

H-France Forum

Volume 18 (2023), Issue 3, #1

Caroline Callard, *Le temps des fantômes. Spectralités de l'âge moderne (XVI^e–XVII^e siècle)*. Collection “L'épreuve de l'histoire.” Paris: Fayard, 2019. 366 pp. Tableaux, notes, et index. 23€ (pb). ISBN 9782213712789.

Caroline Callard, *Spectralities in the Renaissance: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Trans. Trista Selous. The Past and Present Book Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. pp. 248. Tables, notes, and index. £75.00 U.K.; \$100.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780198849476.

Parenthetical citations are from the same language edition as the quotations.

Review Essay by Elizabeth Tingle, De Montfort University

In 1628, a young woman, Huguette Roy, was at home alone in the town of Dole in the Franche-Comté, pregnant, sick, and worried, having already lost two babies in their infancy. To her surprise, another woman dressed in white appeared in her chamber, and returned every day, to care and clean, then to advise on childcare when Huguette's healthy son was born. This helper was a ghost, of a long-deceased aunt, offering worldly assistance in return for prayers.[1] The domestic—and gendered—aspect of this haunting is in many respects, typical of the cases discussed in Caroline Callard's book. The spectres of the Reformations and Counter Reformation examined here rarely appear as demonic; sometimes they are troublesome and frightening, but more often, they are useful agents, whether passively or actively. Callard argues that ghosts were omni-present in Renaissance Europe and contextually contingent in this period of religious conflict and war. When cultural conditions shifted in the later seventeenth century, ghosts were also transformed.

Spectralities in the Renaissance is a shortened, English version of Callard's 2019 *Le temps des fantômes. Spectralités d'Ancien Régime*, translated by Trista Selous. The term “spectralities” is used in both the English and French versions to indicate that this is not a history of ghosts or phantoms per se, but a wider consideration, of the intangible quality of being spectral, and above all, of experiencing spectres. The author's stated aims are not to examine beliefs in, or the historical evolution of the cultural forms known as ghosts, but to study their actions; what they did, how they were interpreted and used by contemporaries. The book is effectively a study of representations, of how ghosts were portrayed and utilised, and how this changed over the period. The focus is on human revenants, individuals who return, rather than on demons or saintly apparitions, although one could turn into another, as with the grandfather ghost-demon in the case of Nicole Obry in Laon in 1565-66.[2] This is not a work of soteriology, or of the afterlife, but of the place of the spectre in this world, and its effect on the affected individual or community.

The context in which the study takes place is that of the western European Reformations and religious wars, primarily in France but with comparisons drawn from England, Germany, Italy, and the Low Countries. In the late twentieth century, medievalists such as Jean-Claude Schmitt argued that in the Middle Ages, ghosts were everywhere and accepted by everyone, while

historians of Protestantism such as Keith Thomas, saw a break with the past in the sixteenth century, as adherents of the new theologies repudiated ghosts and other supernatural forms.[3] But the disenchantment of the world, to use Weber's phrase, has been revised in recent years and Callard works with a similar view to authors such as Timothy Chesters, who see a survival of spectral belief into the Enlightenment.[4] Callard argues that the eschatological crisis of the early modern period made spectrality part of the experience of temporality for people of that period. She maintains, however, that there was no stable view of spectres; their reality, origins and actions were issues which divided the churches, lacked orthodoxy in any confessional tradition and were fluid phenomenon.

Spectralities is divided into three parts. The first section is essentially on written sources concerning ghosts, an important theme running through the book. Because Callard's study is essentially on the portrayal and utilisation of ghosts, the nature of the textual evidence is central. Callard observes that there are few manuscript or ecclesiastical sources on ghosts, perhaps because of a Protestant and Catholic avoidance of bothersome subjects. This made me think about the manuscript archive of religious testimony, which is sparse for many aspects of pre-modern belief. In one respect, the absence of registers of ghosts is unsurprising; they cannot be counted or spent, they do not take people to law, and they do not require correction. Conversely, miracle stories—aimed at the legal recognition of a saint—are plentiful, largely because they have a practical end. But then, these are heavenly rather than purgatorial apparitions. Far more plentiful, and the source of much of Callard's information, are ghost stories found in literary works of various forms, increasingly popular and circulated as print expanded. In Renaissance publications, ghosts were commonplace, in Catholic and Protestant works. Callard discusses the nature and context of a range of such works, from collections on wonders and prodigies such as Alessandro Alessandri's *Geniales dies* (first published 1522), to Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires prodigieuses* (first published 1560) to Henning Grosse's *De Magica* (1597). To examine the influence of such literature on individuals Callard uses the example of Pierre de L'Estoile, who took a great interest in the supernatural, collecting pamphlets and publications. In particular, he read closely Le Loyer's *Discours des spectres* (1605), which he found interesting and enjoyable, but much of which he found incredible, in the literal sense of the word—or at least he worked hard to do so. This was just as well, for a man who lived in a house reputed to be haunted could not afford to be nervous of the returning dead.

Callard goes on to examine the position of ghosts in natural philosophy, that is, how contemporaries related them to the world of humans and the providence of God. Enquiries began with readings of St Augustine, who maintained that there was an unbreachable separation between the living and the dead, but who admitted that apparitions existed and were an inscrutable mystery. Catholics use St Augustine's writings to validate Purgatory, while Protestants such as Ludwig Lavater exploited the ambiguity of his views. In search of the materiality of this theology, the science of ghosts changed over time. In the later Middle Ages, the study of spirits involved finding out who they were and what they wanted—discernment, with debates taking place on the nature of the corporality of ghosts. The main change in the sixteenth century, according to Callard, was that competing philosophical currents alongside Aristotle, such as Neoplatonism, increased interest in ghosts and other forms of spirits. The innovative natural philosophies and Galenic medicine used new tools to explore the beings of the supernatural world. Callard argues this can be seen in the work of the Protestant Ludwig Lavater's *De spectris* (1569), and the responses to it

by the Catholic Franciscan Noël de Taillepied and the Angevin jurist Le Loyer. The latter author provided a corpus and explanation of different forms of spectres, in the vernacular for wide dissemination and use.

The second section of Callard's book focuses on the relationship between ghostly experiences and times of crisis, through case studies of apparitions in legal court cases. Callard argues that the appearance of spectres was related to religious conflict, war, and eschatological anguish. Works that spread knowledge of spectres and apparitions added to contemporaries' sense of living in a period of chaos and end times, as portents and witnesses to the crisis. Ghosts haunted two particular arenas in this period of conflict, towns rather than the countryside and above all, the home. This is exemplified by two court cases over leases of properties, one related to a house in Bordeaux and the second to an inn in Tours. In both instances, the tenants went to law to gain release from contracts because they claimed to be harassed by revenants of former inhabitants of the properties. In both cases, just fear was argued, and appropriate exorcism rituals had failed. Callard argues that the haunting of Bordeaux affirmed the superiority of Catholicism—Protestants were converted after experiencing a fright—and that of Tours, the upholding of contract law and thus judicial authority. Ghosts were thus supporters of sovereign institutions in a time of crisis.

The third section of Callard's work examines different mechanisms of ghostly agency in human affairs. She attempts to define the way contemporaries experienced haunting by examining the ways in which they describe it. Callard takes up Natalie Zemon Davis's view that the dead—and therefore ghosts—became individualised in the Renaissance and the first important step in dealing with them was to find out their name. To know a spirit's identity was to know its biography and therefore its connection with the living present. While St Augustine stated that love cannot transcend death, and orthodox theology opined that souls could not act as autonomous agents, without the sanction of God, many ghost happenings were about family ties and the restitution of value, in some way. Specific souls were seen as returning to work for their lineage. Ghosts returned to the living as informants, notably in matters of inheritance, as the well-known story of Huguette Roy demonstrated. Her ghostly helper was a relative whose testamentary bequests had gone astray; Roy undertook good works to free her aunt from purgatory and in exculpation for past family actions. In other examples, ghosts of husbands appeared to their widows, to ensure they maintained domestic fidelity and protected the lineage, as with the young widow of Toulouse who was repeatedly visited by an apparition of a young man who turned out to be her husband. Women were considered more likely to see phantoms, being of inferior and more emotional cognitive capacities, along with children and adolescents. But ghosts did not only assume patriarchal roles, they could also offer agency to women, as with the case of Roy, who was strengthened by the presence of a female, kindred ghost.

Ghosts were mobile, they travelled. They moved across space and time, into prisons and nunneries, and they needed a space of their own, for their bodies to be appropriately confined. Poor burial could lead a revenant to return, to demand better treatment, and stories abound of the badly interred: Protestants, Catholics, hidden murder victims, people buried in the wrong place. Ghosts were also frequently encountered by travellers, moving across the globe with missionaries and colonisers. Le Loyer considered ghosts to be a universal phenomenon, present in all societies, proving the existence of Purgatory as a real place. Jesuit missionaries encountered ghosts, as with the appearance of the young Jesuit Gerolamo Cignardi to motivate his friend Giovanni Battista

Bonelli, a novice missionary to India. Spectres were also present in European colonies, as the work of Bartolomé de las Casas shows with the ghosts of the failed settlement of La Isabela, which included westerners who died in a quest for gold that led the Indians to suffer, and Indians who haunted the Christian conscience and urged a return to Christ.

The debunking of ghosts and their explaining away was a marked feature of sixteenth-century literature, especially in Catholic-Protestant soteriological contest. Spectral deception was also a popular literary trope, providing a wealth of amusing stories. But Callard focuses on the political use of ghosts in the last section of the book. Rivalry between Dominicans and Franciscans in Bern led to a notorious case of faked haunting and judicial retribution in 1507; a contest between Protestant and Catholic over burial space and urban authority in Orleans in 1534-1535 led to banishment for those found guilty of inventing the ghost of a Protestant woman buried in Catholic soil. Deception was both sin and crime and had to be punished. Political hauntings were a way of asserting royal authority. The murder of Concino Concini, advisor to Queen Marie de Medicis, was followed by his appearance as a ghost in numerous pamphlets, where political disputes were played out. The haunted ruins of the castle of Bicêtre on the outskirts of Paris were rebuilt and repurposed as a hospital for wounded soldiers by Louis XIII, exorcising the spectres of rebellion, banditry, and phantoms themselves from the outskirts of the capital, and thus asserting the power of the crown over its territory.

In conclusion, Callard explores the attack on ghosts of the later seventeenth century, when the grand narrative of the scientific revolution resulted in their expulsion. Ghosts were no longer admissible as reliable evidence in French courts from the 1640s, for spectres could not be objectified, they did not speak in their own name, and they left no tangible evidence behind. In the scientific writings of the later seventeenth century, many spirit phenomena were reclassified as natural occurrences and critiques were clearly heard: the Abbé Thiers and Baltazar Bekker are the best known.[5] But ghosts did not depart entirely. There continued to be reasoned proofs of their existence and above all, they lived on in literature and popular culture. Over time, ghosts appeared most frequently in devotional works, messengers from Purgatory to promote good works. They also continued a literary and cultural presence, in theatre and the arts.

Spectralities is a wide ranging and rich work, difficult to summarise in a short space. It is not always an easy read, in that it is closely detailed, there is some dense description and the links between sections are not always clearly explained. Although it is a work on revenants, some more discussion of perceived origins of ghosts and on their explanation in soteriological terms, would have been useful context. In particular, there is no discussion of the link between ghosts and witchcraft, which was important in this period. The case studies used were mostly French, with some examples drawn from elsewhere, and similarities and differences across geographies as well as confessions, could have been more tightly drawn. But the book is a major achievement, for the author's achievement in summarising so much material in one ordinary-length volume is no mean feat. Any literary or cultural scholar of early modern Europe would profit from reading this book.

NOTES

[1] The case of Huguette Roy is discussed at several points in Callard's text. There is also a translation and commentary on the case in Christophe Mercier, Kathryn A. Edwards, and Susie Speakman Sutch, *Leonarde's Ghost: Popular Piety and "The Appearance of a Spirit" in 1628* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2008).

[2] Nicole Obry's case was much discussed by contemporaries and two texts can be found in Irena Dorota Backus, *Guillaume Postel et Jean Boulaese: De Summopere (1566) et Le Miracle De Laon (1566)* (Paris: Droz, 1995). There is an analysis of the case in Denis Crouzet, "A Woman and the Devil: Possession and Exorcism in Sixteenth-Century France," in *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*, ed. Michael Wolfe (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[3] Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages. The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, transl. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholls, 1971).

[4] Timothy Chesters, *Ghost Stories in Late Renaissance France. Walking by Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[5] For England, there is a detailed study of the battle between believers and sceptics, and the role of the new natural sciences in spirit studies, in Michael Hunter, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020).

Elizabeth Tingle
De Montfort University
elizabeth.tingle@dmu.ac.uk

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum
Volume 18 (2023), Issue 3, #1