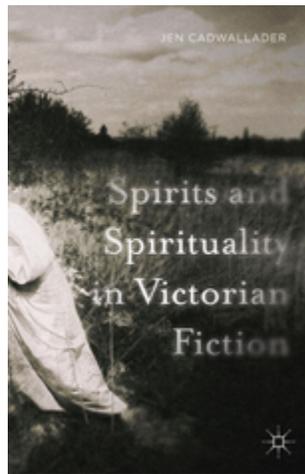


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Guest Edited by Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill



The Conflict between Individuality, Science, and Theology in the Victorian Ghost Story

[*Spirits and Spirituality in Victorian Fiction*](#). Jen Cadwallader. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 209 pp.

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<1>In her poem 'Haunted!' (1878) Isabella Banks asserts '[a]nd so, it is said, you are haunted! / My friend, we are haunted all; / And every homestead holds a ghost / That ever has held a pall' (lines 1-4).⁽¹⁾ These lines reflect the Victorians' sense of being 'haunted' by their own fascination with ghosts; however, they can also be applied to the latest explosion of critical material on the supernatural in nineteenth-century literature, culture, and history. Recent studies present overviews of the British ghost story (Andrew Smith,⁽²⁾ Simon Hay⁽³⁾), the phenomenon of ghost-seeing (Srdjan Smajic,⁽⁴⁾ Shane McCorristine⁽⁵⁾), and popular ghost beliefs (Sasha Handley,⁽⁶⁾ Owen Davies⁽⁷⁾). At the same time that Jen Cadwallader cites all of these studies as formative influences on her book *Spirits and Spirituality in Victorian Fiction* (2-3), she makes an original contribution to this scholarship. Her work argues that 'the

ghost story's thrill is in the individual's triumph over prescriptive authority, in this case the scientific and theological authorities that were increasingly classifying and codifying human experience throughout the nineteenth century' (6). The introduction outlines how the Victorian ghost story provided an alternative view to an Anglican Church rocked by declining religious belief and a scientific establishment that pathologized ghost-seeing. While other studies restrict their scope to well-known ghost stories or those by male authors, Cadwallader covers a balanced mix of canonical and forgotten writers. She notes that her book considers open-minded 'moderate Christian thinkers', (17) which leaves me wondering about authors with more heterodox or radical Christian beliefs. For instance, how is individuality treated in a work by a writer who invented her own scientific and theological theories related to ghosts, as Marie Corelli does with her bizarre 'Electric Creed' of Christianity in *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886)?(8)

<2>Chapter One describes how Sheridan Le Fanu's outlook on stimulants shifted from his early career ghost stories of the 1830s and 40s (collected in *The Purcell Papers* (1880)) to his later supernatural tales in 'In a Glass Darkly' (1872). The Irish Temperance Movement framed drunkenness as a lower-class moral failing and political danger that threatened the Protestant elite, among them Le Fanu. While *The Purcell Papers* associates alcoholism with negative consequences such as ghost-seeing and divine punishment, 'An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street' (1853) takes a more skeptical perspective toward institutional authority. As Cadwallader writes, '[i]n defying and denying the "answers" offered by religion and science Le Fanu points toward ghost-seeing as an experience that lies outside of any system's explanations...' (39), including drunkenness. She remarks that we can trace his changing beliefs through his characterization of the central figure in each collection: the kindly Father Purcell transforms into the 'unlikeable' (43) Dr. Martin Hesselius. Le Fanu's distrust of both science and religion in his late ghost stories leaves his readers in the frightening situation of lacking answers to their greater spiritual questions. Cadwallader's reading of Hesselius as a purely rational figure is significant because he represents the forerunner to male occult detectives such as E. and H. Heron's (Hesketh and Kate Prichard) Flaxman Low (1897), Algernon Blackwood's John Silence (1908), and William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki (1910). It is interesting that Hesselius takes such a rigid approach to the occult, since his literary descendants are more flexible in combining rationalism and supernaturalism.

<3>Chapter Two centers on how the ghosts in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and *The Hallowed Man and the Ghost's Bargain* (1848) enable the protagonists to surpass temporal and spatial limits. In the process, Dickens 'combines a perception of Christmas time...with a theory that ghosts offer Scrooge and Redlaw ways to mentally traverse space and time, helping them gain the psychological relativism necessary to their moral and spiritual growth' (52). Despite Dickens's role in popularizing the Christmas ghost story, he was skeptical about the existence of apparitions. He hilariously satirizes 'a psycho-grapher, which writes at the dictation of spirits. It delivered itself...of this extraordinary lucid message: x.y.z! upon which it was gravely explained by the true believers that 'the spirits were out of temper about something'' (cited in Cadwallader 52-53). However, Dickens refuses to endorse material explanations for ghost-seeing in his fiction because he still regards these visions as beneficial, since they lead to his characters' moral improvement. Cadwallader astutely inspects how the Victorians' experience of temporality was grounded in class-based assumptions that Dickens disrupts in his ghost

stories. He disapproves of both Scrooge's bourgeois attitude of 'time as money' and aristocratic nostalgia for a feudal past; instead, he imagines Christmas as an 'atemporal' space in which Scrooge and Redlaw can develop through self-reflection. I was struck by how Hesselius, Redlaw, and the male experts in 'Carmilla' resemble each other as scientific figures whose rationality prevents them from perceiving spiritual truth. Cadwallader persuasively examines these men of science in each individual story, but I would have appreciated the inclusion of a larger discussion drawing explicit connections between them.

<4>*Spirits and Spirituality* stands out for providing greater coverage of Victorian women's ghost stories than is found in other works, which exclusively focus on ghost stories by male authors or include a token chapter on female-authored texts. Studies by Vanessa Dickerson, Hilary Grimes, and Melissa Edmundson Makala have begun to rectify this disregard of Victorian women's ghost stories.⁽⁹⁾ Over the next two chapters, Cadwallader looks at forgotten ghost stories by female writers such as Edith Nesbit, Margaret Oliphant, Rhoda Broughton, and Mary Louisa Molesworth. Chapter Three addresses Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1872), Oliphant's 'The Library Window' (1896) and Broughton's 'The Man with the Nose' (1872). Despite their opposing literary practices, Oliphant and Broughton both portray how 'female protagonists' supernatural experiences help discredit Victorian psychosexual theories regarding women and invest women with the agency necessary for spiritual growth independent of their (supposed) physical limitations' (86). According to theories haphazardly stitched together like 'Frankenstein's creature', (87) women's inferior mental abilities were linked with their reproductive capacity. Male thinkers such as Henry Maudsley and James McGrigor Allan feared that equality would lead to competition between the sexes or unfeminine female intellectuals. In 'Carmilla,' the male religious and medical authorities are so horrified by female sexuality that they would rather the heroine die than learn the truth about her queer attraction to Carmilla. In contrast with Le Fanu's ambivalence about female sexuality, Oliphant and Broughton's heroines reclaim their sexuality in victories that are 'pyrrhic' (122) at best. While the chapter is engaging overall, I found it odd that Cadwallader fails to mention Broughton was Le Fanu's niece or the fact that her ghost story resembles his 'Schalken the Painter' (1839).

<5>The final chapter starts by discussing how the materialism and technological innovations surrounding the Duke of Wellington's funeral on November 18, 1852 marked a transition in Victorian mourning practices. Cadwallader argues that this shift was embodied by the Victorian spirit photograph, a mourning object developed in 1861 that depicts the subject with the ghost of a departed loved one. As she explains, '[i]n a society where mourning was highly visible in dress, but where grief was all but taboo, the spirit photograph provided a space to gain conceptual control over one's feelings' (135). Besides allowing people to express their repressed emotions, the spirit photograph evidenced an 'anthropocentric' afterlife in which individuals retain their personalities, rather than spending eternity worshipping God. These ideas are scrutinized in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1849), Molesworth's 'Witnessed by Two' (1888), and Nesbit's ghostly works. Cadwallader's investigation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's belief in spirit photography and the irony that the creator of the hyper-rational Sherlock Holmes believed in Spiritualism stands out as well-trodden critical territory in an otherwise original chapter. She concludes with a reading of Rudyard Kipling's 'At the End of the Passage' (1890), which illustrates the horror of the camera furnishing definitive proof of the supernatural. The brief coda assesses how the

heroine of Lanoe Falconer's *Cecilia de Noël* (1891) shows that 'adherence to a system must be tempered by personal knowledge' (1868).

Although academics such as Oliver Tearle⁽¹⁰⁾ and Srdjan Smajic have dissected the relationship between Victorian ghost stories and contemporary science, there is a dearth of criticism on the portrayal of Christianity in supernatural fiction. In attempting to remedy this scholarly oversight, Cadwallader has produced a study that is well-researched, lucidly written, and thought-provoking. Her examination of the Victorian ghost story through the lens of contemporary debates on theology, temporality, psychosexual theory, and mourning practices suggests new directions for scholars to pursue. *Spirits and Spirituality* does an excellent job of paying equal attention to well-known and obscure male and female authors, though Cadwallader's consideration of Doyle feels familiar at this point. Her argument could be pushed a bit further if she looked at ghost stories by radical Christian or even Eastern-influenced thinkers such as Helena Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy. After all, the Victorian ghost story gives scholars a space to explore the more outlandish spiritual beliefs of the period, and I look forward to future studies expanding on this topic. These minor quibbles notwithstanding, Cadwallader's work represents an exciting addition to scholarship on the Victorian ghost story, proving Banks's assertion we are all 'haunted' by the ghosts of the past.

Endnotes

(1)Isabella Banks. 'Haunted!' *Victorian Ghost Stories by Eminent Women Writers*, edited by Richard Dalby (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1990) 341.^(^)

(2)Andrew Smith. *The Ghost Story, A Cultural History: 1840-1920* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010).^(^)

(3)Simon Hay. *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).^(^)

(4)Srdjan Smajic. *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).^(^)

(5)Shane McCorristine. *Spectres of the Self: Thinking About Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750-1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).^(^)

(6)Sasha Handley. *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007).^(^)

(7)Owen Davies. *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2007).^(^)

(8)Marie Corelli. *A Romance of Two Worlds: A Novel*. 2nd ed. (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1887).^(^)

(9)Vanessa Dickerson. *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1996), Hilary Grimes. *The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny, and Scenes of Writing* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), Melissa Edmundson Makala. *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2013).[\(^\)](#)

(10)Oliver Tearle. *Bewilderments of Vision: Hallucination and Literature, 1880-1914* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2013).[\(^\)](#)