenic tricks of this kind. In another memorable 'dexterous piece of magic'<sup>923</sup> at the end of the second act, not mentioned in the play's published text but described by contemporary reviews, Faustus escapes from Count di Casanova's palace, which he had entered in pursuit of the virtuous Rosolia (cousin to Adine and daughter to Casanova), fooling the officers of the Inquisition 'by one of the most extraordinary and best executed illusions ever attempted in theatric representations, that of suddenly multiplying himself and his Famulus Wagner six-fold, and appearing at one and the same time in six different parts of the stage'<sup>924</sup>, eventually vanishing together with Mephistophiles and the poor lady. According to the reviewer of *The Literary Magnet*, 'this was an excellence hit, and came in good season, for without it, as the

<sup>922</sup> Soane, George, *Faustus: A Romantic Drama, in Three Acts*, London: John Miller (1825), pp. 4-5.

<sup>923</sup> *The Theatrical Observer* (21 May 1825).

<sup>924</sup> *The Literary Magnet of the Belles Lettres, Science, and the Fine Arts*, vol. 3 (1825), p. 143.

performance had till now hung excessively heavy, the play would have been, like its hero, inevitably damned'<sup>925</sup>, whereas that of *The Monthly Magazine* thought that '[t]he necromantic sleight of multiplying Faustus and his pupil Wagner, in the twinkling of an eye, six-fold, [...] was executed with an apparent verity of magic, that might (once) have entitled Mr. Wallack, the master of the spell, to a domicile in the dungeons of the Inquisition'<sup>926</sup>.

At the end of the play, Adine tries to save Faustus (who has murdered the King of Milan and assumed his throne) by making him repent of his actions, but to no avail. The corrupted alchemist is seized by the Devil and carried off into Pandemonium with the whole of his court:

FAUS. Then let the demon come.

[*The sun is escaped, and leaves the scene in utter darkness.*

*A Voice (without)*                    I come!  
ALL.                                        Ah, horror!

[*All rush out except ADINE. The building falls, and the demon appearing in clouds and fire, seizes FAUSTUS.*

FAUS. Adine—Adine—lost—lost—for ever lost!

*Music. She rushes towards him, when the earth opens before them, and vomits forth fire.*  
ADINE falls.<sup>927</sup>

Contrary to tradition, characters did not go *down* but *up* in Hell thanks to 'a species of car or go-cart'<sup>928</sup>. However, the special effects of this scene, which featured a 'profusion of brimstone and phosphorus, squibs and crackers'<sup>929</sup>, were criticised for their ineffectiveness and want of originality:

we cannot but say that we were rather disappointed in the scene of Faustus's palace, which is in many respects a very trivial and unmeaning composition: neither did that of Pandemonium exhibit any great effort of the imagination, while the fireworks reminded us more of Vauxhall than of Tartarus. Besides, one has seen these crackers and red flames over and over again, in *Don Giovanni* and other productions of that stamp; so that, really if our stage artists cannot strike out something more novel in their infernal regions, they had much better leave them to be conceived by the imagination:—if they cannot render them terrifying, it would be quite as well not to make them ridiculous.<sup>930</sup>

*The European Magazine* instead objected to the concept itself of the scene:

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<sup>925</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>926</sup> *The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register of Literature, Sciences, and the Belles-Lettres*, vol. 59 (June 1825), p. 461.

<sup>927</sup> Soane, George (1825), p. 59.

<sup>928</sup> *The Examiner* (23 May 1825), p. 321.

<sup>929</sup> *The Literary Magnet of the Belles Lettres, Science, and the Fine Arts*, vol. 3 (1825), p. 143.

<sup>930</sup> *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (21 May 1825), p. 335.

the catastrophe is strikingly faulty, inasmuch as not only Faustus himself is conveyed to the abode of his satanic majesty, but the whole party, the lord chamberlain, the courtiers, the maids of honour, the poor mad victim whom he had seduced, and in fact every person who is present at the expiration of the hour, are sent to the Devil without the slightest exception.<sup>931</sup>

As is evident from contemporary reviews, Soane's *Faustus* was to all intents and purposes perceived as a Gothic melodrama that tried to blend horror and humour with special effects galore but very little originality, resembling less Marlowe and Goethe's works on the same subject than *Der Freischütz* ('When shall we have done with *Der Freischütz*?—Music, action, fire, and smoke all *Der Freischütz*, *Der Freischütz* to the end of the chapter'<sup>932</sup>) and *Valmondi* itself:

The materials are gathered partly from the admirable play of Doctor Faustus, by Marlowe—partly from the mystical romance of Goethe; but more largely from a piece brought forward at the little theatre in the Strand, called Valmondi. Similar as, in some respects, it may be to these, it is without the deep and passionate intensity of thought—the rich and luxuriant poetry, of the old English dramatist, and the mystical interest that pervades the German romance, where the genii of the air, and the tenants of the earth, mingle with each other: but it has all the straining after effect—all the nursery bugbears—the common-place horrors of the *Adelphi* stage, borrowed as they are from the Terrific Register," and "Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales."<sup>933</sup>

*The European Magazine* blatantly stated that '[t]he author [...] has literally done nothing. He has thrown *Faustus* into a greater variety of situations than either Marlowe or Goethe has done; but the incidents have not the slightest novelty to recommend them, nor does the dialogue display the least pretensions to sentiment or wit'<sup>934</sup>. *La Belle Assemblée* called *Faustus* 'the silliest, most witless effusion that the patience of an audience was ever tired with', while *The Circulator of Useful Knowledge, Literature, Amusement, and General Information* pointed to the story's inappropriateness for modern times:

The new romantic drama produced last week at this theatre, though by no means destitute of merit, possesses not, we apprehend, sufficient stamen, either in plot or conduct, to maintain itself very long on the boards. The story, as familiar to our earlier years as it is wild and incredible in its nature, loses much of its interest, from the want of novelty. Besides, our knowledge of the popular ignorance from which the tale of the *Wirtemberg doctor* originated, is accompanied with a disgust inseparable from the witnessing any effort to perpetuate the mind's misinformation, and lead it through the paths of falsehood and darkness. By the ancient Greeks, such a narrative as that of *Doctor Faustus*, might have been received as a refined allegory, carrying with it a useful moral; but in these moral enlightened times, it can be considered only

<sup>931</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 87 (May 1825), p. 467.

<sup>932</sup> *The Theatrical Observer* (5 October 1825). In particular, *Faustus* shared with *Der Freischütz* an extensive, quasi-operatic use of music: the score was the joint production of Henry R. Bishop, Charles E. Horn and T. Cooke, except for the overture, taken straight from Weber's *Euryanthe* (1823). *The Literary Magnet* noted that '[t]he music [...] was one of the most barefaced plagiarisms we ever saw foisted on an audience. It was a mere echo of "Der Freyschutz" from beginning to end'. *The Literary Magnet of the Belles Lettres, Science, and the Fine Arts*, vol. 3 (1825) p. 144. Elliston did not miss the opportunity to have *Faustus* and *Der Freischütz* performed back to back on some occasions.

<sup>933</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>934</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, May 1825, vol. 87. p. 467.

as a senseless series of improbabilities, or rather impossibilities, founded on any thing but taste and rationality. Yet we are free to allow, that our own admirable Marlow, and the German Goethe, have not disdained to exercise their talents on the same subject; but even their authority is not sufficient so far to influence our judgment, as to reconcile us to the propriety of giving the *life, death, and descent into hell*, of *Doctor Faustus*, in stage representation [...] and we insist, that among the undramatized subjects, both in history and romance, we could point out several, which in many respects are much more eligible for stage adaptation, than the present.<sup>935</sup>

*The Examiner* even appealed to Charles Lamb's notion of the unstageability of the supernatural:

We believe it is to Mr. C. LAMB we owe an excellent essay upon the inadequacy of the stage, to deal with the more exquisite refinements of mind and the more ethereal [*sic*] creations of imagination. We never are more convinced of the fact, than when some complacent playwright seizes hold of a story like *Faust*, or even attempts to do his best with an Arabian tale. Reduced to the palpable, all the enchantment subsides, all the spirit evaporates, and in the worst of all possible senses, “nothing is but what is not.” The drama of GOETHE is neither representable, nor can be made so; so subtle and metaphysical indeed is it in its essence, the very attempt to visibly personify the characters in that extraordinary production must necessarily destroy the charm. Dealing with such elements, therefore, it is not surprising that Mr. TERRY and Mr. SOANE—the *Beaumont* and *Fletcher* on this occasion—have found them too volatile for common handling in what they call the Romance of *Faustus*.<sup>936</sup>

Daniel Terry's Mephistophiles was the only aspect of the play that obtained unanimous consensus from critics: *The Literary Magnet* ironically stated that ‘if the devil had not come to the assistance of the piece, the piece, we feel well assured, must have gone to the devil!’<sup>937</sup>. *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* wrote that ‘[t]his character was most admirably personated throughout by Terry: the cold malignant subtilty of the fiend, his sarcastic sneers, and the ironical tones of his voice—even his attitudes, gait, and attire, were all admirable’, adding that there was ‘a rich genuine grotesqueness about them that was truly delightful’<sup>938</sup>. The critic, however, observed that ‘[t]here are, in fact, but three characters,—Mephistophiles, Faustus, Adine; all the rest are people whom we see walk on and off without caring any more about them than we do about the personæ of the Carnival Ballet’<sup>939</sup>.

In a review of *Valmondi*, *The Drama* had expressed fear that ‘the town will be inundated for some time with German horrors in all shapes’<sup>940</sup>. This fear became reality, and extensive importations of all kinds of Gothic and supernatural stories were made from Germany in the following years, rapidly resulting in an unabated trend of melodramatic and pseudo-operatic adaptations. The English Opera House kept spearheading this trend by providing this kind of shows very regularly. On 25 July 1826, the house premiered *The Death Fetch; or, The Student of Göttingen*, an operatic

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<sup>935</sup> *The Circulator of Useful Knowledge, Literature, Amusement, and General Information* (28 May 1825), p. 349.

<sup>936</sup> *The Examiner* (23 May 1825), p. 321.

<sup>937</sup> *The Literary Magnet of the Belles Lettres, Science, and the Fine Arts*, vol. 3 (1825), p. 143.

<sup>938</sup> *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (21 May 1825), p. 335.

<sup>939</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>940</sup> *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. 7 (October 1824), p. 55.

romance by singer-composer Charles Edward Horn (who played Caspar in the Drury Lane *Freischütz*) for which John Baldwin Buckstone wrote the libretto. The piece had a great run and entered the stock repertoire; only three weeks after its debut, a melodrama on the same theme, penned by Henry Milner, was performed at the Coburg under the title of *The Death Fetch; or, The Fatal Warning*. The plot was inspired by the very old superstition of the Death Fetch, namely a spectral entity who takes on the identical appearance of a living person and appears to that person or to another, being generally understood to be an omen of impending death. The English public became acquainted with it thanks to John and Michael Banim's Gothic story 'The Fetches' from their 1825 collection *Tales by the O'Hara Family*. Although the superstition was Irish in origin, the play was set in Germany, where 'everything of the sort is sure to be quite at home'<sup>941</sup>, probably in order to explicitly link it to a tradition of commercially successful German/Gothic melodramas. Buckstone, however, saw not the terrific but the soul-stirring potential of this motif, as he explained in a note to the play:

The superstition of the DEATH-FETCH, so well known in Ireland and the northern parts of Europe, is one the most calculated [*sic*] to produce a powerful effect upon the feelings of any that have ever obtruded themselves on excited imagination—the supernatural appearance of the image of a beloved object confidently supposed to herald the approaching death of that object. This idea reciprocally entertained by two young persons strongly attached to each other, is certainly calculated as powerfully to awake the warmest sympathies, and arouse the most intense interest as any subject ever adopted for the ground work of a dramatic representation.<sup>942</sup>

As a matter of fact, *The Death Fetch* was an unconventionally unspectacular play that centred on a passionate and tormented love story, that between the student Ebert and Louisa Rothe, a young girl who lives near the University of Göttingen. They have two things in common: both are in very poor health and have a morbid interest in the mysterious and paranormal. Throughout the story they both happen to see the Death Fetch of each other and immediately interpret these occurrences as foreboding signs of an inevitable tragedy. In order to cure them, Dr. Von Sassen suggests that Louisa shall be told that all the spectral visits she experienced have been real and that Ebert has set off to Italy by the will of his father, and that Ebert shall be informed that Louisa and her family are annoyed by his conduct and hope not to see him again. Van Sassen takes then Ebert on tour to the Harz mountains ('the seat of all the romance of Germany since Goethe has made romance and mountains fashionable'<sup>943</sup>), but Louisa sees them on their way and follows them by clinging herself into a carriage. The lovers eventually meet on a ledge of rock and, after discussing what has

<sup>941</sup> *The Examiner* (30 July 1826), p. 487.

<sup>942</sup> Buckstone, John Baldwin, *The Death Fetch; or, The Shadowy Dead. A Romantic Drama, in Two Acts*, London: J. Dicks (1826), page unnumbered.

<sup>943</sup> *The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register of Literature, Sciences, and the Belles-Lettres*, vol. 2 (September 1825), p. 325.

recently happened to them, conclude that something supernatural has intervened, dying of fright in each other's arms. Instantly two spectral forms (their Fetches) are seen for the last time together through the mist and spray from a distant waterfall, ending the piece on a chilling note.

Far from indulging in blood-and-thunder effects, Horn and Buckstone's melodrama is filled with intimate emotionally charged moments, its success depending almost entirely on the intensity of Frances Maria Kelly's interpretation of the heroine. According to *The Examiner*, her acting 'was in the highest degree impressive, and caught the spirit of the author's imagination with inimitable skill', to the point that '[h]er first interview with the Fetch of her lover was absolutely overpowering; and the finest performance of the Ghost in Hamlet was never attended to with a more rapt attention'<sup>944</sup>. In this respect, some critics appreciated the English Opera House's attempt to try something different, since *The Death Fetch*

is by no means one of the most stirring and theatrical of ghost stories. It has neither the fire and blue flame of an ordinary ghost, nor the infernal dignity of Old Nick himself visiting "the glimpses of the moon," nor the substantial and horrible monstrosity of The Vampire. The Death-Fetch is a solitary and silent sort of visitor, associated only with thoughts of death, without any of the inspiring accompaniments of devilry or violence.<sup>945</sup>

Other commentators did not see any improvement: *The Monthly Magazine*, for example, wrote that *The Death Fetch* 'is one of those German horror stories, from which common-sense and natural feeling equally turn away', with the added warning that '[t]he stage should not be made the nursery of nonsense that would revolt any other nursery, nor a chapel of ease to the charnel-house'<sup>946</sup>. *The Times* and *The New Monthly Magazine*, instead, used their reviews of the play as pretexts for criticising the English Opera House's ambiguous position, wavering between legitimacy and illegitimacy, as well as its propensity towards subjects regarded as inappropriate for the public of a summer venue erected for a completely different purpose:

Considering that it is exceedingly difficult, through the medium of a dramatic entertainment, to impress the minds of an audience with those supernatural imaginings, which each individual may indulge in while reading a volume of the mysterious and wonderful, we think Mr. Benham [*sic*] has manifested considerable adroitness in adapting his novel to the stage. We think, at the same time, that his abilities might have been much better employed. The perpetuation of the idea of such absurd phantasies as fetches and fairies—witches and wizards—is not merely ridiculous, but it is mischievous. There was scarcely a child (and we observed many present) who last night witnessed the 'fetch' or *double* of the Gottingen student and his mistress, and who recollects the wild glare of Miss Kelly's eye, (fatuity itself, much less childhood, would have marked it,) that will not tremble and shudder when the servant withdraws the light from the resting-place of the infant. Such scenes cannot be useful to youth; and, leaving the skill of

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<sup>944</sup> *The Examiner* (30 July 1826), p. 487.

<sup>945</sup> *Galignani's Messenger* (2 August 1826).

<sup>946</sup> *The Monthly Magazine, or; British Register of Literature, Sciences, and the Belles-Lettres*, vol. 2 (September 1825), p. 325.

the actor out of the question, we know not how they can give pleasure to age. This theatre was ostensibly instituted as a sort of stay and support to legitimate ‘English Opera’; and we feel convinced that one well-written English opera, upon the model of the old school—that school so well described by general Burgoyne, in his preface to his own excellent work, ‘The Lord of the Manor’, would do more credit to the proprietor of this theatre, and bring more money to his treasury, than ‘a wilderness of *Frankensteins* and *Fetches*’.<sup>947</sup>

Although we are not very strait-laced in our dramatic creed, and exceedingly enjoy much which can scarcely be termed “legitimate,” we are a little concerned to perceive in the managers of the English Opera a hankering after vulgar terrors. “Frankenstein” was tolerable as a curiosity, and more than tolerable as reminding the audience of the original and striking romance from which it was taken; “Der Freischutz,” in which the devilry was merely subservient to the music, entitled its producers to the highest praise which taste, energy, and liberal expenditure can deserve; but a third piece, deriving all its interest from gross and absurd superstition, is too ungenial to the place and the season to pass without a word of remonstrance. There are hardly two things in the world more opposite than English opera and German melodrama; and as Mr. Arnold's present company are admirably adapted to the successful representation of the first, which is their business and our pleasure, we are sorry to see them employed in attempting the latter, which is neither. A gorgeous Midsummer evening is not the time “to talk of skulls and epitaphs and worms;” to listen to ghost stories, however well authenticated; or hold, even in thought, fearful dalliance with the world of shadows. Who can step out of the Strand, having just looked at the Surrey hills bathed in golden light, through the noble avenue of the grandest bridge in the world, and be cheated into believing that Mr. Archer, with the paint washed off his face, is the spectre of himself? Such sickly mockeries, hardly capable of affecting the nerves in November, stand exposed in the atmosphere of August, when, instead of peopling this bright and breathing world with dark fancies from the silent and peaceful resting-places of the dead, the imagination casts off “the burthen of the mystery of all this unintelligible world,” and delights to regard death itself as “a shadow thrown softly and lightly from a passing cloud.”<sup>948</sup>

*The New Monthly Magazine* also attacked the whole conception of the plot, especially its ending, and declares that without Kelly's tremendous performance the melodrama could have been a complete failure:

A more unmeaning superstition can scarcely be imagined; for, though the vision is called “a warning,” it is never seen by the only person whom it can possibly warn. [...] Now on what principle—even of the wildest romance (and a romance should have a principle as “a negro has a soul”)—does this tragical story proceed? To what end are the laws of Nature broken? For what purpose are these two young creatures condemned to die? The romance runs in a circle; the

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<sup>947</sup> *The Times* (26 July 1826).

<sup>948</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 18 (1826), p. 364. The review goes on by evoking Shakespeare, an unrivalled model as regards the representation of the supernatural: ‘It is, at least, doubtful whether any writer, gifted with less than Shakspearian power, can introduce the image of a supernatural being on the boards with genuine effect, in this practical and philosophical age. A spectre may still be (at least we hope so) a grand thing in a romance, read on a winter's evening, alone, or to a group of “the fair and innocent” by the fireside; but if brought palpably before our eyes, according to the announcement of the play-bills, amidst some thousand spectators, it can hardly awaken any sense but that of the ridiculous, unless it has such fearful words to utter as those which proceed from “the buried Majesty of Denmark,” making us all ear, and compelling us to forget the portly tenement in which the spirit of Mr. Pope or Mr. Egerton is enshrined. Even Shakspeare has only dared to interweave his magic cunningly among the threads of his story: he has never made it the staple of his web of life; but has given it credibility, by artfully interweaving it with human feelings, passions, and interests, which seem harmoniously to blend with its shades. This wise economy (ever the achievement of high art) has not been imitated by the author of “The Death Fetch,” which has its “beginning” in superstitious fears and theories; its “middle” in successive spectral visitations; and its “end” in the shocking death of its principal persons, in fulfilment of the horrible prophecy’. *Ibid.*

apparitions appear because the lovers are to die, and the lovers die because the apparitions appear. The spectres fulfil their own prophecy, and frighten their doubles into the grave; —and all this on the boards of the festive Lyceum, sacred to mirth and song, where nobody ought to die at all! The mechanism of the phantasmagoria is as well managed as possible; but it is employed wholesale: the Fetches become quite a part of Mr. Rothe's family, and are the common talk of the kitchen. Nothing carries all this off but the acting of Miss Kelly, who of course plays the romantic and fated damsel; and who sustains the most absurd scenes, by riveting the attention of the house to her own fearful efforts and agitations. [...] Except in the admiration which must follow her acting, as a piece of art, the drama can only interest children “who fear a painted devil;” for children it is surely a questionable lesson; and we trust that this will be the last spectral visitation to disturb that delicious music, and that gay nonsense, which befit the English Opera, and its season of “fantastic summer.”<sup>949</sup>

*The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* instead published a letter of a reader who wholeheartedly defended *The Death Fetch* and other similar ‘German’ productions, dismissing criticisms coming from diehard purists of legitimate instructive drama as exaggerations:

The town has lately been surprised by a drama with the astounding title of *The Death Fetch*; a drama which introduces us to a far different region to that which we inhabit. But what has surprised me more than even the drama itself, is the virulence with which some writers have opposed it, and with a pseudo-philosophical dogmatism declared, that *The Death Fetch* and all similar productions tend only to revive and to foster superstition. The term superstition is homonymous, and I almost despair of rightly understanding this appropriation of it. As far as I am able to judge of supernatural exhibitions, the only evil which can attend them, is the belief that the action portrayed is incident to our own existence; certainly such a belief would be most dreadful, and if it were concomitant to those exhibitions they should instantly be abolished. But it is not. Among the thousands that have seen *The Death Fetch*, I believe not one person is impressed with a conviction of its real existence; not one, but is assured that it is only a theatrical illusion. Several of my acquaintance have seen it; yet they are as reckless as ever. So far from living in constant dread of a fatidical phantom, I can see no abatement of their wonted cheerfulness and hilarity. I doubt not, but they can walk along a dark passage with perfect equanimity, and blow out the candle on getting in bed with their pristine fortitude—nay, that when in the state of consopiation, they can open their eyes without any apprehension of perceiving “shadowy dead.” These facts are quite sufficient to confute the assertion, that *The Death Fetch* has a baleful influence on the mind, and engenders horrible superstition. That it has rendered a few hypochondriacs more miserable, is very probable, but such wretched creatures should not witness the performance; one would think that the title of the piece would effectually deter them, and that they would not with unaccountable eagerness tempt the “hideous apparition.” If it has increasingly hypped them, themselves alone are to blame. Without entering on discussion, I would merely observe that some of the German dramas are a valuable acquisition to our stage. They open a truly original source of imaginative pleasure, and being contradistinguished from every other species of dramatic writing, to judge them by general rules, is fallacious. As to their moral tendency, I think them far less detrimental to society, than those “ingenious” productions, which merely exhibit the advantage of lying, and the success of imposture, and which would lead us to suppose that effrontery and deceit will invariably surmount the greatest difficulties.<sup>950</sup>

Although these comments seem to reflect polarised views, by this time the radical changes affecting

<sup>949</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 364-6. Similarly, as regards the denouement of the melodrama the critic of *Galignani's Messenger* noted, not without a certain irony, that the two lovers perish ‘for no other apparent reason than by way of showing that the warning of the *Death-Fetch* was a true one’. *Galignani's Messenger* (2 August 1826).

<sup>950</sup> *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, vol. 8 (12 August 1826), p. 85.

English theatre had become irreversible, and nothing could or would stop this process of commodification and commercialisation of the art of drama. It was in this context that the English Opera House could freely continue to delight the London public with its ‘fantastic summers’. The main melodramatic novelty of 1827 was *The Cornish Miners*, by George H. Rodwell (music) and Richard B. Peake (libretto), in which O. Smith played a maniac ‘who has gone distracted for the loss of his child, very strikingly, and bids fair to rival Mr. Cooke in the monster line’<sup>951</sup>. Initially paired with a revival of David Garrick's *Arthur and Emmeline* (Drury Lane, 1770), a masque adapted from John Dryden and Henry Purcell's *King Arthur; or, The British Worthy* (Dorset Garden Theatre, 1691) that also deals with Cornish matters, the play was conceived to ‘appeal to the local community of Cornish dockworkers and their families’<sup>952</sup>, this being a further proof of Arnold's efforts to attract people from all social classes. It included several frightening, almost Gothic scenes (especially those involving the mad Githian), being for this reason sometimes scheduled on the same evening with revivals of *The Vampire* and *Presumption*<sup>953</sup>. The following year it was the turn of another German/Gothic melodrama, *The Bottle Imp*, another product of the successful partnership between Rodwell and Peake which was performed for 44 nights and is now mainly remembered for having provided the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's tale of the same title (1891). During the autumn of 1828 the production moved to Covent Garden (where it was received with ‘the same degree of approbation with which it was formerly so highly honoured’<sup>954</sup>), as frequently happened with the English Opera House's most remunerative hits. *The Bottle Imp* was the dramatisation of the popular German legend of the devil who lives in a bottle and can fulfil all the wishes of whoever owns it. In return for these services, the soul of the person who possesses the imp becomes the property of the devil, and this can be undone only if the bottle is sold for a lesser sum than that for which it was bought. If, however, the owner dies bearing the bottle, his or her soul will go straight to Hell. The source apparently was an eponymous tale featured in *Popular Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations* (the 1823 anthology that included De Quincey's translation of Apel's *Der Freischütz*, among other texts), translated anonymously from Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's ‘Das Galgenmännlein’ (‘The Gallows Imp’, 1810). *The British Magazine* called it ‘one of the most funny, and, at the same time, most horrible stories in the whole collection’<sup>955</sup> and surely the melodrama defined by a critic as ‘the lightest piece of the kind we have ever seen’<sup>956</sup>, brilliantly

<sup>951</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, vol. 21 (August 1827), pp. 332-3.

<sup>952</sup> Burwick, Frederick, *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2015), p. 143.

<sup>953</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-4.

<sup>954</sup> *The Stage; or, The Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 1 (October 1828), p. 95.

<sup>955</sup> *The British Magazine*, vol. 1 (September 1823), p. 316.

<sup>956</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 24 (August 1828), p. 343. *The Gentleman's Magazine* interpreted the play as ‘a clever satire on the wine-bibber. [...] There is more wit and less horror in it than in the Freischütz, &c.’. *The*

conveyed both these sides. The protagonist is a young German merchant named Albert who arrives at Venice with his servant Willibald and purchases a bottle imp from the mischievous Spaniard Nicola, triggering a relentless series of misadventures. The bottle passes through several hands until Albert, with a trick, re-sells it to Nicola (now reduced to beggary and confined to the dungeons of the Inquisition for sorcery), who pays it with the smallest coin in the world. Unable to sell it at a lower price, the villain is eventually dragged down to hell amidst a grand shower of fire. The most funny scene undoubtedly is that in which Willibald learns the story of the bottle imp from a German demonic treatise and delivers a soliloquy on the subject of German folklore which is full of innuendos about recent theatrical productions:

WIL. Master is gone to enjoy himself. How am I to enjoy myself? (*takes out a book.*) A little reading to improve my mind, and a little eating to improve my body. (*takes out a large German sausage and knife.*) I'll have a slice and a chapter;—chop logic and sausage at the same time! [...] How unlike most other Germans I am; when they read they choose such romances as “The Fatal Skull and Cross Bones,” or “The Dead Men of the Pest;” but I have a more lively work to cheer my spirits, it is called “A Dissertation upon Devils,” by Mein Herr Ashtaroth Belpheghor Asmodeus. Dedicated (I suppose, by permission) to Belzebug. Written by some printer's devil, I'll be bound;—ha! ha! ha! It's very amusing. (*Reads.*) “Red Devils,” “Blue Devils,” “Zamiel,” “Mephistophilis,” “Demons,” “Incubusses,” “Fiends,” “Imps,” “Land Imps,” “Water Imps,” “Forest Imps,” “Bottle Imps”. Bottle Imps! what the devil are they? (*Reads.*) “Bottle Imps”! that must be a bottle of *spirits*. “Bottle Imps.” (*Reads.*) “Whoever possesses one of these little devils, enclosed in bottle, can command from it as much gold as he desires.” Come, that's worth thinking about; but what are the conditions? for, from the time of Dr. Faustus to the present day, these gentlemen always make their conditions. (*Reads.*) “In return for these services, should the possessor of the Bottle Imp die without having sold his bottle”—Oh! (*closes book.*) oh, what a condition! Bless me!—“he becomes the property of Old Scratch.”<sup>957</sup>

Needless to say, the part of the demonic imp was played by O. Smith, who ‘made the character satanic and devilish enough<sup>958</sup> by wearing a ‘tightly fitting skin dress, of a sea green, horns in the head, and demon's face, from the wrists to the hips a wide-spreading wing, extending or folding at pleasure’<sup>959</sup>. *The Gentleman's Magazine* noted that the imp ‘outdevils every devil of the stage’<sup>960</sup>. His appearances – ‘less absurd than can be supposed’ – were accompanied by an ‘exceedingly well managed’ diabolical machinery<sup>961</sup>, such as when he makes his first entrance on stage at the end of the first act amid smoke and blue-fire effects:

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*Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 98 (August 1828), p. 170.

<sup>957</sup> Peake, Richard Brinsley, *The Bottle Imp. A Melo-dramatic Romance, in Two Acts*, in *Acting National Drama*, ed. Benjamin Nottingham Webster, 18 vols., vol. 2, London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper (1838), pp. 7-8. Like Old Nick, Old Scratch is a nickname for the Devil. According to *The New Monthly Magazine*, ‘[v]ery droll it is to see [Willibald], with a volume of German romances in one hand and a German sausage in the other, seated on his portmanteau, and keeping a due balance between the flesh and the spirit, while he sups full of meat and of horror’. *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 24 (August 1828) p. 343.

<sup>958</sup> *Oxberry's Theatrical Inquisitor; or, Monthly Mirror of the Drama*, vol. 1 (July 1828), p. 204.

<sup>959</sup> Peake, Richard Brinsley (1838), page unnumbered.

<sup>960</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 98 (August 1828), p. 170.

<sup>961</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 24 (August 1828) p. 343.

ALB. This strange and uneasy sensation, I dread to seek my couch. (*bell tolls 2.*) 'Tis morn, perhaps my charmed talisman may add me to remove this dread depression. (*takes the BOTTLE IMP from under his robe, and places it on the table.*) Sprite, fiend, whate'er thou art, I invoke thee to preserve my health, to give me balmy sleep. (*music, ALBERT reclines on the bed.*) No, the hope of repose is vain; demon, demon, aid me; (*gets to couch, R.; lights down; wild strains of music; the discordant voice of the BOTTLE IMP is heard.*)

Albert, Albert, thou prayest in vain;  
Prepare thee, now for eternal pain  
No herb that grows the pangs of death can heal.  
I joy—for that thou art mine, I feel.

ALB. Horror.

BOT. IMP. Behold! (*music; blue fire; a column of smoke arises from the bottle; which smoke gradually assumes the form of a large demon; it disappears from the curtain, and is immediately seen by the side of ALBERT, leaning over the couch.*)

ALB. Ah! what art thou?

IMP. Thy slave.<sup>962</sup>

Samuel Arnold even received a special letter from 'Hell' meant to be a whimsical praise of O. Smith's demonic talents:

RESPECTED SIR,

A letter from our agent at Crockford's has thrown our realms into perfect consternation. It has been intimated to us, that some suspected fugitive from our world, has, in contempt of our authority, to the scandal of our character, and, in violation of his oath, never to divulge the secrets of his prison house, been suborned by the managers of the English Opera House, to assume a variety of damnable forms, and to exhibit certain devilish propensities, under the name of the diabolical Mr. O. SMITH; we dispatched our beloved minister Asmodeus, with a few trusty myrmidons, to examine into the truth of this, and bring the offender to infernal justice. The representation of *The Bottle Imp* was chosen; and, the indignation of our friends was aroused at the idea of one of their fraternity being confined in what appeared to be a tin cannister. [...] Soon they beheld a personage being about him all the characteristics of our infernal tribe; one, from his lofty height, supposed him to be of the originally fallen; another, that he was a "blue devil;" a third, from his sepulchral voice, that he was the "devil incarnate;" but all pronounced him "Devil!" and hastened to seize him as their property, when lo! on entering his room, we perceived a gentleman, who had cast his skin, and who, as he cleared the torrents of perspiration from his brow, was loudly reproving the managers for placing him in a situation that required the powers of a salamander, he confessed himself the demon of the bottle; but disclaimed all connexion with us, or wish to join us at present. We were anxious to give this explanation, that we might express our veneration for his unearthly talent, and our thanks for the popularity he has given to our realms.

Believe me, your sincere friend,  
THE DEVIL.<sup>963</sup>

The most flattering review of *The Bottle Imp* appeared in *The Metropolitan*, where a critic praised Peake's originality and recourse to humour as a means of downplaying and, to an extent, moralising the use of the supernatural:

This author is famous for the choice of subjects, which, to an inexperienced mind do not appear

<sup>962</sup> Peake, Richard Brinsley (1838), p. 15.

<sup>963</sup> Quoted in *The Stage; or Theatrical Inquisitor*, vol. 1 (October 1828), pp. 115-6.

dramatic; indeed, we doubt whether the most experienced of our playwrights would have ventured on such subjects as “Frankenstein,” or the “Bottle Imp.” Peake, however, saw their dramatic capabilities, and has rendered them highly interesting and most completely successful on the stage. He has, too, unerring act in the introduction of those comic characters by which the horrors of his subject are relieved; and we confess, we think we perceive a deep moral in the attempt to lessen the effect of these superstitions, the influences of which are not yet quite exploded from real life. [...] we again recommend our other playwrights to imitate Peake and be original.<sup>964</sup>

In 1829, James Robinson Planché came full circle by reviving the vampire motif and translating Wilhelm August Wohlbruck's libretto of Heinrich August Marschner's *Schaueroper* (‘horror opera’) *Der Vampyr* (Leipzig, 1828) for the English Opera House. In this play, Planché restored the original Hungarian setting of the vampire superstition, ‘as he had originally wanted to do in his 1820 *Vampire*’, and reportedly did extensive research on the costumes and traditions of Eastern Europe in order to ‘provide a sense of authenticity to this extraordinary story’<sup>965</sup>. Planché later wrote that this production gave him the opportunity to ‘treat the same subject in a manner much more satisfactory to [himself]’<sup>966</sup>. *Der Vampyr*, which opened on 25 August 1829, retained its original German title (‘as if the plain English “Vampire” were not sufficiently expressive’<sup>967</sup>), confirming how by this time theatres had no shame whatsoever in declaring their full adherence to Teutonic supernaturalism. As a matter of fact, the plot principally diverts from the 1820 melodrama in that it is ostensibly indebted to the Faustus myth, with the vampire (played by Henry Phillips) being the vassal of the Prince of Evil or *Vampyrmeister* (‘Vampire Master’, impersonated of course by O. Smith). who allows him to remain another month on Earth, provided that he stains his altar with the blood of a virgin. As *The Quarterly Musical Magazine* remarked, however, in *Der Vampyr* the Faustian myth assumed a more terrible connotation:

The story of *Der Vampyr*, the last that has been produced of the species, excites in our minds, we must own, nothing short of disgust. [...] This tale scarcely presents one feature that can awaken the sympathies of an audience. Faust, which it most resembles, contains characters that raise at once admiration and pity, but in *Der Vampyr* the incident upon which the whole is founded, is capable of exciting only the strongest physical disgust, and this feeling is kept alive by the continual presence of the unearthly being himself, and the descriptions which he is made to give

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<sup>964</sup> *The Metropolitan*, vol. 2 (September 1831) p. 25.

<sup>965</sup> Senf, Carol A., *The Vampire In Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press (1988), p. 41. Planché attention to historico-geographical accuracy would frequently emerge throughout his career, starting from 1823, when he designed the costumes for a Covent Garden revival of Shakespeare's *King John*, the first truly antiquarian production of this kind. In this regard, Planché championed the new trend for historically accurate *mise-en-scène*, making it a commercial value. For example, in his one-act extravaganza *Blue beard* (Royal Olympic Theatre, 1839), a close parody of the plot of George Colman The Younger's 1798 melodrama on the same subject, Planché brought the Bluebeard legend back to its original Breton roots ‘[i]n accordance [...] with the laudable spirit of critical enquiry and antiquarian research which distinguishes the present era’. Dance, Charles, and Planché, James Robertson, Prefatory note to *Blue Beard*, London: Thomas Hailes Lacy (1839), unnumbered page.

<sup>966</sup> Planché, James Robinson, vol. 1 (1872), p. 40.

<sup>967</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 27 (October 1829), pp. 431-2.

of the horrors of his existence, nor does he possess the usual allurements that in some degree conceal the deformity of vice, for he is described in the text as “a pale and wan man,” who, like the rattle-snake, kills by the supernatural fascinations of his “leaden eye.”<sup>968</sup>

Of course the underlying preoccupation was that the popularisation of such subjects through recent German operas could only ‘stimulate the grosser passions of the mountaineers of that country, whence they principally derive their origin’<sup>969</sup>, and give the ultimate boost to the process of cultural deprivation affecting the English stage. However, these arguments had lost the power they had some decades earlier and now appeared more and more detached from the theatrical reality of the 1820s. At some point, *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* admitted that ‘[w]e ourselves should prefer a good picture in a poor frame to a bad picture in a brilliant one. The town, however, thinks otherwise; and we suppose, therefore, that managers act very wisely in humouring this taste’<sup>970</sup>. Such affirmations sounded like a death knell for the idea itself of legitimate theatre.

#### 4.5 Edward Fitzball and the collapse of the patent monopoly

A note in the Webster's acting edition of *The Bottle Imp* informed readers that ‘[t]he Lyrical portion of this Melo-drama, is from the pen of the author's old friend, Mr. FITZBALL (with a few exceptions)’<sup>971</sup>. This should not come as a surprise to anyone for Edward Fitzball was not only the most prominent hack dramatist of the first half of the nineteenth century but also an excellent songwriter. He was frequently called upon to write or collaborate on new melodramas and operas, especially those of a more visionary kind. Actually, throughout his career Fitzball fully embraced the Gothic, the fantastic and the supernatural (a recent biographer called him ‘the melodramatist of the macabre’<sup>972</sup>), striking the right balance between creative and commercial concerns perhaps like no other author of his age. As George Daniel put it, Fitzball's ‘wits, fits, and fancies, in dramatic *diablerie*, have contributed to make night hideous, to the infinite delight of an intellectual public, who think the day's meal incomplete until they have supped full with horrors’<sup>973</sup>. Fitzball took his first steps as a dramatist at the Theatre Royal, Norwich, where his tragedies *Edwin, Heir of Cressingham* (1817) and *Bertha; or, The Assassin of Istria* (1819) and his melodrama *Giraldi; or, The Ruffian of Prague* (1819) were first performed. Due to the positive reception of these works, in

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<sup>968</sup> *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, vol. 10 (1828), pp. 58-9.

<sup>969</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508.

<sup>970</sup> *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (21 May 1825), p. 334.

<sup>971</sup> Peake, Richard Brinsley (1838), p. 5.

<sup>972</sup> Clifton, Larry Stephen, *The Terrible Fitzball: The Melodramatist of the Macabre*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press (1993).

<sup>973</sup> Daniel, George, ‘Remarks’ to *The Flying Dutchman, or, The Phantom Ship: A Nautical Drama In Three Acts, by Edward Fitzball*, in *Cumberland's Minor Theatre*, 17 vols, vol. 2, London: John Cumberland (1829), p. 5.

1820 Fitzball submitted his melodrama *Edda; or, The Hermit of Warkworth*, based on Thomas Percy's famous translation of the Icelandic *Edda* (1770), to Thomas Dibdin, then manager of the Surrey, where it was played and well received (*The European Magazine* wrote that the play's merits and reception 'warrant [Fitzball's] cultivation of a talent which he appears to possess in no common degree'<sup>974</sup>). The marked success of another, more domestic melodrama, *The Innkeeper of Abbeville; or, The Ostler and the Robber*, performed in 1822 at both the Norwich and the Surrey, prompted him to leave his home and occupation in Norwich and move definitively to London, where his plays for the minor theatres earned him the high esteem of critics and a devoted audience. In this period, he frequently engaged with supernatural melodrama, such as the already mentioned *Thalaba the Destroyer* (Coburg, 1822), and *Der Freischütz; or, The Demon of the Wolf's Glen, and The Seven Charmed Bullets* (Surrey, 1824), or the very unfortunate *The Burning Bridge; or, The Spectre of the Lake* (Surrey, 1824)<sup>975</sup>. In 1824, another decisive moment of his career, Fitzball produced *The Floating Beacon; or, The Norwegian*, the first in a series of nautical melodramas, a genre (spearheaded four years earlier by William Thomas Moncrieff's *The Shipwreck of the Medusa; or, The Fatal Raft*) that became his speciality. *The Floating Beacon* ran for 140 nights, while the next year his follow-up *The Pilot; or, A Tale of the Sea*, a burletta adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's eponymous historical novel (1824) with which Fitzball inaugurated his engagement at the Adelphi Theatre, reached 200 performances, with T. P. Cooke playing one of his best parts, the tipsy sailor Long Tom Coffin<sup>976</sup>. Fitzball's greatest triumph in nautical melodrama, however, was *The Flying Dutchman; or, the Phantom Ship* (Adelphi, 1826), in which he fused the maritime themes with the Gothic-Romantic trope of the Faustian pact. Fitzball himself wrote of his play that it 'was not by any means behind even *Frankenstein*, or *Der Freschütz* [*sic*] itself in horrors. The subject was a very fresh one, though it had so much of salt water in its composition'<sup>977</sup>. The music was composed by G. H. Rodwell, who had already collaborated with Fitzball in *The Pilot*; as Michael V. Pisani explains, the two became 'famous with audiences throughout Europe and the Americas largely for their unique amalgamation of the "gothic" and the "nautical" melodrama', establishing 'the first

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<sup>974</sup> *The European Magazine, and London Review*, vol. 77 (June 1820), p. 535.

<sup>975</sup> On the night of the play's premiere there were two accidents that destroyed all stage illusion. One of these ruined the eventual appearance of the Spectre of the Lake: 'At the conclusion of the play a female spectre had to rise from a lake surrounded by a mist, an effect in these primitive times produced by lamps placed behind gauzes, and surrounding the figure. When the machine had nearly mounted to the flies, one of the gauzes took fire, and the spectre's dress was presently in a blaze. The spectre, a man, strove hard to get rid of his gear, and in doing so discovered to the audience that he was a Scotch-man with kilt, &c., on, being cast for the part of Waverley, which was to follow. The uproarious mirth that followed this discovery overbore any feeling for the actor's serious position, and in his fright he jumped from a great height to the stage, and seriously injured himself'. Fitzgerald, Percy, *The World Behind the Scenes*, London: Chatto and Windus (1881), p. 77.

<sup>976</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Eleventh edition, 29 vols., vol. 10 (1911), p. 441.

<sup>977</sup> Fitzball, Edward, vol. 1 (1859), pp. 168-9.

long-standing British playwright-composer team of nineteenth-century popular drama<sup>978</sup>.

The seafaring legend of the Flying Dutchman dates back to the sixteenth century, perfectly embodying ‘the unsettled feeling of the epoch caused by the discovery of a new faith by the Germans, and of a new world by the Spaniards’<sup>979</sup>, and was endlessly re-told and elaborated ever since. The protagonist is a Dutch sea captain named Vanderdecken, a sort of maritime Wandering Jew, who swore to round Africa's Cape of Good Hope through a raging storm (against the advice of his sailors) even if it took him until Judgement Day. Unfortunately, the Devil, hearing this oath, accepted it in its most literal meaning, condemning the blasphemer to sail the high seas eternally and aimlessly as a punishment for his crime. Moreover, legend has it that when the Flying Dutchman ghost ship meets another vessel, its crew approaches it in a boat and hopelessly try to have letters delivered to their loved ones who have been long dead. The letters must be rejected or otherwise some terrible misfortune will befall the ship. The story had had little diffusion in England before May 1821, when *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published an anonymous tale entitled ‘Vanderdecken's Message Home; or, the Tenacity of Natural Affection’, attributed to Canadian writer John Howison. Fitzball used this tale as the basis for his melodrama (borrowing the name Vanderdecken, among other things), which ‘furnishe[d] conclusive evidence’ of the fact that ‘our national taste is [...] *marvellously* inclined to the *supernatural*’<sup>980</sup>. In his version, the undead Vanderdecken is a supernatural monster much in the same vein as the Vampire (both, for example, have the habit of appearing and disappearing in a flash through a trapdoor), and it is no coincidence that the role was played by T. P. Cooke himself, who obtained great praise in spite of his initial reluctance to accept the role<sup>981</sup>. Just like for *The Vampire*, Cooke was credited for having superintended the ‘melodramatic business’ of the play, confirming the fact that his talents went beyond acting<sup>982</sup>. However, he eventually became ‘so disgusted’<sup>983</sup> with the part of Vanderdecken that, in 1829, he abandoned it in favour of his rival O. Smith, probably the only one worthy of

<sup>978</sup> Pisani, Michael V. (2014), pp. 86-7.

<sup>979</sup> *The Musical World*, vol. 55 (30 June 1877), p. 449.

<sup>980</sup> Daniel, George (1829), p. 5.

<sup>981</sup> Fitzball humorously recalled that ‘[d]uring the rehearsals of “The Flying Dutchman,” Cooke walked through his part like a person who submits, with noble resolution, to a martyrdom. On the first night's representation, the tremendous applause he met with, being in that part a great actor, in spite of himself, convinced thoroughly that he had made a slight mistake. Accordingly, the next morning at rehearsal, with a very good and right-minded feeling, in which he was never deficient, he deputed his wife, a most excellent lady, who, though not a theatrical, happened to be present, to offer me some acknowledgement for the coolness he had displayed: with a sweet smile she took up the prompter's pen, a plumed pen, and advancing towards me with it in her hand, like a palm branch, said she had come with a flag of truce from Cooke, that he thought, from Vanderdecken being a silent part, it would prove effective. My reply was—“When the refractory child smiles, the father not only forgives, but forgets everything.” I need not add that Cooke's hand and mine were quickly linked together, and a firmer friend I do not possess. His acting of Vanderdecken had in it a sublimity of awful mystery, which those who have seen him in the part can alone comprehend’. Fitzball, Edward, vol. 1 (1859), pp. 170-1.

<sup>982</sup> Wischhusen, Stephen (1975), p. 25.

<sup>983</sup> Brereton, Austin, *Henry Irving: A Biographical Sketch*, London: David Bogue (1883), p. 63.



*her wand.*] And now go seek a bride to share thy stormy fate. Rockalda's fatal death-book make her sign, and become my slave. She's thine, and thou shalt renew thy present respite when another century has expired; but, remember, on earth, as the shadow of man is silent, so must thou be. Voice is denied thee 'till thy return; lest, in thy treachery, thou disclose to human ear the secrets of the deep.

[MUSIC.—*Vanderdecken rises and expostulates by action.*

ROC. Thou urgest in vain—speak, and the charm is broken; and, at the third appearance of thy phantom ship, thy fate lies buried in the dark depths of the ocean for ever.

AIR.—ROCKALDA. [...]

[*Thunder—Vanderdecken takes up his death-flag and retraces his steps amid the waves—he ascends in blue fire as the scene closes.*<sup>986</sup>

Fitzball uses the trope of the undeliverable letters in the last scene of the first act, when Vanderdecken, pretending to be a drowning seaman in need of help, tries to hand over a pack of letters to the crew of a passing ship, being however recognised as the infamous Dutch ghost:

TOM. There, drink, poor fellow—Heaven help him.

[MUSIC.—*Vanderdecken trembles and drops the flask at the word “Heaven”—the Crew start, and exclaim, “Vanderdecken! Vanderdecken!”—Vanderdecken recovers himself suddenly, and, taking out letters, offers them to Tom Willis and the rest, who all reject them in apparent alarm—by this time, Peter has got seated on a keg, R.*

TOM. No, no, your letters are sealed with dead lead. Letters to your friends, indeed: if reports speak true, your friends have been stowed in the last hold long before now.

[MUSIC.—*Vanderdecken implies, “No, no”—he takes a letter from his bosom, tied with blue riband—Kisses it—weeps—points to the superscription—opens it—presses it to his breast—shows it to the crew—then wildly tenders its answer, sealed with green wax, to Tom Willis.*

TOM. [*Reads without touching it: “To Miss Lestelle Vanhelm, who lives in the second street, Stancen Yacht Quay, Amsterdam.”*] Why, to my certain knowledge, no such person lives there; the street was pulled down sixty years since, and a large church now stands in its place.

PET. [*Rises, and advances next to Vanderdecken*] Bag my books, what's that I hear—Miss Lestelle Vanhelm—why, that's my wife as is to be. I'm now going to the Cape on purpose to marry her. Sailors, when I arrive, I invite you all to the wedding—plenty of grog, and all that—ah! you may stare! [*To Vanderdecken.*] Look here, here's the licence, and here's dad's letter of introduction—look here [*To Willis.*] “L-i-c-e” [*Spelling each letter.*]—there, you read.

[MUSIC.—*Vanderdecken, with a malicious smile, takes the letter—reads it with a start—conceals it, and offers his own in exchange, which Peter is going to take, when Tom Willis pulls him back.*

TOM. (R.) What the devil are you about?

PET. (R. C.) What the devil are you about, lugging one so.

TOM. Touch one of them bits of paper, and we sink into Davy Jones's locker like a shot.

PET. Oh, give me my letter!

[*The Sailors seize Peter, who faints in their arms, R.*

TOM. Slew him taught there—and you [*To Vanderdecken.*] quit the ship, can't ye.

[*Vanderdecken offers his letter more wildly, which they still refuse—he threatens, and places the letter on the deck.*

PET. I will have my letter.

MUSIC.—*Peter attempts to snatch the letter, when it explodes—a sailor is about to size*

<sup>986</sup> All quotations from the text are from Fitzball, Edward, *The Flying Dutchman; or, The Phantom Ship*, in *The Hour of One: Six Gothic Melodramas*, ed. Stephen Wischhusen, London: Gordon Fraser (1975).

*Vanderdecken, who eludes his grasp, and vanishes through the deck—Tom Willis fires on R., Von Swiggs on L., a Sailor falls dead on the deck—Vanderdecken, with a demoniac laugh, rises from the sea in blue fire, amidst violent thunder—at that instant the Phantom Ship appears in the sky behind—Vanderdecken and the Crew in consternation exclaim “Ah! Vanderdecken! Vanderdecken!” as the drop hastily falls.*

As a part of the deal, Rockalda grants Vanderdecken one day each century to claim a bride to accompany him in his death journey (provided he respects an oath of silence). This aspect obviously aligns the character with the Vampire, ‘although Vanderdecken must keep silent, virtually ensuring an abduction rather than a seduction’<sup>987</sup>. His chosen victim is Lestelle Vanhelm (Miss Boden, also the heroine in *Valmondi*), niece to former sea captain Peppercoal (Daniel Terry), whom Vanderdecken sees as a reincarnation of his deceased spouse. He kidnaps her right under the nose of her lover, a young sea officer named Mowdrey, in a thrilling scene at the end of the second act in which the spectral Captain carries out the abduction by embracing the poor girl with a sort of mantle of invisibility given to him by Rockalda:

MOW. Lestelle! Dearest Lestelle!

LES. Now assist me.

[MUSIC.—*She descends into Mowdrey's arms—Vanderdecken, who is invisible to Mowdrey, comes behind, and, crossing to L., touches Lestelle.*

LES. (C.) How is this? A sudden chillness rushes through my veins—I faint—I die! Ah, Mowdrey, see, that horrid spectre!—support me.

[*Swoons in Mowdrey's arm.*

MOW. (R. C.) Lestelle, Lestelle! All here I behold—the tree, the fortress—nothing more. Ah, this cold hand—her bosom, too, no longer palpitates. I dare not call for aid—the water—in the hollow of my hand.—

[MUSIC.—*He supports Lestelle in his arms to a bank, R. S. E., and hurries towards the water, L.*

U. E.—*in the meantime, Vanderdecken covers her with his mantle, and Lestelle vanishes.—Exit Vanderdecken, R. S. E.*

MOW. [*Returning.*] Lestelle! my love, my life! my—horror!—lost, lost! Help, help!

[*Falls.*

[*Storm.—A mist begins to rise, through which Vanderdecken is seen crossing the sea in an open boat with Lestelle, from L. U. E.—the storm rages violently—the boat is dashed about upon the waves—it sinks suddenly with Vanderdecken and Lestelle—the PHANTOM SHIP appears (a la phantasmagorie) in a peal of thunder.—The stage and audience part of the Theatre in total darkness.*

The episode had two authentically memorable stage tricks. According to Fitzball's own account, the scene of Lestelle's magical abduction took a great effort of imagination:

when Mrs. Fitzwilliam had to vanish from a bank, a great consultation took place on the stage, as to the *how*? When I found no one could accomplish it, not even the *master* carpenter, I requested that worthy to cut a slit across the canvas, through which she slipped under a certain light—not blue fire—and so great and startling was the disappearance, that the people, almost in consternation, rose in the pit to look for her. And take notice that the greatest effects are always

<sup>987</sup> Burwick, Frederick, and Powell, Manushag N., *British Pirates in Print and Performance*, New York: Palgrave (2015), p. 52.

produced by the simplest means, as they are in *Nature*.<sup>988</sup>

Intriguingly, the stunning image of the phantom ship was created through a magic lantern projection, the first recorded use of this technology in a regular theatrical play. The scene could have easily been part of one of the many phantasmagoria shows in London given that the projectionist who created the spectral ship actually was Henry Langdon Childe, a former scene painter for famous phantasmagorist Paul de Philipstahl<sup>989</sup>. Furthermore, Gabriela Cruz has noted that ‘[i]n the theater, as in the novella, the vision was preceded by the sound of distant thunder and sudden darkness—the elements of acoustic saturation and visual inhibition that habitually prepared audiences for a display of phantasmagoria’<sup>990</sup>. In an ultimate twist of irony, a techno-Gothic ghost-making machine created for the ostensible purpose of demystifying the supernatural (as a ‘recreational application of rationality’, to use Cruz’s words<sup>991</sup>) was now used to actually reinforce the illusion of its reality, therefore completely reversing its function. In his memoirs, Fitzball explained how he created this never-before-seen effect recalling a dialogue he had had with Daniel Terry:

“But of what would you compose it, sir?”

“A shadow” laughing incredulously.

“Yes. Purchase a few yards of union, (a sort of glazed calico,) darken the scene by turning off the gas, then, while your invisible chorus, rendered invisible by the darkness, sing their corale [*sic*], draw off the flats, and Mr. Child [*sic*], a gentleman that I can recommend to you, will throw, with his magic lantern, on the invisible union, a better phantom ship than all the ship carpenters in Woolwich Dockyard could build, with Peter the Great to assist them.”

Terry looked amazed—*convinced*. Child was sent for. The result is known.<sup>992</sup>

It was thanks to pieces such as *The Flying Dutchman* that the Adelphi became renowned in this period as a ‘bazaar of fun, horror, and strong scenic effects’<sup>993</sup> and that Fitzball earned the well-deserved nickname of ‘Blue Fire’ Fitzball, which he seemed not to dislike at all<sup>994</sup>. As a matter of fact, the play seems to encompass three or four decades of theatrical exploration of the Gothic and the supernatural mode. Burwick has listed all the most outstanding (techno-)supernatural special effects created to convey Vanderdecken’s illusionist feats in his pursue of Lastelle:

<sup>988</sup> Fitzball, Edward, vol. 1 (1859), p. 14.

<sup>989</sup> Altick, Richard D., *The Shows of London*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1978), p. 219. Childe invented and perfected the technique of the dissolving views, a device which allowed to slowly superimpose an image from one projector upon another, usually by gently reducing the projection light behind one while increasing the other, thus creating an effect similar to future cinematic dissolves.

<sup>990</sup> Cruz, Gabriela (2020), p. 111.

<sup>991</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>992</sup> Fitzball, Edward, vol. 1 (1859), pp. 13-14.

<sup>993</sup> *The Athenæum* (13 October 1832), p. 668.

<sup>994</sup> ‘The merit of this fine scientific chemical preparation, at which the ignorant smile, are not simply applied to effects on the stage, but are used in the greatest emergencies, as signals at sea, especially during fogs, and have saved not only many valuable lives, but many vessels from destruction. Blue-fire is a discovery well qualified in the pages of humanity’. Fitzball, Edward, vol. 2 (1859), p. 381.

the house light in the Adelphi was provided by a gas luster hanging from the ceiling. The gas footlights were in a float that could be raised and lowered to darken the stage and to exchange colored lens. The stage was equipped with a “devil’s trap” that allowed for Vanderdecken’s magical appearances and disappearances; there was also a concealed panel through which he could vanish. His costume – “Green old-fashioned dress, with white sugar loaf buttons – belt – high boots – old English hat – red feather” – would on appropriate occasions be bathed in the blue light from a Clegg lamp in the fly gallery, so that he seemed engulfed in a ghostly aura. For his magical gestures, he palmed a small mirror, which would reflect an offstage beam, so that a colored flash of light seemed to dart from his hand. This trick is used with the exploding letter at the end of Act 1. When he changed his own portrait into the likeness of Von Bummel (II.ii), the electric bolt that seemed to pass from his finger tip to the painting was actually the arc of a concealed voltaic pile. The long arc appeared when Vanderdecken slowly separated a positive carbon electrode from the negative electrode attached to the frame. Further trickery is involved when the painting of *The Flying Dutchman* becomes illumined with crimson fire as an omen that Vanderdecken approaches. The sliding wings depicted the two interior chambers: when they were withdrawn the stage seemed to open into an expanse of moonlit ocean. The rearstage dropcloth was backlit by a magic lantern and the illusion of the crashing and receding waves was accomplished by moving the lantern forward and backward on its trolley tracks.<sup>995</sup>

But *The Flying Dutchman* was more than a mere display of the state-of-the art machinery and spectacular stage tricks at the disposal of the Adelphi. The play was also a source of boundless joy and *fun*, following the Gothic tradition of counterbalancing horror and humour, a mix often criticised in other melodramas of the same kind, but here handled masterfully<sup>996</sup>. There were many innuendos and thinly veiled references to current affairs and events: as Agnes Andeweg has argued, for example, *The Flying Dutchman*, ‘performed a few years after British settlement policy, stages the encounter between the old and the new colonial order, the British and the Dutch, attempting to mark clear distinction between the two [...] by gothicizing the Dutch, and relegating them to the past’, or by giving them a mostly negative connotation<sup>997</sup>. As a matter of fact, the plot is quite uncharacteristically set in the present day, not in an often deliberately vague and fictionalized Gothic past. Using a little imagination, one might infer that the play also incorporates a not-so-subtle subtext about the current situation of theatre in general. This becomes really manifest in the very last scene, when Vanderdecken is about to sacrifice Lestelle but is interrupted by the arrival of Mowdrey. The ghostly Dutch easily subdues his rival (he had been rendered invulnerable by

<sup>995</sup> Burwick, Frederick (2009), pp. 62-3.

<sup>996</sup> George Daniel wrote that Fitzball ‘has wisely catered for all palates: for those whose taste inclines them to the terrible, he has provided thunder and lightning in abundance, thrown in a grotesque dance of water imps, and served up a death’s head (not according to the old adage, stewed in a lantern), but picturesquely mounted on a black flag, and garnished with cross bones; while to the laughing souls, to whom—“A merry jest is better far / Than sharp lampoon or witty libel,” he presents a bill of fare irresistibly comic. We may, therefore, congratulate the “*violent spirits*” of the present day on the production of a piece where mirth and moonshine—murder and merriment—fire and fun, are so happily blended!’. Daniel, George (1829), p. 6.

<sup>997</sup> Andeweg, Agnes, ‘Slavery as a National Crime: Defining Britishness in Encounters with the Flying Dutchman’, in *Haunted Europe: Continental Connections in English-Language Gothic Writing, Film and New Media*, ed. Michael Newton and Evert Jan van Leeuwen, New York and London: Routledge (2020), p. 63. In this respect, it is important to remember that the British government had annexed the Dutch colony of the Cape of Good Hope as early as 1795. Then, in the early 1820s, 5,000 emigrants were sent there to establish a permanent settlement.

Rockalda at the beginning of the play), but just as he is about to kill him, he accidentally breaks the oath of silence by speaking a curse and thus violates the terms of his agreement with Rockalda, meaning that the spell that resurrected him is broken and he is instantly condemned to his dreadful fate for another century. The metaphor is rather clear: the ban on speech mirrors the legal restriction (technically still in force) that prevented illegitimate theatres such as the Adelphi to present the spoken word, seen to all intents and purposes as an unjust curse:

*Interior of the Devil's Cave—an overhanging Rock, L. S. E., leading into the Cave—a grotesque Rock in the centre, resembling an antique table, and a massy book, closed.*

[MUSIC.—Lestelle discovered, supporting herself against the rock, L. S. E., in an attitude of distress.—Vanderdecken, R., comes down with a torch in his hand—he gazes at Lestelle, puts down the torch, and points to the magic book.

LES. Thine, earthly or unearthly! never! Terrible being, thou mayst indeed trample on my mortal frame, but the soul of Lestelle is far above thy malice.

[MUSIC.—He is angry—he takes her hand, and, approaching the book, it flies open and displays hieroglyphics—Lestelle screams, and sinks at the base of the rock—footsteps heard without—Vanderdecken listens.

*Enter Mowdrey, from the rock, L. S. E.*

MOW. [Calling.] Lestelle! I am here—you are safe! Lestelle! [He descends, and sees Vanderdecken.] Ah, wretch, is it you? Tremble!

[MUSIC.—Vanderdecken laughs, then draws a sword—a terrific fight—Mowdrey, after repeatedly stabbing his opponent in vain, is taken up by Vanderdecken, and furiously thrown down.

VAN. Mortal, die! [Thunder.] Ah, what have I done! [He displays bodily again.] I have spoken!

[MUSIC.] The spell which admits my stay on earth is destroyed with my silence. I must begone to my phantom ship again, to the deep and howling waters.

After an uninterrupted run of 87 performances during its first season (a near record for the time), *The Flying Dutchman* continued to enjoy huge success all over the English-speaking world during the following years, cementing its position as one of the public's absolute favourites<sup>998</sup>. The fact that, initially, every manager wanted a piece of its fame sometimes led to bitter controversy: Robert Elliston, for example, planned to stage the play during his second managerial tenure at the Surrey, but the director of the Adelphi, Frederick Henry Yates, applied for an injunction to stop him, believing that he possessed exclusive rights to the work. Elliston then commissioned playwright Douglas Jerrold to write another version of the play, which opened on 19 September 1829 under the title of *The Flying Dutchman; or, the Spectral Ship*, with T. P. Cooke as Vanderdecken. Meanwhile the injunction was refused (because it was proved that Cooke himself had purchased a copy of the melodrama from Fitzball for the purpose of performing it), and both versions, Fitzball's and Jerrold's, co-existed at the Surrey for some weeks, with the latter however paling in comparison to the former<sup>999</sup>. The new version was nevertheless published with a preface by Elliston himself, who

<sup>998</sup> Pisani, Michael V. (2014), pp. 88-9. Fitzball wrote that the melodrama had been acted 'at the least ten thousand nights' by the end of the 1850s. Fitzball, Edward, vol. 1 (1859), p. 15.

<sup>999</sup> See Burwick, Frederick *Playing to the Crowd: London Popular Theatre, 1780–1830*, Basingstoke: Palgrave

gave a detailed account of this heated legal dispute. The plot is basically identical; the most curious change is that the figure of Rockalda is replaced with Æolus, Zephyrus and other wind gods from Greek mythology<sup>1000</sup>. Imitations (more or less obvious) were also frequent: Charles A. Somers's *The Spectre Hulk; or, The Haunted Bay*, for example, was performed at the Surrey at the beginning of 1827 and included ghostly images projected through a magic lantern. The vogue for spectral pirates and haunted ships continued during the 1830s with other two playwrights who provided the minor stages with several nautical Gothic pieces, namely John Thomas Haines, author of *The Haunted Hulk; or, The Rebel's Heir* (Coburg, 1824), *The Wizard Skiff; or, The Pirate Boy* (Coburg, 1831; Surrey, 1832), *The Demon Ship; or, The Buccaneers of Malta* (Sadler's Wells, 1834), *The Phantom Ship; or, The Demon Pilot* (Surrey, 1839) and *The Wizard of the Wave; or, The Ship of the Avenger* (Victoria, 1840), and William Bayle Bernard, author of *Rip van Winkle; or, The Helmsman of the Spirit Crew* (Adelphi, 1832) and *The Haunted Hulk; or, The Rising of the Spring Tide* (1833). Moreover, *The Flying Dutchman* was also a massive influence for two of the greatest German Romantic authors, Heinrich Heine and Richard Wagner, who would personally reinterpret the legend respectively in the novel fragment *Aus den Memoiren des Herren von Schnabelewopski* ('From the Memoirs of Herr Von Schnabelewopski', 1833) and in the operatic masterpiece *Der fliegende Holländer* ('The Flying Dutchman', Dresden Opera House, 1843), drawing several elements from Fitzball's melodrama<sup>1001</sup>.

*The Flying Dutchman* gave an incredible boost to Fitzball's reputation, and he was now expected to score one big hit after the other. As he himself recalled,

[t]he long run of my pieces became injurious to me with managers in the end, as every one expected a drama of mine *must* go at least a hundred nights, and if it only reached forty or fifty, they looked upon it as a dreadful failure, and would ask me how it happened that I did not write them so good a piece as the Pilot, as if to insure a long run existed within myself; whereas a man might as well attempt to command the weather, as to command the success, or run, of any

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Macmillan (2011), pp. 184-6.

<sup>1000</sup> See Elliston, Robert, *The Flying Dutchman; or the Spectral Ship*, in *Richardson's New Minor Drama*, 4 vols., vol. 3, London: Thomas Richardson (1830).

<sup>1001</sup> 'The piece was running at the Adelphi Theatre about the time of Heine's visit to London, and nothing is more probable than that the German poet, who conscientiously studied the English stage, should have seen it. For the circumstance of the Dutchman's taking a wife, Heine would, in that case, be indebted to Fitzball, in whose piece there also occurs an old picture connected with the story. It would thus be most interesting to note how Heine developed out of these trivial indications his noble idea of the Dutchman's deliverance by the love of a woman. Wagner, on his part, has heightened the dramatic pathos of the fable by making his hero symbolise a profound philosophical idea—thus raising the conception of his character from the sphere of a popular tale into that of artistic ignorance, out of fancy into imagination. The pitiful figure of Mynheer Vanderdecken becomes an embodiment of life-weariness longing for death and forgetfulness of individual pain and struggle (which is the same) of existence. Still, we must acknowledge, it would seem that the modest germs of these grand ideas were furnished to both the German poet and composer by the English playwright'. Hueffer, Francis, *Half a Century of Music in England. 1837-1887. Essays Towards a History*, London: Chapman and Hall (1889), pp. 36-7. Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* did not have its London premiere until 1870, when it was given in Italian at Drury Lane as *L' Olandese dannato*. The first English production was instead put on six years later at the Lyceum by the Carl Rosa Opera Company.

dramatic work whatever.<sup>1002</sup>

In this period he also began to undertake engagements at the Royal theatres while continuing to write for the minors. After the total failure of his legitimate theatre debut, the crime melodrama *Father and Son; or, The Rock of La Charbonniere* (Covent Garden, 1825), condemned as ‘one of the most silly and disgusting affairs which has been seen for a long time, [...] unworthy of even the Coburg Theatre’<sup>1003</sup>, Fitzball made recourse to his great forte, German/Gothic supernaturalism, and in 1829 offered to Covent Garden *The Devil's Elixir; or, The Shadowless Man*, a ‘Musical Romance’ previously rejected by Drury Lane. Charles Kemble, manager of Covent Garden, instead expressed interest in seeing the play performed at his theatre since he was rather jealous that a similar melodrama, *The Bottle Imp*, had been the trump card of the English Opera House season<sup>1004</sup>. The piece – a ‘pungent morality play in the Faustian tradition’<sup>1005</sup> – was a melodramatic concoction of E. T. A. Hoffmann's novel *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (1816, translated in 1824 as *The Devil's Elixir*), Adalbert von Chamisso's tale *Peter Schlemihls Wundersame Geschichte* (translated in 1823 as *Peter Schlemihls*) and even a bit of *Macbeth*, ‘[t]he ingredients of which are mingled in a dramatic cauldron of no ordinary potency’<sup>1006</sup>. As often was the case with melodramas of this kind, the most outstanding scene is the opening one, an infernal vision in which the King of Shadows and his demons wake up the shadowless phantom Gortzburg<sup>1007</sup> from the 100-year slumber to which St. Anthony had condemned him for having offered him his soul-intoxicating elixir:

*A Circular Cavern opening to the Sky, which appears moonlit, but stormy, with passing Clouds—a Rock of Crystal, R., reflecting the hues of a small flame, which burns, L. C,—over the fire hangs a cruise, containing the inscription “Elixir.”*

MUSIC.—*The SHADOW KING discovered near the cruise, and two Imps blowing the fire with bellows, on which are magic characters.*

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<sup>1002</sup> Fitzball, Edward, vol. 1 (1859), pp. 169-70.

<sup>1003</sup> *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review*, vol. 2 (4 March 1825), p. 359. The bad reception of *Father and Son* came as a fierce disappointment to Fitzball since the Examiner of Plays himself, George Colman the Younger, had publicly praised the work.

<sup>1004</sup> Fitzball devotes several pages to the production history of the play. See Fitzball, Edward, vol. 1 (1859), pp. 174-80.

<sup>1005</sup> Clifton, Larry Stephen (1993), p. 76. According to Clifton, the play is indebted to the Gothic tradition as well as to Jacobean drama: ‘The setting is typically gothic and the conflict almost medieval in its clash of good against evil: the adversary is from hell itself and the protagonist is a cleric. The Faustian syndrome is thereby established in a battle that is symbolically archetypal. Fitzball's hero, Francesco, and the villain, Gortzburg, have about them a Jacobean aura and manner of design. [...] Redolent of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* in its presentation of evil incarnate, while lacking tragic dimensions, the play intones a Marlovian theme: damnation resulting from lust and the loss of soul’. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>1006</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 27 (May 1829), p. 200.

<sup>1007</sup> As one would expect, the role of Gortzburg was offered to O. Smith. From a visual point of view, however, this character was somehow less striking than his predecessors: according to *The New Monthly Magazine*, ‘[t]he only fault we noticed in the piece is, that the demon, instead of fearfully glaring out with his fiery eyes from behind, is perpetually stalking in almost to the foot of the lamps, in which his Satannic [*sic*] majesty does not act with his usual judgment, as he fails to create the horror which a less prodigal disposition of his shape would ensure’. *Ibid.*

SOLO. [...]

[*Thunder—Enter* OLBURG, R., and STORMBURG, L.

ALL. Ha, ha, ha! brother!

[*They dip their cruises into the boiling elixir, and drink.*

TRIO.—Shadow King, Olburg, and Stormburg. [...]

SHADOW KING. The time has arrived in which to release my captive slave, who, condemned by St. Anthony's curse, hath slept a hundred years in the centre of yonder crystal rock. What! ho! Gortzburg, the time of thy penance has expired—thou most subtle of my spirits, awake! arise! the Shadow King commands thee to arise!

[CHORD.—*He strikes the rock, which splits asunder, and discovers the* DEMON GORTZBUG *in a forlorn attitude.*

ALL. Brother!

[MUSIC, *piano*.—*Gortzburg, as if roused from sleep, looks torpidly around—he stretches his limbs and wings—then leaps joyfully from the rock, and throws himself at the feet of the Shadow King.*

SHADOW KING. Ha, ha, ha! I, the King of Shadows, welcome thee! Welcome to freedom and to vengeance. By a mortal malediction, consigned to yonder icy tomb, a mortal victim soon shall satisfy thy hate. [*Clapping his hands.*] Behold! [MUSIC.—*The back scene opens, and discovers* Francesco, *seated at a table, in his cell, by lamplight.*] 'Tis Francesco, the young monk of the Silver Palm-tree Monastery: of late, he hath wandered much from pious thoughts; and loves, in secret, Aurelia, his brother's betrothed bride. Hear me: Francesco is keeper of the reliquary, in which stands deposited the fatal cruise of Anthony, thou wast doomed to a century of torpor, Weak-sighted mortals! out of their own precautions, work thou thy revenge—behold thy victim. [*Pointing up to Francesco in the cell, L. C.*] I see, by the malice flaming in thine eye, thou read'st my thoughts—no more. The moon begins to fade—we must all away,

[*Scene closes.*

CHORUS. [...]

[*The Shadow King ascends on a fragment of the rock—Olburg, Stormburg, and Imps, fly up—The Demon Gortzburg, with an attitude of denunciation, rushes out, L.*<sup>1008</sup>

*The Devil's Elixir* had a run of more than 100 performances, became 'one of the most popular drinks of the day'<sup>1009</sup> and established Fitzball as a successful playwright at Covent Garden. The doors of legitimate theatre were therefore thrown open to him. As Fitzball recalled in his autobiography, this had been a highly anticipated event in the London theatre world, and ultimately became a pivotal moment in the cultural process of completely dismantling the legitimate theatre category:

Many curious speculations were made as to my ultimate failure or success, as a writer at the theatre Royal, emerging at once from my minor hemisphere so fully into the golden blaze, whether I should singe my waxen wings and fall to the ground at once, like poor, deluded Phæton. At the minor theatres, if I had created blue fire, (as Mr. Egerton generously said on the stage of me,) I had also, it was quite evident, created an audience of my *own*, who seemed to follow me, a greater recommendation to a manager and his treasurer, sad to say, than the

<sup>1008</sup> Fitzball, Edward, *The Devil's Elixir; or, The Shadowless Man: A Musical Romance, in Two Acts*, in *The Hour of One: Six Gothic Melodramas*, ed. Stephen Wischhusen, London: Gordon Fraser (1975), pp. 9-10.

<sup>1009</sup> Unknown review quoted in Summers, Montague (1968), p. 243.

divinest aspirations of the most legitimate author that ever breathed. My dramas, such as they were, pleased greatly a large portion of the public, and were the fashion with something more than the middling classes. It now remained to be proved whether that public would follow me into a temple echoing with the *indefinable* and antique help—*legitimacy!*<sup>1010</sup>

From the 1830s onwards, Fitzball frequently worked for Drury Lane and Covent Garden (in fact, he produced more plays for these two theatres than for any other theatre) and heavily contributed to make their theatrical menus essentially undistinguishable from those of the minor theatres. He established a very solid partnership with Alfred Bunn, another key figure during the last phase of the patent monopoly. Bunn became lessee and manager of Drury Lane in 1831 and held this position – with two short breaks – until 1850, in spite of the fact that he was declared bankrupt in December 1840. He was an ambitious showman that transformed the temple of the legitimate drama into a ‘big booth’<sup>1011</sup>, a place of mass entertainment combining contemporary and classical legitimate plays with opera in English translation (of which Bunn unquestionably was the greatest promoter in this period<sup>1012</sup>) as well as a wide range of lighter forms of spectacle, including circus-like exhibitions such as tight-rope dancing and lion taming. In a controversial move, Bunn also gained control of Covent Garden in 1833 and thus acquired an effective monopoly on the production of legitimate theatre, a ‘Napoleonic sovereignty which no single head or hand could possibly wield with satisfaction, or permanent success’<sup>1013</sup>. The union of the two Royal theatres under the same management lasted only two years but made Bunn fiercely unpopular in the theatre industry and gave a great blow to the stability of the patent system, sparking discussions about its abolition. His introduction of a rich variety of popular fare was a crucial part of his plan to save the two theatres from plummeting to financial disaster. On 20 April 1835, something truly remarkable and unprecedented in history occurred: Bunn simultaneously brought out two new Fitzballian plays at the legitimate houses: *The Note Forger* at Drury Lane and *Carlmilhan; or, The Drowned Crew* at Covent Garden. The former, a translation of a French piece entitled *Les Faussaires Anglais* (Ambigu-Comique, 1833), was a macabre crime melodrama that had ‘the most determined Fitzballian look’<sup>1014</sup> and received very high approbation especially due to its top-notch cast. The latter was an ‘ultra-marine’<sup>1015</sup> Romantic melodrama in roughly the same style as *The Flying*

<sup>1010</sup> Fitzball, Edward, vol. 2 (1859), pp. 14-5.

<sup>1011</sup> Baker, Henry Barton, *The London Stage: Its History and Traditions from 1576 to 1888*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: W. H. Allen & Co. (1889), p. 109.

<sup>1012</sup> Fitzball called him ‘the greatest friend to operatic people that ever yet came on the English stage: liberal, a poet, and a gentleman’. Fitzball, Edward, vol. 2 (1859), p. 242.

<sup>1013</sup> Cole, John William, *The Life and Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A., Including a Summary of The English Stage for the Last Fifty Years, and a Detailed Account of the Management of the Princess Theatre, from 1850 to 1859*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: Richard Bentley (1859), p. 231. The experiment of running two theatres in tandem had already been made by Llewellyn Watkins Williams (Surrey and Sadler’s Wells) and George Bolwell Davidge (Coburg and City), but both obtained poor results.

<sup>1014</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 44 (1835), p. 110.

<sup>1015</sup> *Figaro in London*, vol. 4 (25 April 1835), p. 70.

*Dutchman*, in which the protagonist is an ancient and amphibious phantom commander of a wrecked pirate ship who returns from the ocean abyss to seduce a girl. The piece was mainly notable for a beautiful scene created by Thomas, William and John Henderson Grieve, the principal Covent Garden scene painters at the time, that ‘represented a drowned crew lying at the bottom of the ocean, with their vain, ill-gotten treasures glittering around them, and the hull of their dilapidated vessel half-buried in sand’<sup>1016</sup>. Whereas *The Note Forger* displayed elements of tragedy and very down-to-earth horrors, *Carlmilhan* was a ‘more impossible and unintelligible’<sup>1017</sup> holiday piece targeted at young people, resembling less a horror show than a fairy tale conceived ‘to fit the escapism of so many children wanting the “Walt Disney” of their age, Fitzball’<sup>1018</sup>. *The New Monthly Magazine* acknowledged Fitzball as the undisputed protagonist of contemporary drama: ‘The Fitzball again! The houses which used to engross every thing, have, in turn, delivered every thing up to be engrossed in turn by—Mr. Fitzball; and the dramatic muse [...] is now flung under the hoofs of the author of Jonathan Bradford’<sup>1019</sup>. Similarly, *The Athenæum* conceded that

we cannot compliment Mr. Fitzball upon anything but success. We are not sure that the gentleman is not the cleverest of living dramatists. It is true, that he does not always care to convince us of it by the style of his writings; but, as he is unquestionably one of the most successful, how do we know that he is not writing as he does on purpose, and laughing in his sleeve all the time?<sup>1020</sup>

At some point, in 1835, Fitzball even briefly became lessee of Covent Garden, but due to a severe illness he gave it up in favour of David Osbaldiston<sup>1021</sup>, serving as his emergency author for two

<sup>1016</sup> Fitzball, Edward, vol. 2 (1859), p. 273.

<sup>1017</sup> *The Spectator*, vol. 8 (26 April 1835), p. 397.

<sup>1018</sup> Clifton, Larry Stephen (1993), p. 143. According to *The Athenæum*, “‘Carlmilhan, or, the Drowned Crew,’” sounds much more like a piece for the Easter holidays, and, after having seen it, we should say, that the schoolboys would poll ten to one in its favour against “The Note-Forger.” There are red lights and blue lights, and green lights, and white lights, and all lights but new lights. We shall not attempt to detail the plot, for fear we should make anybody understand it; for, where the effect depends so much upon a foggy state of comprehension, a clearance might be fatal. Suffice to say, that there are great effects produced by slights causes—that part of the scene is on shore, and part under the sea—that the people are some human, some superhuman, and some, like other spirits and water, half and half. [...] it is a capital holiday piece, and was not intended for anything more’. *The Athenæum* (25 April 1835), p. 325.

<sup>1019</sup> *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, vol. 44 (June 1835), p. 110.

<sup>1020</sup> *The Athenæum* (25 April 1835), p. 325.

<sup>1021</sup> Osbaldiston was a Shakespearean actor who had previously managed the Surrey, producing several of Fitzball's plays, including his biggest commercial hit, the crime melodrama *Jonathan Bradford; or, The Murder at the Roadside Inn* (1833), which ran for 264 consecutive nights. Osbaldiston played the title role in it. Fitzball recalled in his memoirs that the direction of Covent Garden was Osbaldiston's most difficult enterprise to date: ‘[Osbaldiston], in consequence of having realised a large sum of money, by what is called a *minor* drama, “Jonathan Bradford,” fully determined, I believe, to invest himself with a theatre royal, and try the effect of a *larger* minor drama in a larger theatre. A theatre royal, I have frequently heard the case argued by men speculative as Osbaldiston was, but he was the *first* to try the experiment. It *did* answer the *first* season; he cleared two thousand pounds: the second season, Osbaldiston lost himself, in listening to every one's opinion, without abiding by his own good common sense. The yelping cry of legitimacy haunted him wherever he went; till, like the knight in the fairy tale, the cotton of self-control not being stuffed into his years, he became terrified at the Gorgon sound of his own voice, and in the querulous nervousness of his heart, began to chime in with the cry of legitimacy himself. Well, we *had* what is

years. During his tenure, Osbaldiston basically converted the theatre into a ‘surreyesque theatre’<sup>1022</sup>, presenting a rich variety of showy spectacles and pageants, and drastically reduced tickets prices while continuing to pay large salaries to stars such as Charles Kemble and William Charles Macready. The experiment was a failure, and Fitzball failed in providing him a genuinely popular hit (it was in this period that the theatre presented a controversial revival of *Thalaba the Destroyer* that was lambasted for being falsely advertised as a wholly new production<sup>1023</sup>). Bunn (reluctantly) adopted the same commercial strategy at Drury Lane, but there was no difference in the results: the receipts of the Royal theatres did not increase and the unlicensed houses continued to attract and maintain audiences, paradoxically also thanks to Fitzball’s own visionary works. As a matter of fact, Fitzball continued to write crowd-pleasing Gothic and fantastic melodramas for the minors, showing indefatigable creativity in accommodating the tastes of the illegitimate theatre market. Among them, it is worth remembering *The Inchcape Bell; or, The Dumb Sailor Boy* (Surrey, 1828), *The Earthquake; or, The Spectre of the Nile* (Adelphi, 1828), *The Black Vulture; or, the Wheel of Death* (Adelphi, 1830)<sup>1024</sup>, *The Haunted Hulk* (Adelphi 1831, then also at the Surrey), *The Sea Serpent; or, The Wizard and the Winds* (Adelphi, 1831, in collaboration with John B. Buckstone), *Robert Le Diable; or, The Devil's Son* (Adelphi, 1832, in collaboration with John B. Buckstone), *Margaret's Ghost; or, The Libertine Ship* (Victoria, 1833), *The Wood Devil; or, The Vampyre Pirate*

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called legitimacy; we had the very *best* authors and actors that could be engaged. In referring to the management of Osbaldiston, writers and speakers have always lost sight of this important fact: we had Charles Kemble, Macready, Vandenhoff, Elton, Farren, Power, Collins, H. Wallack, Tilbury, Webster, Mrs. West, Miss Helen Faucit, Miss Romer, Miss Turpin, Miss Taylor, and a whole phalanx of others nearly as good. Yet, the second season, startling as the disclosure may appear, we lost the two thousand pounds we made the season before! How this is to be accounted for? Added to which, the very reviewers who had abused our illegitimacy, turned round and abused our legitimacy still more. So, like the man and his ass, if a manager attempts to please everybody, he will please nobody’. Fitzball, *Edward*, vol. 2 (1859), pp. 105-7.

<sup>1022</sup> Clifton, Larry Stephen (1993), p. 43.

<sup>1023</sup> ‘[T]he *ingenious* Mr. Fitz-Ball thought to do a little bit of *ingenious swindling*, by announcing as a new piece, an old trashy Coburg affair of fifteen years since. We know that the Covent Garden management calculates upon a very natural conclusion, that all Fitzball's pieces are no sooner out than they are forgotten; but print is rather more durable than Fitz-Ball's dramatic genius, and when a piece gets into *print*, even the heavy sinking tendency of Fitz-Ball's writing, cannot *quite* carry them to the very bottom of the gulph of oblivion. We think that the impertinence of announcing this as a new piece, deserves the most severe condemnation, and it certainly receives it, in the shape of the most unequivocal hisses, every night at Covent Garden Theatre. The piece of “Thalaba” has been damned to all intents and purposes, yet, the *bills* are thought strong enough to draw *John Bull*, who is, we must confess, as easily “led by the nose as asses are”’. *Figaro in London*, vol. 5, no. 260 (26 November 1836), p. 196.

<sup>1024</sup> This grotesque, pseudo-mythological monster melodrama mainly deserves to be remembered for the presence in the cast of O. Smith, who ‘cut a most extraordinary figure with his plumage and beak’ (actually Lucifer himself in a griffin-like shape) who preys on the ladies of those condemned to be put to death on the wheel. *The Dramatic Magazine*, vol. 2 (November 1830), p. 317. Fitzball devotes a brief passage to Smith's impressive interpretation of the role in the first volume of his autobiography: ‘In October, 1830, I find myself again at the Adelphi, bringing out a new, and exceedingly original spectacle, called by the astounding appellation of *The Black Vulture*; in other words, the Ixion of the ancients. It met with an excellent reception. O. Smith was the *Vulture!!* And well might he say to me, on that, or some other occasion, that he had determined to sell his hoofs, horns, and tail, and play the devil no longer. He did so, I believe, and tried on the *owld* legitimate. Most excellent was he in it; [...] When one sees O. Smith enacting a legitimate part, one thinks it would amount to profanation to transform him again into that of a demon: yet, when one witnesses his assumption of the demon, one thinks that such a *devilish* good demon ought never more to step back into frail humanity’. Fitzball, *Edward*, vol. 1 (1859), pp. 211-2.

*of the Deep* (Sadler's Wells, 1836), *Ombra; or, The Spirit of the Reclining Stone* (Surrey, 1842), *The Owl Sisters; or, The Haunted Abbey Ruin* (Adelphi, 1842) and *The Lancashire Witches. A Romance of Pendle Forest* (Adelphi, 1848)<sup>1025</sup>. In the last part of his career, however, Fitzball's name became mainly associated with opera, especially thanks to the librettos he wrote for Michael William Balfe's *The Siege of Rochelle* (Drury Lane, 1835), Michael Balfe's *Keolanthe; or, the Unearthly Bride* (Lyceum, 1841), William Vincent Wallace's *Maritana* (Drury Lane, 1845) and *Lurline* (Covent Garden, 1860) and Edward Loder's *Raymond and Agnes* (Theatre Royal, Manchester, 1855), among others.

Fitzball continued to write for the stage until his death in 1873, therefore well beyond the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act that eliminated the patent monopoly. His dramatic *oeuvre* constituted an excellent demonstration of the multifarious and completely unrestrained nature of early nineteenth-century theatre, impossible to frame in those tidy categories reminiscent of another, lost time. Fitzball's work and imagination embodied the cultural quality of fluidity: he was a versatile 'artistic populist'<sup>1026</sup> and a champion of dramaturgical experimentation willing to attract theatregoers who came from all walks of life. In this respect, Fitzball was the Shakespeare of his era for he was able to adapt himself to a vivid context in which, as in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century London, different theatres came to cater for different audience tastes, with each theatre developing a reputation for particular kinds of plays. Fitzball was simply not interested in the division between the legitimate and the illegitimate drama, nor did he regard it as a problem: as Peter Charles Winn pointed out, '[a]t no point in his autobiography does he refer to the limitations imposed by the licensing laws as limitations on his own ability to satisfy the public taste. Neither does he refer to the act of 1843 which freed the theatres from these restrictions'<sup>1027</sup>. To Fitzball, '[e]verything dramatic, that is moral, interesting, and amusing to the public, *is* the legitimate drama, whether it be illuminated with blue fire, or in one act, or twenty'<sup>1028</sup>. He even seemed to agree with a claim made by fellow dramatist James Sheridan Knowles about the inherent illegitimacy of Shakespeare, possibly the worst theatrical blasphemy, as emerges in the following dialogue between the two:

"You are very indulgent, and can afford to be so [...] to a mere writer of melodrama."  
 "Melodrama!" reiterated the poet, "and pray what is *Macbeth* but melodrama? And *Richard the Third*, and Shakspeare's [*sic*] plays in general, if you come to that? melodrama."  
 Here was a conviction! Shakspeare [*sic*], then, is *not* the *legitimate* drama.<sup>1029</sup>

<sup>1025</sup> For more or less brief comments and observations about these plays see Clifton, Larry Stephen (1993).

<sup>1026</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>1027</sup> Winn, Charles Peter, *The "Terrible" Fitzball: The Work of a Hack Dramatist, 1817-1873*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Cornell University (1979), p. 231.

<sup>1028</sup> Fitzball, Edward, vol. 2 (1859), p. 107.

<sup>1029</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9.

Being the culmination of a process begun several decades before with the development of the Gothic, Fitzball adopted the supernatural formula to create an early form of what is now commonly referred to as mass entertainment<sup>1030</sup>, taking advantage of a theatrical milieu at the threshold of a great revolution through which a previously censored popular culture of exceptional energy and diversity emerged in full force. In this respect, the 1820s, with its unprecedented boom of plays depicting the supernatural in a large variety of ways, was the decade that definitively turned it into a subject of mass entertainment, just as the concept itself of mass entertainment was developing. The supernatural was thus packaged into a product that could be experienced by a wide range of people, a move of commercial opportunism that actually reflected a larger cultural shift away from the rationalism and elitism of the Enlightenment and aimed at meeting the needs, interests, and tastes of a newly emerging industrial society. Of course, in the following decades the trend continued not only thanks to Fitzball, with works such as George Blink's *The Vampire Bride; or, the Tenant of the Tomb* (Sadler's Wells, 1830), John H. Amherst and Andrew Ducrow's *The Spectre King and His Phantom Steed* (Astley's Amphitheatre, 1830), Douglas Jerrold's *The Devil's Ducat; or, The Gift of Mammon* (Adelphi, 1830), Richard B. Peake's *The Skeleton Lover!* (Adelphi, 1830) and *The Evil Eye; A Legend of the Levant* (English Opera House, 1831), George Almar's *The Fire Raiser; or, The Prophet of the Moor* (Surrey, 1831), John B. Buckstone's *The Ice Witch; or, The Frozen Hand* (Drury Lane, 1831) and *The Dream at Sea* (Adelphi, 1835; Surrey, 1847), Robert St. Clair Jones's *The Harp of Altenberg* (Sadler's Wells, 1833), George D. Pitt's *The Eddystone Elf* (1833), John Kerr's *Bill Jones; or, the Spectre by Sea and Land* (Surrey, 1834), William L. Rede's *The Skeleton Witness; or, The King's Evidence* (Surrey, 1835) and *The Devil and Dr. Faustus* (New Strand Theatre, 1841), John T. Haines's *The Phantom Ship; or, The Demon Pilot* (Surrey, 1839), William T. Moncrieff's *Giselle; or, The Phantom Night Dancers* (Sadler's Wells, 1841), Henry W. G. Plunkett's *Faust; or, The Demon of Drachenfels* (Sadler's Wells, 1842) and many others.

However, to analyse these productions would be here superfluous, as they rarely added something new to the development of stage supernaturalism, often merely reprising or updating stories, characters and tropes that had already been developed in the previous decades. What is relevant is that the two Royal houses continued to be 'followers rather than leaders of the minor theatres'<sup>1031</sup>, which, in spite of all difficulties, kept using supernatural melodrama and opera as main crowd-pullers. This despite the fact that a commonly held belief was that the blame for this seemingly irreversible trend should first be laid on the patent theatres: in the 'Advertisement' to *The Skeleton*

<sup>1030</sup> It is ironic that Fitzball initially tried to avoid dealing with the supernatural: in the 'Advertisement' to his 1821 poem *The Revenge of Taran*, he proudly stated that [t]he design of the story is to prove that a tale of real horror may be produced by normal means, without resorting to superhuman agents as in 'The Vampire' and 'Frankenstein'. Fitzball, Edward, *The Revenge of Taran. A Poem*, London: C. Chapple (1821), page unnumbered.

<sup>1031</sup> Fuhrmann, Christina (2015), p. 86.

*Witness; or, The King's Evidence* (published under the title *The Skeleton Witness; or, The Murderer of The Mount*), for example, William L. Rede justified the Gothic horror tone of his play with these words:

Demons, fiends, and all the fraternal and paternal relationships between Satan and his family having exhausted what are called *striking* titles at the Royal Theatres, the Minors are unfortunately forced to go to the charnel-house for appellatives as horrible as those put forth by their patented rivals. I say this in justice to [...] myself, who, I believe, is not anxious to place a death's head and cross bones as an attractive emblem over his doorway, unless in compliance with a Freischützean taste that has been gradually developing itself amid a large class of playgoers, and which has been pandered to so often by the rulers of the large theatres that it bids fair to be deemed a metropolitan characteristic.<sup>1032</sup>

At this point, the patent monopoly was on very thin ice. As Frederick Elliott Warner noted, by 1830 'the patents no longer afforded their owners any significant degree of protection from the competition of their smaller rivals' given that the latter 'were able to produce, in only slightly modified form, the very plays that drew audiences to the great houses, using standards of production that, at their best, equalled the representations in the legitimate theatres'<sup>1033</sup>. On 31 May 1832, liberal Member of Parliament and novelist Henry Lytton Bulwer presented a petition to the House of Commons asking for the removal of the restrictions on the performance of legitimate drama. He then established and chaired the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature, which met in June and July 1832 in order to inquire into the current state of English drama and investigate the laws governing it. Although supporters of the patent theatres defended their position by blaming the minors for making continuous inroads into their cultural authority and system of legal rights, the Committee emphasised the responsibilities of the Examiner of Plays (George Colman the Younger) as well as Drury Lane and Covent Garden's poor management, financial problems and apparent inability to encourage native genius and talent and react to the new competitive environment. In his final report, the Committee concluded that there was 'a considerable decline, both in the Literature of the Stage, and the taste of the Public for Theatrical Performances'. As a solution, it proposed to confine 'the sole power and authority to license Theatres throughout the Metropolis (as well as in places of Royal Residence) to the Lord Chamberlain' and allow all licensed theatres 'to exhibit, at their option, the *Legitimate Drama*'. With regard to the privileges of the Royal theatres, the Committee declared 'it appears manifest that [they] have neither preserved the dignity of the Drama, nor, by the present Administration of the Laws, been of much advantage to the Proprietors of the Theatres themselves'. It was also noted that the figure of the playwright was 'subjected to indefensible hardship and injustice', which led to recommendation that 'the Author of a Play should

<sup>1032</sup> Rede, William Leman, 'Advertisement' to *The Skeleton Witness; or, The Murder of the Mount. A Drama, in Three Acts*, London: John Miller (1835), page unnumbered.

<sup>1033</sup> Warner, Frederick Elliott (1972), p. 41.

possess the same legal rights, and enjoy the same legal protection, as the Author of any other literary production; and that his Performance should not be legally exhibited at any Theatre, Metropolitan or Provincial, without his express and formal consent'<sup>1034</sup>. The suppression of the patents was therefore regarded as the best solution for everybody:

In regard to Actors, it is allowed, even by those Performers whose Evidence favours the existing Monopoly, that the more general exhibition of the regular Drama would afford new schools and opportunities for their art. In regard to Authors, it is probable that a greater variety of Theatres at which to present, or for which to adapt, their Plays, and a greater security in the profits derived from their success, will give new encouragement to their ambition, and, perhaps (if a play is never acted without producing some emolument to its Writer) may direct their attention to the more durable, as being also the more lucrative, classes of Dramatic Literature; while, as regards the Public, equally benefited by these advantages, it is probable that the ordinary consequences of Competition, freed from the possibility of licentiousness by the confirmed control and authority of the Chamberlain, will afford convenience in the number and situation of Theatres, and cheap and good Entertainment in the Performances usually exhibited.<sup>1035</sup>

A Dramatic Performance Bill to license any theatre to perform regular spoken drama was however defeated in 1833. It was not until ten years later that a Theatre Regulation Act was passed, repealing previous statutes and creating a new regulation under which any theatre operating in the metropolis might be authorised to perform any kind of play, provided that they were scrutinised and cleared before performance by the Lord Chamberlain's office. The long battle to eliminate the monopolies and special privileges of the patentees finally came to an end: as Dunton Cook explained, '[f]ree-trade in theatrical entertainments was instituted; the illegitimate drama was legitimated, or it may be said that the legitimate drama was deprived of any particular claims arising from its legitimacy'<sup>1036</sup>. The effects of the Act were immediate: Samuel Phelps at Sadler's Wells and Charles Kean at the Princess's Theatre, for instance, began mounting great Shakespearean productions, bringing legitimate drama to vast new audiences. A new era began.

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<sup>1034</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature: with the Minutes of Evidence*, London: House of Commons (1832), pp. 3-5.

<sup>1035</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>1036</sup> Cook, Dunton (1881), p. 637.

## Conclusion

Somehow paradoxically, the 1843 Act did not erase the legitimate-illegitimate distinction in drama, and ‘the tags of *major* and *minor* theatres persisted anyway’<sup>1037</sup>. Even discussions over the appropriateness of representing the supernatural on stage continued unabated, as demonstrated by the largely unfavourable reception bestowed on Dion Boucicault’s *The Corsican Brothers* (Princess Theatre, 1852) and *The Vampire* (Princess Theatre, 1852, retitled *The Phantom* in 1856), possibly the two most important Gothic plays of the immediate post-Theatre Regulation Act era<sup>1038</sup>. By this time naturalism dominated the theatre, but the supernatural did not disappear entirely; it instead took new forms and meanings, increasingly oriented towards a psychological reading of it. The most important novelty in this respect was Pepper’s Ghosts, a theatrical illusion devised by civil engineer Henry Dircks in 1858 and later perfected by Professor John Henry Pepper, head of the Royal Polytechnic Institution in London, where the invention was first shown on 24 December 1862. An evolution of the phantasmagoria (with which it shared the avowed purpose of exposing frauds, charlatans, visionaries and supposed ghost-seers and thus promoting the triumph of reason over superstition), Pepper’s Ghost used bright lights and carefully angled mirrors in order to allow spectators to see the reflections of hidden performers, who thus appeared as full-sized ghostly apparitions. It did not take long for it to become a commercial attraction in theatre, with popular melodrama being the best vehicle for its spectacular exploitation. The first use of this breakthrough technology in dramatic representation was in Colin Henry Hazlewood’s *The Widow and the Orphans; or, Faith, Hope and Charity* (Britannia, 1863), a melodrama especially written to display impressive holographic effects, such as a ghost pierced by a sword. In the same year it was also featured in a remount of Mark Lemon’s adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* (Adelphi, 1848). Given the vast success of their invention, Dircks and Pepper

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<sup>1037</sup> Weltman, Sharon Aronofsky, ‘Theater, Exhibition, and Spectacle in the Nineteenth Century’, in *A Companion to British Literature, Vol. IV, Victorian and Twentieth-Century Literature 1837-2000*, ed. Robert DeMaria, Jr., Heesok Chang and Samantha Zacker, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell (2014), p. 70.

<sup>1038</sup> Both were adaptations of works by Alexander Dumas. *The Corsican Brothers*, in particular, was hugely popular thanks to Charles Kean, who played the twin brothers, and the so-called Corsican Trap, a kind of stage trap designed to allow a spectral character to ‘glide across the stage while gradually ascending to ghost music’. Summers, Montague (1928), p. 23. Reviewers, however, attacked the play using the same old refrains: ‘The extraordinary success of such pieces as the “Corsican Brothers,” which royalty itself has patronized by repeated visits, presenting scenes that outrage morality and decorum, affords striking evidence of how far the public themselves have contributed to the degradation of the stage’. *The Westminster Review*, vol. 58 (January 1863), p. 63. Comments on *The Vampire* were even more derogatory: ‘That the author of so excellent a comedy as *London Assurance* should descend to the concoction of a myth of electro-lighted ghosts and murderers, and introduce himself as a candidate for histrionic honours in the part of the sanguinary hero himself, is very much to be regretted. Mr. Boucicault’s [*sic*] *Vampire* is intended to out-horror the horrors of *The Corsican Brothers*; and we will do him the justice to state that, in this respect, its success is unequivocal. We object to ghost stories at all times; but to give representations of the shrouded dead rising bodily from the tomb, in a manner of which there is no authentic record save in the miracles of God’s Holy Bible, is little less than—blasphemy’. *The London Literary Gazette* (19 June 1852), p. 502.

decided to make a joint application for a patent, which was granted on 5 February 1863. Pepper's Ghost became therefore known as the 'Patent Ghost', the first important stage illusion to obtain such a kind of official recognition and legitimation:

Modern researches in Spiritualism have led to one practical result—the discovery of a ghost. Not of an ordinary old-fashioned ghost, appearing in the midnight hour to people with a weak digestion, haunting graveyards and old country mansions, and inspiring romance-writers to the mischief of three-volume novels; but of a well-behaved, steady, regular, and respectable ghost, going through a prescribed round of duties, punctual to the minute—a Patent Ghost, in fact.<sup>1039</sup>

The proprietors of Pepper's Ghost sacrificed the original scientific purpose of their apparatus to box-office receipts and commercial fame. They knew that its sensational popularity, which lasted until the 1890s – when it slowly gave way to cinema, although the device is still used nowadays in museums, amusement parks, concerts – was mainly due to the Victorian public's keen interest in spiritualism, mesmerism and occultism. In fact, as Martin Harries argues, '[i]t is even possible that the Ghost worked quite the reverse of the rationalizing magic its inventor had in mind, and fostered spiritualism by helping people to picture the ghosts they desired to see'<sup>1040</sup>. The attempt to bestow an aura of legitimacy and respectability to a mass entertainment product proved to be not only a paradox but a hardly solvable contradiction that to some degree still exists in various contexts. The patenting of a ghost trick was the ultimate manifestation of a new, irreducibly commercial religion that emerged in full force during the nineteenth century, which turned the supernatural into a money-making attraction and used theatre as its main church. The process originally sparked by the Gothic showed no signs of slacking and, in a way, the commercialisation of the collective fascination for the supernatural and the debates triggered by it have continued unabated into the twenty-first century.

It seems, therefore, that a pivotal event such as the passing of the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act did not lessen but actually intensified the division between high and low cultural forms that emerged out of the antagonism between Enlightenment and Romanticism, contributing to the development of cultural (post-)modernity. With the advent of mass media, then, the juxtaposition between intellectual and popular ways of thinking has been the subject of continuous critical debate in Western scholarship, feeding an impressive body of literature and generating new fields of studies. Curiously, conservative detractors of mainstream popular culture still invoke the very same arguments employed in theatre criticism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: they make a case for its morally detrimental effects and argue against the mass-media simplification of the

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<sup>1039</sup> Anonymous newspaper article entitled 'The Patent Ghost' quoted in Pepper, John Henry, *The True History of the Ghost; and All About Metempsychosis*, London: Cassell (1890), pp. 22-3.

<sup>1040</sup> Harries, Martin, *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2000), p. 37

complexities of reality through their adoption of melodrama, the populist lowbrow genre *par excellence* that still ‘remains, commercially, public entertainment’s most viable form through the outlets of film, television, and theatre’<sup>1041</sup>. This conflict seems more pronounced when literature, drama and media deal with the representation of the unexplainable, the mysterious, the unknown, as in the ongoing critical debates about horror cinema – an obvious cultural descendant of Gothic literature and drama as well as of nineteenth-century melodramatic forms – where high and low cultural aesthetics communicate and converge in thoroughly powerful ways. This is why this dissertation has investigated the history of the theatrical commercialisation of the supernatural in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in connection with the history of the legitimate/illegitimate opposition – indicative of both legal status and artistic value – that defined the English theatre in this period.

The four chapters of this work have analysed different ways of seriously portraying the supernatural on stage in that delicate moment of transition between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, from the controversial pseudo-Shakespearean ghosts of early Gothic dramas to the psychological/technological apparitions conceived in later works as a reaction to them, from the sheer fantastic of the early melodramas of the 1800s and 1810s to the overwhelming, all-encompassing Gothic supernaturalism of the illegitimate melodramas of the 1820s. An attempt has been made to combine chronology and thematic order for the purpose of highlighting the various forms and trends that characterised onstage portrayal of the supernatural in a highly heterogeneous, rapidly evolving theatrical *milieu*. The principal objective has been to contribute to the re-evaluation of a period of English theatre that deserves further appreciation and exploration, especially with respect to the incredible amount of lesser known or critically overlooked plays that can shed light on the aesthetics of neglected popular cultural forms and their enduring influence. Future research in this area should consider how these innovative yet too often understudied works went far beyond their objective artistic merits and immediate box-office purposes, exerting an everlasting influence on how our collective shared culture perceives and imagines the supernatural not only in drama but also in cinema, television, comics, videogames and new media, sometimes with modes not very dissimilar from those examined in this work. As a matter of fact, present-day popular culture is saturated with supernatural narratives that adopt many of the same images, symbols, character types, plots, tropes, archetypes and genres above examined as vehicles of entertainment meant to provide people with an imaginative escape from a world increasingly dominated by science and hyper-rationality – keeping in mind that the eruption of supernatural fiction actually originated in the first place as a backlash against the Enlightenment – testifying to their continuing appeal and

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<sup>1041</sup> Clifton, Larry Stephen (1993), p. 170.

persistent marketability. But if on the one hand the supernatural has been packaged as an entertainment commodity that ‘shows us nothing other than the insatiable desires of our own consumerist culture’<sup>1042</sup>, on the other it continues to inspire the same thought-provoking and provocative questions as before, such as who are we, why are we here, is there life after death and what lies beyond the visible sphere. In spite of the fact that this commodified supernatural spoke to rough emotions rather than the intellect and depended on a very down-to-earth desire to make money, sometimes appealing to the lowest common denominator of taste and morality, it nevertheless managed to mirror the *Zeitgeist* in intriguing ways. As a matter of fact, the Gothic mode – in its endless variations and transformations – that decisively fostered the spectacular commodification of the supernatural in the first place eventually overstepped its boundaries and contributed to larger cultural developments. It challenged conservatism and conformity and questioned the intellectual and moral *status quo*, clearly out of tune with the changing cultural climate. No wonder therefore that the topic of on-stage supernaturalism became a favourite battleground during the long war between legitimate and illegitimate theatre-making, high and low forms, as understanding of aesthetics and matters of taste became increasingly rooted in the social class system. The rise of a commercial mass culture, namely, of ‘a culture of consumption and conspicuous display, that some elites originated and others almost instantly attacked’<sup>1043</sup>, thus reflected two factions of the cultural world willing to claim the right to represent and define increasingly large and heterogeneous publics (especially theatre publics) as well as the compromises that needed to be made. The same problems still persist in our own days, as the supernatural continues to fascinate our collective imagination and raise questions of legitimacy.

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<sup>1042</sup> Marsden, Simon, *Holy Ghosts: The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan (2018), p. 11.

<sup>1043</sup> Mukerji, Chandra, and Schudson, Michael, ‘Introduction: Rethinking Popular Culture’, in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives In Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, Berkeley: University of California Press (1991), p. 17.

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