# The Staging of the Sinister in Machine Plays

by
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In the world of the marvelous depicted in French machine plays the plots focus, not surprisingly, on the exploits of gods and heroes with supernatural powers, and their adventures sometimes bring them into contact with such sinister beings as ghosts, monsters and demons. It is the dark side of that world that I propose to examine here, especially how the frightening episodes contribute to the aesthetic unity of the play and how they were actually staged. About the latter, unfortunately, we have only minimal information.[1]

Ghosts are the most human of the sinister beings, for the obvious reason that ghosts were once living humans. They may either appear unbidden, usually in a dream, or they may be conjured up by magical means. Since they have access to more than mortal knowledge, they may be asked to predict the future; angry ghosts in dreams denounce the dreamer for past misdeeds and announce his or her imminent downfall, but their warnings go unheeded, and often the dreamer fails to retain the crucial pieces of information. Indeed, the majority of seventeenth-century ghosts have no impact on the dénouement, and their main function is to contribute to the tragic atmosphere, in much the same way as omens and recounted dreams.

Ghosts had largely disappeared from French drama by the middle of the century, primarily because of critical insistence on *vraisemblance* and because of practical difficulties. Indeed, it is not clear how the ghosts entered in plays from the first half of the century, which is to say, the period predating the vogue of elaborate theatrical machinery. Trapdoors would seem to be the likeliest method, but the texts of the plays do not specify. I have not located any mention of a ghost entering in this way prior to 1656, and then in a work designated as a machine play.[2] (However, despite the absence of references to them, trapdoors probably existed. We know that the Hôtel de Bourgogne had a staircase connecting

the basement with both the main stage and the upper stage, and that the Marais theatre had a cellar.)

In any event, such characters do not feature prominently in the machine plays from the second half of the century, since they owe much of their effectiveness to surprise; namely, the irruption of a supernatural being into a purely natural environment. In plays based on mythology, where the supernatural is everywhere, ghosts are simply one special effect among others. The statue of the Commander in the Don Juan plays startles the viewer precisely because it marks the first intrusion of the marvelous into a strictly human world. In Molière's *Dom Juan* (1665), where the protagonist is a thoroughgoing skeptic who refuses to admit the reality of supernatural forces and does not allow the statue to terrify him, the playwright adds a second prodigy, a "spectre en femme voilée" who conveys a final warning to the hero and, when he refuses to heed it, changes into the personification of Time (V, 5). Despite this amazing accumulation of supernatural manifestations, Dom Juan refuses to connect them with a moral or religious order, seeking desperately to find a purely rational, scientific explanation. The statue and the "spectre" are atypical in that they function as direct agents of divine retribution. Indeed, by showing the hero the criminality of his past in explicitly visual terms, "le Ciel" gives him an offer to repent which he is capable of understanding, even though he chooses to reject it.

Although most of the numerous ghosts in *tragédies-lyriques* are summoned by magical invocation, I have found only one example in the machine plays. Armide in Philippe Quinault's *La Comédie sans comédie* (1657) raises the spirit of her dead uncle Hidraot, who was her mentor in the magical arts, requesting assistance in defeating the invincible Christian knight Renaud. The ghost, who still possesses extensive magical powers and who represents the forces of Hades (who feel threatened by that unstoppable hero), readily agrees to help. Indeed, as he informs his niece, he has already given Renaud her portrait, with which the knight instantly fell in love, and has led him in the direction of her enchanted palace, where she will have ample opportunity to destroy him (V, 2). When Renaud arrives, the ghost, presumably in some

humble disguise, invites him to cross the bridge onto the magic island. Once Renaud has complied, the ghost prevents the hero's squire Agis from following him, first by threats and then by causing the bridge to break. When Agis tries to attack him with his sword, the ghost vanishes (V, 3). This ghost clearly plays a major role in advancing the plot, as well as symbolizing the alliance of devils and earthly magicians to defeat the virtuous crusaders.

The other ghost scene in a machine play has absolutely nothing in common with those just discussed. In Molière, Corneille and Quinault's *Psyché* (1671), when the heroine descends to the underworld, she encounters the shades of her two human suitors, Agénor and Cléomène. Their main function is to inform her (and the audience) of what transpired on earth during her stay in Amour's magic palace: they tell how they jumped off a cliff in despair when they saw her carried off by the agents of the supposed monster, and how her envious sisters, whose wicked advice caused Psyché to lose her husband, have been sent to Hades and sentenced to dire punishment. In addition, they assure her that they feel no bitterness over losing her and dying young, since they can take satisfaction in seeing her the bride of a god and since they now dwell in the section of the Elysian Fields reserved for lovers; they even predict, although tentatively, that she will be reunited with Amour and accepted into the ranks of the immortals (V, 2).

How were these episodes staged? Hidraot presumably enters and disappears through a trapdoor, since the areas directly below and above the stage frequently served for miraculous entrances and exits in machine plays. As for Agénor and Cléomène, since the last act of *Psyché* is set in Hades already, they presumably enter and exit like normal characters. Perhaps the strangest feature of these scenes is that, unlike the appearance of ghosts in dreams or the Commander's statue, the living characters do not find them the least bit frightening, while the ghosts, far from being menacing, do everything in their power to assist and encourage Armide and Psyché. Their sinister dimension is thus reduced to the bare essentials of makeup and costume, without which the audience could not recognize them as ghosts.

If ghosts are the most human of the sinister beings, monsters are the least human. They are inevitably non-speaking roles and were probably big hollow statues, controlled by stagehands above or below the stage, though in some cases stagehands or dancers may have operated them from inside; precise information is lacking. Their main function is intimidation and destruction, and they are mere instruments of an evil sorcerer or hostile deity, possessing no will of their own. One might say that their secondary function is to provide a touchstone for supremely great heroes; no one of lesser stature would dare attack so formidable an adversary. Clearly expendable, they do not remain on stage long, for they are soon slain or expelled by good characters with superior magic powers. This is especially evident in Françoise Pascal's *Endymion* (1657), where all the title character's adventures take place within a magically induced dream. Thus, when Endymion is assailed by monsters and wild beasts, the mere act of drawing his sword suffices to put them to flight and prove his bravery (II, 1.369-79).

For Pierre Corneille's *Andromède* (1650) we possess more information than usual, thanks to the illustrations included in the second edition (1651) and to a detailed discussion of the play in the *Gazette de France* of 18 February 1650. In the plate for Act III the sea monster is shown as a creature of immense size, with a huge mouth complete with forked tongues and the ability to breathe fire (cf. I, 1, 169), two long arms with claws, and a series of snake-like coils. It advances toward the heroine slowly, "ne mouvant pas seulement tout son corps dans le grand chemin qu'il fait, mais chacune de ses parties: et ce qui est plus remarquable en la perspective, paraissant de différentes grandeurs à mesure qu'il approche." (*Andromède* 163) Might this mean that there were people inside the monster, moving its individual limbs? We get no details about the actual combat, but it must have been extended and vigorous, given the huge size of the monster and the amount of text that the chorus is supposed to sing while the fight is in progress. Apparently, the monster sinks below the stage as soon as it is slain, since there is no mention of its still being present later in the act. If this is so, then it is visible for only sixty lines (vv, 896-955). The *Livret* for the 1682 revival gives a more detailed physical description of the monster ("écailleux, armé de griffes et d'arêtes piquan-

tes"), notes that the highly impressive horse Pégase joins in the fighting, and adds that "Ce combat paraît un assez long espace de temps pour en admirer la beauté" (*Andromède* 201-02).

For *La Toison d'or* (1660) Corneille decided on a different type of monster scene. Médée and her brother Absyrte concoct a scheme to make Hypsipyle renounce her unfaithful fiancé Jason. Everyone will benefit, since Médée loves Jason and Absyrte loves Hypsipyle. The sorceress transports the hapless queen to a "palais d'horreur" and summons a group of monsters to devour her. According to Corneille's own description in the *Dessein* (1661), "Quatre monstres ailés, et quatre rampants enferment Hypsipyle." (*Œuvres complètes*. 3: 199) But when an offstage voice sings, the monsters freeze in their tracks, and when Absyrte appears out of a descending cloud, he commands them to disappear. According to the stage direction, "Tous les monstres s'envolent ou fondent sous terre" (III, 6, 1379). Presumably, the winged monsters do the flying and the crawling monsters do the sinking, so that their exit involves the same machinery as their entrance. In the absence of a combat, the monsters merely slink away, having been visible for only forty-two lines (vv. 1338-79). Of course, the simultaneous appearance and disappearance of eight large creatures was one of the major spectacular effects of the play.

The play with the greatest variety of monsters is Thomas Corneille's *Circé* (1675). The vindictive and sadistic sorceress, not content with transforming the men who have offended her into wild beasts, has kept them in her palace as a kind of army to intimidate or attack future visitors. Thus, when Glaucus spurns her advances, Circé tries to terrify him by summoning this collection of "divers Animaux, Lyons, Ours, Tygres, Dragons, & Serpens" (Th. Corneille II, 7, 1290). But when she orders them to attack Glaucus, he commands them to disappear, whereupon "Tous les Animaux sont engloutis dans la Terre" (II, 7, 1320). As the magic contest continues, Circé orders ten bronze statues supporting the arbor to come to life and to defend her. No sooner have the statues complied when Glaucus orders them to disappear. They fly away, and the arbor sinks into the earth. The number of machines operating simultaneously in the course of this scene must have made it

quite dazzling. Viewed allegorically, the duel between Circé and Glaucus shows the triumph of good magicians over bad, though in fact the latter's powers are limited: Glaucus, as a minor marine deity, has only a defensive magic capability (he can use it to defend himself but for little else). Similarly, the animation and dispersal of the statues indicates in visual terms how illusory the beauty and seductiveness of Circé and her palace really are - a distant echo of the medieval doctrine that equated evil with non-being.

Evil spirits and furies, the third and most commonly used type of sinister being, can threaten and intimidate people, kidnap mortals or drag them to the underworld, deliver false information and bad advice, or otherwise assist the nefarious plans of an evil sorcerer or hostile deity. They may be portrayed either by speaking actors or by dancers. Because they function as little more than spectacular servants, they can advance the plot only to a limited extent.

Arguably the most energetic of these evil creatures are the kidnapping spirits, generally silent roles, who are distinguished more by speed than by striking physical appearance. Corneille, perhaps motivated by mythological consistency, entrusted this function to spirits of the air: eight Vents commanded by Eole in *Andromède* (II, 5.742), and two Zéphyrs in *Psyché* (II, 4.895). His brother in one instance specifies that the kidnappers are to be invisible (*Circé* I, 8.773), while later in the same play the Esprits, now presumably visible, are attacked and overpowered in mid air by little Cupids (IV, 5.2157).

Sinister allegorical characters likewise have little will of their own. In Jean Donneau de Visé's *Les Amours de Vénus et d'Adonis* (1670) the god Mars makes an impressive first entrance flying through the air in a horse-drawn chariot, accompanied by three mute associates, Renommée, Crainte and Terreur. Upon descending, he bids Renommée fly off with the chariot, then asks Crainte and Terreur not to accompany him, since his current mission to earth is solely devoted to love, whereupon they also fly away (II, 1.363-68). Although these seemingly unnecessary characters were intended mainly to show the god of war with his principal attrib-

utes, their presence serves a psychological function by reminding us that Mars is a cruel and violent character, unlikely to inspire love. Of course, in performance such silent characters can establish a distinct identity only by wearing striking and symbolic costumes; unfortunately, we have no information about the costumes in the original production.

In *Les Amours du Soleil* (1671) by the same author the personifications maintain even less of a personal identity. Vénus, enraged at the fickleness of her erstwhile lover Apollon, sends a series of threatening messages to his current beloved, the princess Leucothoé. To make the threats especially terrifying, she orders three personifications (Jalousie, Envie and Discorde) to deliver them, disguised as the deities Pallas, Mercure and Junon; she also engages the three Furies to reiterate the message, in the guise of three celestial spirits. The personifications seem to function as a troupe of actors for hire, completely without moral scruples. Discorde is unmasked when Jupiter, a champion of truthfulness, heeds Apollon's plea and hurls a thunderbolt at her chariot, which bursts into flames and splits into pieces (III, 10); the other deceptions are revealed when Jupiter compels the Furies to return to Leucothoé in their true guise and explain exactly what has been going on (III, 6). The most sinister feature of this work is not the presence of such frightening creatures, but rather the constant uncertainty about who is who and whether Apollon is capable of defending his beloved from the wrath of his fellow gods. That uncertainty is reflected in the fact that Donneau de Visé confers reality and unreality upon his personifications at the same time: they really exist as minor deities, but they are merely generic evil spirits, available to perform any mischief at the bidding of one of the principal gods.

Because these personifications are purely external agents of intimidation with no fixed identity of their own, they cannot function in what was to be their most effective role in the *tragédies-lyriques*; namely, as projections of specific forces within the human psyche. The only tentative anticipation of that function occurs in Claude Boyer's *Les Amours de Jupiter et de Sémélé* (1666), when the god Hyménée and his temple vanish as soon as the king formally announces that he is forcing his daughter Sémélé to wed a

human prince, although she is the beloved of Jupiter. The lair of Jalousie appears in place of the temple, and Jalousie herself emerges from an abyss that opens in its floor, in a chariot drawn by dragons, to deliver a threatening speech to the king (IV, 6; *Dessein* 14. In *Recueil de tragédies à machines*, *q.v.*). After declaring that the proposed marriage will destroy his family, she reveals her identity and warns that she will continue to torment them (IV.7). The weakness of this scene as allegory is that, although jealousy torments several of the other main characters, it does not afflict the king, whose vices are anger and tyranny. Nevertheless, the four dancing "fantômes" who appear in the still visible lair of Jalousie later in the act to frighten Sémélé (IV.10.1697) arguably constitute a genuine projection of the heroine's inner anguish.

Furies are not only the most energetic of the purely evil characters; they derive great pleasure from their nefarious activities and do not seem to mind being at the beck and call of sorcerers or angry gods. Fortunately, the pamphlet accompanying the premiere of *Les Amours du Soleil* provides a detailed description of their costumes in that production: they "tiennent chacune en une main un flambeau allumé & plusieurs serpens dans l'autre. Elles n'ont pour coeffures que des serpens autour de la teste; leur habillement est une longue robe noire, toute semée de flâmes, avec une ceinture de plusieurs serpens" (*Sujet* 11). In *Circé* we find the largest single gathering of evil spirits: the title character, bent on revenge upon Glaucus, summons the Furies together with the "plus noires Divinitez de l'Enfer," including Terreur, Désespoir and Rage (IV, 5.2193). Played by dancers, these forces of evil express themselves only in pantomime, accompanied by music. In the course of their thirty-five-line "conversation" with Circé they display an astonishing range of moods, noted as follows in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's score: "joye, complaisance, colere et tendresse, rage et pitié, fureur et promptitude, estonnement, marques d'impuissance," and ending with "fureur et desespoir" before she dismisses them and they flee (*Circé* 181). Although incapable of speaking, they are more complex and more human than any of the other sinister beings encountered thus far.

In conclusion, the proliferation of frightening creatures in machine plays served two vital purposes: it satisfied the visual need for dazzling mechanical effects and for strikingly unusual costumes, and it allowed for the effective integration into the plots of the most extreme moral, physical and psychological states (absolute good versus absolute evil, resplendent beauty versus hideous ugliness, blissful happiness versus terror and agony). In a society where most people still believed in ghosts, demons and witches, the machine plays provided excitement and titillation, but reassured the audience by placing the sinister beings in the remote worlds of classical mythology or medieval romance. As the form evolved, playwrights came to glimpse the possibilities for fusing the supernatural with the psychological and for expressing the demonic through music and dance. How far they might have gone if Lully had not achieved such overwhelming success with his operas we shall never know.

## NOTES

[1]The most comprehensive study of the machine plays is Christian Delmas's*Mythologie et mythe dans le théâtre français (1650-1673)* (*q.v.*). On staging of spectacular effects, see Sophie-Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *L'Histoire de la mise en scène dans le théâtre français à Paris de 1600 à 1673* (*q.v.*); Marie-Françoise Christout, *Le Ballet de cour de Louis XIV 1643-1672* (*q.v.*). Nicola Sabbattini's highly influential treatise on the subject, *Pratica di fabricare scene e machine ne' teatri*, first published in 1638, seems to have been well known in France by the middle of the century. The present study is a continuation of my earlier article, "Staging and Spectacle in the Machine Tragedies" in *L'Age du théâtre en France*, ed. David Trott and Nicole Boursier (q.v.).

[2]In the fourth act of an anonymous tragedy, *Astianax*, staged at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in late 1656 or early 1657, a ghost rises from "dessoubz le theatre" (Deierkauf-Holsboer 69). The play is lost, but a contract relating to the machinery and sets survives.

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