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What did early modern audiences relish about Hamlet's ghost?

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The ur-*Hamlet* mentioned by Thomas Lodge features a pale-vizarded 'ghost which cried so miserally at ye Theator like an oyster wife *Hamlet, revenge*'.¹ However, spectators credit Shakespeare's ghost with more initiative and energy. John Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604) refers to affection for Malevole 'put on' with 'the most affected grace' by a usurper's son, whom he greets with 'arte there olde true penny? Where hast thou spent thy selfe this morning? I see flattery in thine eies, and damnation in thy soule' (referring to *Hamlet*, 1.5.50, 'arte thou there, truepenny').² The subplot of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Womans Prize: or The Tamer Tamed* (1604-1617) ends with the success of a deception that lets two characters marry, sealed by an oath sworn twice after arbitrarily deciding to 'remove our places' to 'Swear it again' (referring to *Hamlet*, 1.5.156, '*Hic et ubique*? Then we'll shift our ground').³ Edward Sutton's *Anthropophagus: or, a Caution for the Credulous. A Morall Discourse Upon... Prov. 26.25 'Though he speaketh favourably, beleeve him not'* (1623) warns against flatterers who agree with their patron, no matter what: 'men know not where to finde them: for they are like *Hamlets ghost, hic & ubique*, here and there, and every

¹ T. Lodge, *Wit's Misery* (1596), p. 56.

² J. Marston, *The Malcontent* (1604), F1r.

³ F. Beaumont and J. Fletcher, *The Womans Prize: or The Tamer Tamed* (1604-1617) in *Comedies and Tragedies* (1647), Qqqqq1v.

where, for their owne occasion'.⁴ Wye Saltonstall's *Picturae loquentes, or Pictures Drawne Forth in Characters* (1631) satirises an amiable chamberlain of an inn, who is 'as nimble as Hamlets ghost heere and every where' in showing travellers the worst rooms first (as though there were no others), after damping the sheets of their beds to pretend they had recently been washed.⁵

The ghost's own comments on its movements merely contrast being confined in fires during the day and walking at night. Watchers comment on its unpredictable and inconsistent appearances ('tis here. / 'Tis here. / 'Tis gone', 1.1.140-41) and mimed invitations: 'It beckons you to go away with it', 'with what courteous action/ It waves you to a more removed ground', 'It waves me forth', 'It waves me still' (1.4.58-61, 68, 79). Hamlet recovers his self-possession after the ghost disappears by joking about its ubiquity. The Arden 3 editors mention this quality as significant, since it is shared by God and the devil.⁶ It would seem, however, that the play's first audiences were more struck by the danger Hamlet is running into of being deceived into error by the ghost's show of courtesy.

⁴ E. Sutton, *Anthropophagus: or, a Caution for the Credulous...* PROV. 26.25 *Though he speaketh fauourably, beleuee him not* (1623), p. 14.

⁵ W. Saltonstall, *Picturae loquentes, or Pictures Drawne Forth in Characters* (1631), E4r.

⁶ W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. A. Thompson and N. Taylor, Arden Shakespeare third series (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 1.5.156 fn.