# The English Reformation and Ghosts
## Orthodox revenance

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the Reformation, ghosts became undesirable for Protestant theology, which through its rejection of purgatory severed the highly intimate bonds that the living had with the dead during the Middle Ages. England's attitude on the matter was fairly distinct from other Protestant countries, for after a century of trying to convince the faithful to abandon these beliefs, Anglican theologians undertook a fairly spectacular reversal by once again making the appearance of the deceased part of dogma, in an effort to defend the overall religious structure against the new enemy of atheism during the second half of the seventeenth century.
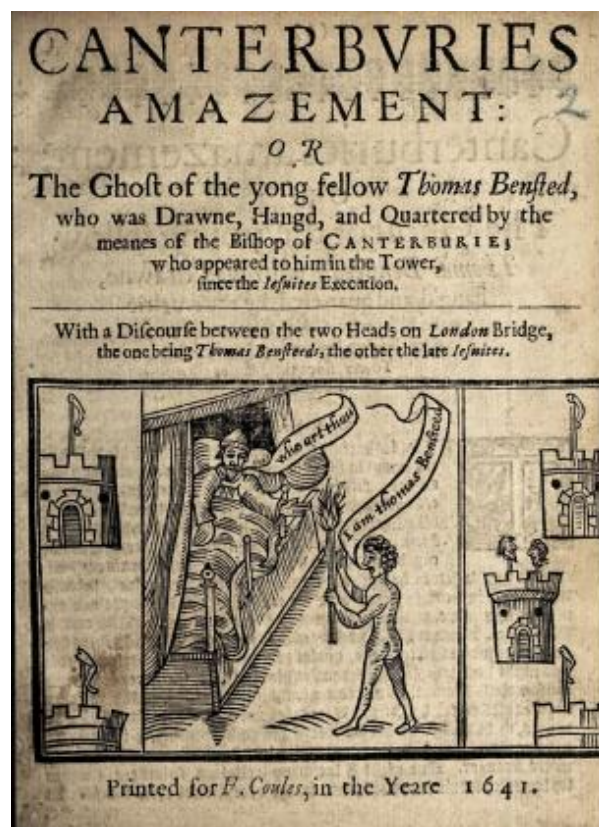
Canterburies amazement: or The Ghost of the yong fellow Thomas Bensted,
London, F. Coules, 1641, in-4°, frontispiece. Source : Wikimedia Commons
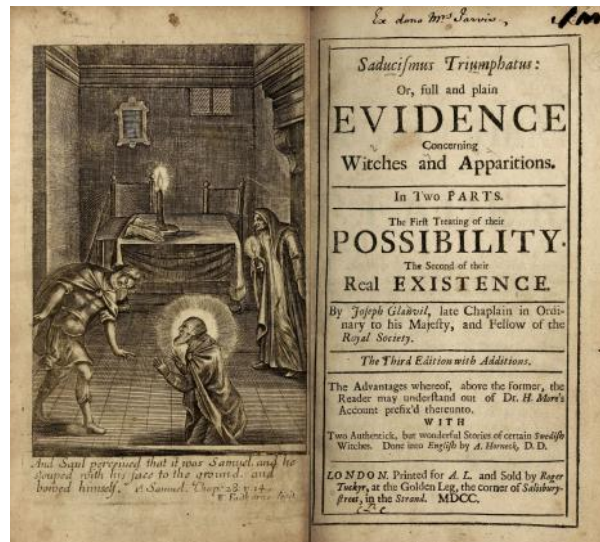
Joseph Glanvill, Saducismus triumphatus, London, J. Collins, 1681, frontispice.
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The Reformation Faced with Ghosts

In Europe during the Middle Ages, the living maintained close and reciprocal bonds with the dead. In the early sixteenth century, one of the effects of the Reformation led by Luther (1483-1546) and later Calvin (1509-1564) was to break this relation. Rejecting the existence of purgatory pushed the spirits of the dead beyond the reach of the world of the living. Protestants did not believe that blissful souls would leave heaven, or that damned souls could escape from hell. In the absence of an intermediate place to purge sins between heaven and hell, only angels or demons could appear to the living bearing the resemblance of the deceased they had once known. Yet given that Protestants believed that the time of miracles had passed, the only probable candidates were demons. The appearances of such spirits were therefore simply diabolical impostures designed to lead good Christians away from the right path.

England adopted the Reformation following the divorce of Henry VIII (1534). After a traumatizing return of Catholicism under Mary Tudor (1553-1558), from 1558 onward Elizabeth I imposed a middle way as state religion, one that combined a doctrine of Calvinist inspiration with a liturgy fairly close to Catholicism.

For all that, the new Protestant orthodoxy struggled to impose itself with regard to ghosts. While Catholic and continental Protestant theologies took a tough stance on the subject, with numerous publications appearing during the last third of the sixteenth century, few theoretical writings on ghosts were published in England. People were content with translating into English the two primary works circulating in the rest of Europe: *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night* (1569) by the Protestant pastor of Zurich, Ludwig Lavater (1527-1586), in 1572, and *Les quatre livres des spectres* by the Catholic jurist Pierre Le Loyer (1550-1634), in 1605. Furthermore, the Frenchman's text was not translated in its entirety, as the passages that conflicted with Anglican positions on the topic were expurgated. On the English side, only Reginald Scot (1538-1599) provided a substantial contribution to this debate with his brief *Discourse upon Divels and Spirits*, which he appended to his monumental *Discouerie of Witchcraft* (1584). In order to deny any interaction between the spiritual world and the physical world, Scot denied ghosts and other spirits any kind of material substance.

Sacred Ghosts, Secular Ghosts

The question of spirits had in fact returned to the forefront of the European scene since the end of the Council of Trent (1563). The Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed belief in purgatory among other elements in its dogma, and the appearance of spirits that it entailed. Even so, the Counter-Reformation warned against too much credulity. Like its Protestant adversaries, it developed a certain suspicion toward apparitions of all sorts. These disputes between Catholics and continental Protestants also affected England, notably through authors writing for the new public theaters of London. These productions betrayed a popular enthusiasm for spirits, and were also fostered by recent English translations of Seneca's tragedies, with their share of phantoms serving as a chorus. This preference translated into an abundance of ghostly figures on London stages from the beginnings of public theaters, with two star ghosts dominating the overall teeming production: Don Andrea in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), and the ghost of the dead king in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1600).

Many spirits are also present in popular ballads, in which ghosts, contrary to Protestant theological precepts, move about in flesh and blood. Even more so than in other Protestant countries on the continent, practice remained very distant from scholarly theories. Accounts of appearances of the dead continued to spread in England throughout the seventeenth century. There was even a change in the relations between theology and beliefs beginning in the 1650s. Instead of seeing scholarly theories—affirming that ghosts were necessarily a diabolical illusion—establish themselves after nearly a century of preaching, the opposite took place. Preachers began to defend the existence of ghosts, under pressure from what were deemed to be atheist attacks. In the middle of the century, freethinkers and Socinian skeptics, along with nonconformists and Diggers, took advantage of the loosening of the civil and religious authority that came with the first English Revolution (1642-1660) to attack Christian dogma. Puritans themselves, who ordinarily advocated a Protestantism closer to Calvinism, were not markedly different on the subject than the Anglicans of the Church of England.

Rehabilitating Ghosts to Combat Atheism

This new debate began during the English Revolution, as the greatest witch-hunt in the British Isles was unleashed by Matthew Hopkins (c. 1620-1647). This dispute reached its apex during the second half of the seventeenth century with the Restoration. The scholars who defended the existence of ghosts and witches in addition to the Devil were no longer just theologians, but also followers of the new "natural philosophy" (physical science) that had been flourishing since the sixteenth century. Among the primary champions of this rehabilitated supernatural were Henry More (1614-1687) and Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680), two eminent members of the Royal Society (both elected in 1664). More sparked the controversy by publishing *An Antidote Against Atheism* in 1653; Glanvill followed suit with a treatise published in 1666, which he rewrote up until his death, and that came down to posterity with the title of its final version, revised and expanded by his friend Henry More: *Saducismus triumphatus* (1681). The skeptical adversaries opposing them, such as John Wagstaffe and John Webster, did not have the same authority or renown.

It was within this context that the first anthologies of ghost stories appeared, with some of them being part of more general collections on all kinds of supernatural phenomena, and others exclusively focusing on ghosts. Still, it was long believed that the first anthology of this type came from the pen of a certain Thomas Bromhall, who in 1658 published a long collection entitled *A Treatise of Specters*, which in reality was no more than the English translation of a German collection by Henning Grosse, published in Latin in the late sixteenth century. This first work was nevertheless followed by many other collections, whose argumentative framework gradually transitioned from accumulations aiming to establish proof toward collections more clearly oriented toward entertainment.

While being part of the European debate on ghosts, England nevertheless exhibited genuine originality: by contradicting the notion of a decline in the magic spirit in the face of materialist rationality, it combined science

and religion in its defense of ghostly apparitions. With its unabating appetite for ghost stories, it also prefigured the European trend for Spiritism, which came from America during the mid-nineteenth century.

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