

Echoing Ghost Stories

Literary Reflections
of Oral Tradition

Edited by
TIM PRASIL

BROM  NES BOOKS

Echoing Ghost Stories: Literary Reflections of Oral Tradition is the second volume of the Phantom Traditions Library series, published by Brom Bones Books. These anthologies feature “forgotten” genres or sub-genres of popular fiction—from supernatural and fantasy tales to detective mysteries and science fiction—written during the 1800s and early 1900s. Edited by Tim Prasil, each volume will include a well-researched introduction, helpful and interesting footnotes, and an appendix that spotlights a work or two of relevant non-fiction from the same period. Learn more about the Phantom Traditions Library at BromBonesBooks.com.

The front cover illustration is from John Greenleaf Whittier’s *Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1891). The back cover illustration is from H.J.V. Torode’s “Mr. Rangle’s Ghost Story,” *The Lamp* (Christmas, 1884).

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Introduction

Tim Prasil

The Passing of a Ghostly Oral Tradition

Now I remember those old women's words,
Who, in my wealth, would tell me winter's tales
And speak of spirits and ghosts that glide by night,

says Barabas, the title character in Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*, originally staged in 1592. Fourteen years later, theater audiences first heard William Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth dismiss her husband's visions of a floating dagger and Banquo's ghost as phantasms belonging in "A woman's story at a winter's fire," and then, in the Bard's *A Winter's Tale* (1623), Mamillius says that sad stories are best for winter and narrates one about "sprites and goblins." Clearly, in Renaissance England, an oral tradition of telling spooky stories was common enough that audiences understood such references to it. These stories—especially when featuring elements of the supernatural or outright fantasy—were sometimes called "winter's tales" or "old wives' fables" despite being unrestricted by season or by the narrator's gender, marital status, or age. Perhaps a more fitting name is "fireside ghost stories," though that might also be too narrow. Regardless, in England and beyond, such oral storytelling evolved into a social tradition: friends and family gathered to share dinner, to play games, and as the party quieted, to gather around the hearth and tell stories. Telling *ghost* stories in particular was a reliable source of entertainment, one comparable to 21st-century kids at summer camp recounting the legend of the young lovers' encounter with the man with a hook instead of a hand.

One of the most detailed accounts of this tradition appears in Washington Irving's "Christmas Dinner," an essay about his experience with an old-fashioned Christmas in rural England. It

was published in *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-1820). There, Irving describes a lavish dinner followed by animated conversation and children's games. Afterward, the author enters the drawing room, where the local parson is sitting with a group by the fire and

dealing out strange accounts of popular superstitions and legends of the surrounding country. . . . He gave us several anecdotes of the fancies of the neighbouring peasantry, concerning the effigy of the crusader which lay on the tomb by the church altar. As it was the only monument of the kind in that part of the country, it had always been regarded with feelings of superstition by the goodwives of the village. It was said to get up from the tomb and walk the rounds of the churchyard in stormy nights. . . . Some talked of gold and jewels buried in the tomb, over which the spectre kept watch; and there was a story current of a sexton in old times who endeavoured to break his way to the coffin at night; but just as he reached it, received a violent blow from the marble hand of the effigy, which stretched him senseless on the pavement. These tales were often laughed at by some of the sturdier among the rustics, yet when night came on, there were many of the stoutest unbelievers that were shy of venturing alone in the footpath that led across the churchyard.¹

Telling ghost stories by the hearth was not strictly a Christmas custom,² and importantly, it was a *dying* custom in the early 1800s. Along with his Christmas essay, *The Sketchbook* presents Irving's famous tale "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." This work specifies *autumn* as the season when Icabod Crane attends a ball and, at one point, hears tales about "mourning cries and wailings heard and seen about the great tree where the unfortunate Major Andre was taken," about "the woman in white, that haunted the dark glen at Raven Rock," and, of course, about the "Headless Horseman, who had been heard several times of late, patrolling the country. . . ." However, in both his non-fiction sketch and this fanciful tale, Irving suggests that telling ghost stories as an oral tradition was a vanishing art, the last traces of which lingered in a rural estate in Yorkshire and an isolated Hudson Valley hamlet respectively. In the latter work, he says that modern mobility is to blame: "Local tales

and superstitions thrive best in these sheltered, long settled retreats; but are trampled underfoot by the shifting throng that forms the population of most of our country places.”³

Other writers of the early 1800s also noted the disappearance of, not only the fireside ghost story custom, but also the belief in such supernatural phenomena. In 1827, for example, the British magazine *La Belle Assemblée* ran a series called “Sketches from the Country,” and the first installment opens by asking, “Who now believes in ghosts, or shudders at the recital of a tale from the land of spirits?” The writer attributes such disillusion to “the light of reason and revelation,” a light that has burned away old fears: “A citizen would shrug up his shoulders, and ridicule the absurdity of ghosts in the nineteenth century; and even in the country, only a faint shadow of the old superstition remains.” Yet there is a touch of nostalgia, a sadness about losing the oral tradition accompanying the belief in ghosts: “The recital of such tales round a winter fireside, when the wind roared without, and bent the old elms over our antiquated mansion, was ever hailed by me with interest and pleasure. They constituted an indefinite charm, giving rise to ideas which bordered on the wild and wonderful.”⁴ The essayist then goes on to relate a secondhand account about witchcraft on the eastern coast of England.

Another explanation for the passing of this tradition, one less nostalgic, comes from Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and of a story included in this anthology, “The Ghost in the Mill” (1872). According to the narrator of the latter work, fireside tales were told in earlier decades because there was little else available as entertainment: “In those days we had no magazines and daily papers, each reeling off a serial story. . . . [A]ll the multiform devices—pictorial, narrative, and poetical—which keep the mind of the present generation ablaze with excitement, had not then even an existence.” On a dreary winter evening, “the necessity of amusement became urgent. Hence, in those days, chimney-corner storytelling became an art and an accomplishment.”⁵ Together, these three writers attribute the passing of this branch of oral tradition to changing times, be it increased mobility, the spread of Enlightenment-era reasoning, or new media. Indeed, we can probably relate to all of these, especially the proliferation of entertainment and communication “devices.”

Of course, ghost stories are still shared orally in the twenty-first century. For instance, in *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*, published in 2007, Elizabeth Tucker shows that a variety of ghostly legends routinely get passed along to incoming college students across the U.S.⁶ Fully grown adults tell ghost stories, too, and I've personally heard about several unsettling encounters at my community theater from volunteers there. (Ghost hunters spent the night at the theater and declared it: *probably* haunted.) I suspect that, at some point, virtually everyone reading this book has heard a ghost story purported to be true. Of the stories in this anthology, Mary Louisa Molesworth's "Lady Farquhar's Old Lady" (1872) and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "The Lost Ghost" (1903) come the closest to these, and I included both because of their clear nods to the long history of *women* sharing supernatural yarns. However, these more modern instances of telling ghost stories are too spontaneous and arise too randomly to belong to an activity steeped in tradition. Winter—or, perhaps, autumn—or, at least, stormy weather is not requisite. It doesn't even have to be evening. Sharing these stories is no longer a cherished event that one hopes will conclude a festive gathering. Fire is not necessarily a key ingredient.

Certainly, no early-nineteenth-century authors describe these modern spoken ghost stories as a vanishing part of social interplay.

The Rise of Prose-Fiction Ghost Stories

While the oral tradition of fireside ghost stories might have waned in the early 1800s, ghost stories themselves certainly did not. The Victorian and Edwardian periods are often considered the heyday of the *prose-fiction* ghost story, attracting esteemed and varied authors including Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Rudyard Kipling, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. (The latter two are represented in this anthology.) In addition, the era introduced a number of authors remembered today primarily for their ghostly tales, from Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Charlotte Riddell to E. Nesbit and M.R. James. (Again, works by the latter two can be found here.) Julia Briggs explains that the "remarkable success" of prose ghost stories from the mid-1800 to early 1900s "was closely connected with the

growth of a reading public who consumed fictional periodicals avidly. . . .” Often read aloud among middle-class families, these magazines included ghost stories because “they provided short self-contained episodes which could be printed beside the full-length serials running from issue to issue.”⁷ Of course, this says more about why short stories in general found popularity in the 1800s.

To explain specifically why *ghosts* haunted so many short stories, Briggs touches on the nostalgic impulse that drew the writer for *La Belle Assemblée* to recount a supernatural adventure. “The combination of modern scepticism with a nostalgia for an older, more supernatural system of beliefs provides the foundation of the ghost story,” she writes. With hints of Irving’s and Stowe’s comments on modern mobility and new media, Briggs adds, “Technical progress and modern urban life had displaced the older continuities, cutting the individual off from his past, both communal and personal, from the magical perceptions of childhood, from Wordsworthian glimpses of supernatural forces with nature.”⁸ Reading ghost stories took readers back to a more “connected” and more magical time, in other words. However, it’s interesting that ghosts and ghost stories are almost never comforting; if they coax readers to retreat in time, they also teach that doing so is a scary thing. Perhaps, they were one means for readers to *adjust* to the present rather than to escape it. Tucker explains that campus ghost stories help college freshman adjust to the turmoil of college life and adulthood, and Victorian and Edwardian ghost stories might have similarly offered readers models for confronting the fearful ambiguities of changing times.

At the same time, prose ghost stories from the mid-1800s and early 1900s very much mirrored the times. No doubt, interest in such tales was spurred by a renewal of belief in ghosts or, at least, by a renewal of the *debate* about specters being real or illusion. One of the clearest signs that ghosts were not going away was the publication—and popularity—of Catherine Crowe’s *The Night-Side of Nature*, which was first released in the U.K. in 1847. This compendium of allegedly true spectral encounters was widely reviewed, frequently republished, and repeatedly alluded to in other works about ghosts, be they factual or fictional. It may well have helped set the stage for the Spiritualist movement that is typically traced to 1848, when the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New

York, made headlines for claiming to have made contact with the Afterworld. Though there are precedents in Spiritualist doctrine, the sensation surrounding the Fox sisters ignited an international religion that would attract millions in the decades to follow, and this seems to have redoubled belief in ghosts. The thinking seems to be that, if spirits could be contacted by the living, the millennia-old idea that some spirits return to the physical realm—or are compelled to never leave it—was not unreasonable.

The question of *how* not unreasonable began to be whispered in academic circles. In 1860, Robert Dale Owen noted that the “majority of educated men” waved off reports of haunted houses, apparitions, and similar phenomena. He then notes signs of change:

It is within my knowledge, that a few years since, at one of the chief English universities, a society was formed out of some of its most distinguished members, for the purpose of instituting, as their printed circular expresses it, ‘a serious and earnest inquiry into the nature of the phenomena which are vaguely called supernatural.’ They subjected these to careful classification, and appealed to their friends outside of the society to aid them in forming an extensive collection of authenticated cases. . . .⁹

Owen is referring to the Ghost Club, informally begun around 1855 at Cambridge’s Trinity College and then officially founded in 1862. This is a precursor of the Society for Psychological Research, which was established in 1882 in England and, in turn, inspired an American branch a few years later. Ghosts were still a contentious subject, of course, but a growing number of academics were staking their professional reputations to study them seriously.

With this in mind, the era’s ghost stories—told orally or in prose fiction—can be seen as reflecting their original audience’s wonderment about the boundaries of reality.

The Evolution of a Sub-Genre

This resurgence of interest in “real” ghosts bolstered fictional ghost stories generally and, specifically, allowed authors to revise and rejuvenate the fireside ghost story tradition—albeit in a new, silent form. The sub-genre of ghost stories explored in this

anthology can be defined as works that present to the reader's *eye* an attempt to evoke a story intended for the *ear*. Perhaps the most famous example of this kind of ghost story is "The Turn of the Screw" (1898), and like James's novella, many of the works included here open with a frame depicting a Christmas gathering. Indeed, this approach appears in William Jerdan's "The Dead Man's Race: A Christmas Story," published in 1839, and E.F. Benson's "Between the Lights," published in 1912, respectively the first and final works in this chronologically arranged book. In some of the selections, though, the storyteller and audience gather, not on a festive yuletide evening, but on a dismal stormy one. Or the characters are travelers staying at an inn. In Brander Matthews' "The Rival Ghosts" (1884), they're passengers on a steamship. In "The Lost Ghost," mentioned above, Freeman uses two friends' afternoon visit to frame a spooky story. Ambrose Bierce, being Ambrose Bierce, puts a unique spin on telling scary stories around a campfire in "The Stranger" (1909). Having one foot in oral tradition and the other in literary ghost stories, these authors twist genre conventions and create innovative narratives.

At the risk of formulating *sub-sub-genres*, we can begin to see how different authors approached this branch of prose-fiction ghost story by looking at three basic techniques: the framed monolog, the framed dialog, and the portmanteau. The first is the simplest, and a great example is Jerdan's "The Dead Man's Race." The narrator sets the scene: a yuletide frolic at a country squire's mansion. Storytelling begins, and readers are invited to "listen" to one tale. There's a brief return to the frame at the end, but that single story comprises the bulk of the piece, as if it's a script to be read aloud—and it may well have been in the early 1800s. There are no interruptions from the listeners, not even a mention of a single reaction along the way.¹⁰

A bit more complex is the framed *dialog*. Here, there's interaction between the fictional raconteur and the fictional audience. That audience is typically a *group* of people, "Lady Farquhar's Old Lady" and "The Lost Ghost" being the obvious exceptions. The framed dialog approach seems to accommodate an author adding a sort of creepy sequel to the main ghost story, which becomes clearer upon reading E. Nesbit's "The Portent of a Shadow" (1905) or M.R. James' "A School Story" (1911). Significantly, this technique became

the standard around the mid-1800s. It seems these stories *weren't* intended to be read aloud to, say, the family. Instead, a lone reader could pretend to be a silent member of that fictional audience. Reading was becoming a more isolated pleasure.

As the framed dialog rose, the portmanteau waned—or, more correctly, portmanteaus short enough to include in this anthology did. Fans of 1970s and 1980s horror movies might recognize “portmanteau” as a term for a single movie featuring about four or five separate stories, usually linked together by some framing device, maybe one involving pun-filled transitions from the Crypt Keeper. Prose fiction has a long history of something similar. William Mudford’s “Ghost Gossips at Blakesley House” (1841) George Washington Peck’s “Ghost Stories” (1845), and the anonymous “Rather Ghostly” (1858) each feature a sequence of ghost stories told in a single setting. Andrew Lang, who collected ghost and fairy tales, returned to the form with “The House of Strange Stories” (1886). In a way, this approach presents the most accurate reflection of the fireside ghost story tradition, not only in the *series* of tales, but also in telling those tales quickly and with little concern for narrative details or character development. In that Jerdan’s “The Dead Man’s Race” also spotlights a brief yarn devoid of names or dates, the first four works presented here certainly have the *feel* of transcribed folktales. (Whether they actually *are or are not* folktales is a matter for a folklorist like Lang.) Nonetheless, with the exception of Lang, portmanteaus in short form were short-lived. They appear to have survived longer in book-length form.¹¹

These three approaches offer *one* way to chart the evolutions of this curious sub-genre of written ghost stories designed to echo oral tradition. Readers are encouraged to consider others, too, since doing so enhances each work. Rather than being disappointed by the turn from *scary* to *funny* that came with Stowe’s “The Ghost in the Mill,” Matthews’ “The Rival Ghosts,” and H.J.V. Torode’s “Mr. Rangle’s Ghost Story” (1884)—the latter ending with a dark sense of humor comparable to *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*—a reader might contemplate why this shift occurred in the 1870s and 1880s. Other interesting connections can be found in the ghost stories written by women writers known primarily for their regionalism. Stowe and Freeman are often considered New England regionalists. “From the Loom of the Dead” (1898) shows Elia

Wilkinson Peattie's proficiency at depicting the immigrant settlers of the American West, and L.M. Montgomery, famous for capturing life in eastern Canada in her *Anne of Green Gables* series, shows what she can do with a ghost story in "Davenport's Story" (1902). It's also intriguing to watch an acclaimed author such as Wharton—or acclaimed horror writers such as Bierce and James—reinvent the well-established tradition. Or to see E.F. Benson, in "Between the Lights," steer that old tradition in directions paralleling those explored by Arthur Machen and H.P. Lovecraft.

I have modernized the texts a bit, for example, removing hyphens from words no longer hyphenated and breaking especially long paragraphs. But I have also retained some of the now-curious Victorian grammar conventions, such as *not* capitalizing a word following an exclamation point or question mark. Apparently, such punctuation was once perceived to be as much like a comma as like a period. My goal is to make the stories more accessible to readers in the twenty-first century while also preserving the charm of the old-fashioned language.

Indeed, the past echoing into the present is central to almost any ghost story and especially to these ghostly reflections of oral tradition. I hope you enjoy "listening to" them.

¹ Washington Irving, *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (A.L. Burt, 1820) pp. 210-11.

² According to David Parker, the linking of ghost stories specifically to Christmas (as opposed to winter) "seems to have spread throughout [British] society only after 1800." He cites the precedent of *Round about our Coal Fire; or, Christmas Entertainments*, published around 1730, and says its "anonymous author was evidently less interested in the festival than in apparitions, witches, ghosts, fairies, and the like." However, this and other works say the custom was found only in the country. "After 1800," Parker explains, "references to the custom become more numerous, and indicate settings socially more diverse." He then specifies "the second half of the 1830s" as the point when "telling stories of the supernatural around the fireside was a Christmas custom widely practiced and accepted" (*Christmas and Charles Dickens* [AMS Press, 2005] pp. 104-06).

³ Irving, pp. 323-24.

⁴ S.S., "Sketches from the Country: The Witch of the East Cliff," *La Belle Assemblee*, 331 (July, 1827) p. 15.

⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Ghost in the Mill," *Oldtown Fireside Stories* (James R. Osgood, 1872) p. 1-2.

⁶ Elizabeth Tucker, *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

⁷ Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (Faber, 1977) p. 14.

⁸ Briggs, p. 19.

⁹ Robert Dale Owen, *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (J.B. Lippincott, 1860) p. 33.

¹⁰ It's worth noting that some well-known ghost stories fit what might be called an "unframed monolog." In other words, the narrator is clearly addressing fictional listeners (referred to as the "auditor" by literature scholars). For example, Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" opens this way: "You know, my dears, that your mother was an orphan, and an only child; and I dare say you have heard that your grandfather was a clergyman. . . ." (*Household Words* 6 [Christmas, 1852] p. 583). Readers' only source of information about the narrator's "dears" is the narrator herself. While this approach also echoes the fireside ghost story oral tradition, I felt it does so too loosely to include such works in this volume.

¹¹ Among book-length portmanteaus that echo the oral tradition of the fireside ghost story is *The Haunted House*, which first appeared in the 1859 Christmas issue of *All the Year Round* and includes stories by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell, and others. The frame in this work involves friends who sleep in a house alleged to be haunted and then meet on Twelfth Night to share their experiences. There is also Stowe's *Oldtown Fireside Stories* (1872), represented in this book with "The Ghost in the Mill." This portmanteau features stories told by Sam Lawson, a character Stowe introduced in her novel *Oldtown Folks* (1869). Another is Robert Hugh Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott*, which began appearing in monthly installments in the April 1906 issue of *The Ecclesiastic Review* and was published as a book the next year. The narrative frame here is a gathering of clergymen who agree to meet nightly, taking turns telling ghost stories. No doubt, there are other books that fit this mold, too.