

Ghostly Clients & DEMONIC CULPRITS

The Roots of
Occult Detective Fiction

Edited by
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Ghostly Clients & Demonic Culprits: The Roots of Occult Detective Fiction is the third 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 has 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.

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INTRODUCTION

Tim Prasil

Sometimes, ghosts have a very difficult time explaining *why* they've returned to the land of the living. Take, for instance, the case of Dorrien, a college tutor who died—with unfinished business—back in 1746. His spirit returned to campus, and after several sightings were reported, one intrigued professor named Oeder mustered the courage to investigate. Upon witnessing the ghost himself, the professor was convinced that the visitation was authentic. However, further probing failed to divulge the reason for Dorrien's return, and Oeder decided that the ghost would have to *come to him* if he wanted assistance. Sure enough, the materializations began to occur in Oeder's bedroom. The professor knew that the tutor had been a conscientious man while living, and so he asked Dorrien's ghost if he died with an unpaid debt. Unable to speak, the specter responded by moving a pipe across his mouth. Was he signaling that he owed money to a tobacconist? No, this proved to *not* be the solution. When Dorrien appeared later, he presented a different clue: he held up a picture with a hole in it, through which he slipped his head. With some help, Oeder eventually deduced that Dorrien had borrowed—but never returned—several slides for use with a magic lantern. Once those slides were returned to their proper owner, the tutor's spirit was put at rest.¹

The tale of Dorrien's unreturned magic lantern slides certainly lacks a compelling motive for finding one's way back from the Great Beyond. However, Oeder is really the star of the story, since he's the one who exhibits bravery, frustration, tenacity, and finally intelligence enough to solve the mystery of why Dorrien bothered to return. In other words, Oeder assumes the role of the "occult detective" while Dorrien acts as his "ghostly client." These paired figures have a long history. Stories of a troubled ghost and a living person who resolves the supernatural dilemma go back at least as far as an anecdote told in Pliny the Younger's first-century letter to Sura, the first piece presented in this anthology. There, it's

Athenodorus whose curiosity, courage, and calmness lets him discover and correct an ignominious burial that had resulted in a house being haunted. Oddly, the backstory explaining why the ghost's body had been buried in chains and without ceremony is never explored. Instead, as with the Dorrien narrative, the hero is the one who confronts the dimensional breach and pieces together the puzzle.

According to legend and folklore, there are a range of reasons why ghostly clients engage occult detectives. In *Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead & Cultural Transformation*, R.C. Finucane surveys the millennia of beliefs about ghosts in Western Civilization, from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the twentieth century. He discusses records of specters seeking proper burial and settling financial legacies, phantoms craving due punishment for their murderers or begging for forgiveness for their own crimes, and ghosts with other goals. "There are often mixed motives in a ghostly visitation, in all times," writes Finucane. Frequently, these spirits are wise in selecting their flesh-and-blood agent—say, a friend or family member—and matters are swiftly resolved. Sometimes, though, even when specters are able to clearly communicate their *final* final wishes, their choice of proxy proves unwise. Finucane recounts the case from the mid-1600s that concerns Anna Walker. After being murdered by a man, one hired by a relative who had impregnated her, Walker materialized in ghostly form before a local miller, a seemingly random choice. Walker gave the miller full details on who murdered her, why she was murdered, how she was murdered, and even where her body could be found. Nonetheless, the fainthearted miller took no action, so Walker had to return to the miller again and again, finally *terrifying* him into conveying what she had told him to the magistrate. Only then were the crime investigated and the guilty punished.² Of course, such well-spoken ghosts and quivering agents are hardly the stuff of occult detective fiction.

Instead, characters such as Professor Oeder and Athenodorus—who exhibit sharp minds and stalwart hearts when confronted by baffling ghosts—led to this cross-genre of mystery and supernatural fiction. Despite this long legacy, ghostly clients seem a bit rare among occult detectives as we know them since the start of the twentieth century. Thomas Carnacki, John Silence, Carl Kolchak, Agents Mulder and Scully, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,

Harry Dresden, and their many colleagues focus less on serving supernatural sufferers and more on ousting otherworldly ogres. Vampires, werewolves, zombies, and their ilk are what I call “demonic culprits.” They join the ghostly clients to complete a triangle that mirrors the detective, client, and criminal relationship found in more secular mystery fiction.

As the two sections of this anthology suggest, ghostly clients and demonic culprits form master plots that have become the parallel roots of occult detective fiction, and they both appear to have emerged and evolved alongside one another. About 50 years after Pliny the Younger related the tale of Athenodorus, Lucian of Samosata had a character named Arignotus tell a suspiciously similar one about his own ghost hunt. Here, though, the ghost is depicted as much more monstrous: a shapeshifting entity that seems to relish horrifying unwary mortals. Instead of following it, Arignotus must repel the ghost with esoteric incantations, and in this version, digging up the skeleton (there are no chains now!) feels more like uncovering a monster’s lair than a tragic past.

Around sixteen centuries later, two Cornish legends emerged that illustrate how each figure continued to haunt the living. The first is a ghostly client tale recorded in “A Remarkable Passage of an Apparition,” and it involves a parson guiding a sad spirit named Dorothy Dingley towards final peace. About the same time, in the same region, another parson banished the devilish manifestation that Thomas Q. Couch called “The Spectral Coach”—a demonic culprit tale. Though these two—like the stories of Athenodorus and Arignotus—are presented in separate sections in this book, readers are encouraged to find the interesting similarities and contrasts between them as well as between all that follow, as legend evolves into imaginative fiction.

Bayard Taylor’s “The Haunted Shanty” is particularly worth noting in terms of dividing ghostly clients from demonic culprits. The narrator decides that whatever is wreaking havoc in the title home arises from “the malice of some infernal power rather than the righteous justice of God.” However, after doing some basic detective work, this narrator learns that the demonic damage is a result of incurable heartbreak, not inherent evil. In other words, this is a sympathetic monster, more like the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* than the vampire in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

My readers might enjoy deciding if they agree with my placing Taylor's hard-to-place work with this anthology's second section.

Digging up these mirrored roots of occult detective fiction has led to some interesting finds. For example, one of my aims in compiling this book is to challenge the notion that there is a single, clear-cut starting point for the tradition. When I first started exploring this body of fiction, there was a fairly solid consensus among critics that occult detective fiction began *after* Sherlock Holmes had become a full-fledged sensation in the 1890s. Granted, one saw prototypes in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's Dr. Hesselius (1869), Bram Stoker's Dr. Abraham Van Helsing (1897), and maybe as far back as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's anonymous narrator in "The Haunted and the Haunters" (1859). But "true" occult detectives, according to these critics, didn't come on stage until 1897, when L.T. Meade and Robert Eustace's John Bell debuted in *Cassell's Family Magazine* or certainly by 1898, when the adventures of E. and H. Heron's Flaxman Low began in *Pearson's*.³ This search for starting points raises questions about who passes the Occult Detective Qualifying Exam. For instance, John Bell and Flaxman Low are both series characters—is this a requirement? Is there a useful distinction between an occult *detective* and an occult *investigator*? Are occult detectives limited to those characters who do such work as professionals or, at least, experienced experts in occult study? In other words, can occult detectives be amateurs in the way that characters such as Miss Marple or the Hardy Boys are in conventional mystery fiction?

This last question is easy to answer: yes, the earliest occult detectives almost certainly are amateurs and, therefore, they aren't called in on cases so much as stumble upon them. While nineteenth-century mystery fiction reflects the fact that, in real life, criminal detective work developed into a profession, supernatural detecting did not. It's interesting, then, to see who this anthology's authors cast in the role: a frontiersman whose survival skills assist him in reading visual clues, an antiquarian whose love of history spurs him to gather evidence and recreate past events, a doctor with a special interest in topics that stretch the limits of science, a man with literary ambitions and a lot of time on his hands, or even an office clerk eager to find more rewarding work. To understand how occult detective fiction interweaves with its more secular sibling, it is useful to remember that an *actual* full-time occult detective

probably would have seemed absurd in the nineteenth-century—and would do so even in a kind of fiction that depends on at least a *bit* of realism to be scary.

Another challenge to the premise that there's an easily identified start to occult detective fiction is the trend to be more inclusive when charting the history of mystery fiction. There has been a movement lately to replace the view that *one* author alone initiates or invents a literary genre—a *monogenic* approach—with the premise that several, diverse authors contribute to the birth of a generic tradition. The latter is referred to as a *polygenic* approach, a distinction Lucy Sussex uses to challenge the idea that Edgar Allan Poe stands in isolation as the creator of detective fiction. She is particularly interested in illuminating the role that women authors had in developing mystery fiction, first tracking the generic roots through several non-fictional, fictional, and theatrical works. Along the way, Sussex points out, “There is actually more mystery in [Ann Radcliffe’s 1774 novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*] than in William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, hailed as the first novel to feature a detective,” and Radcliffe’s novel beat Godwin’s to publication by several weeks. Sussex goes on to say that Catherine Crowe’s *Susan Hopley; or, Circumstantial Evidence* (1841) is a murder mystery with three female detectives published four months before Poe introduced readers to C. Auguste Dupin with “The Murders of the Rue Morgue.”⁴ The polygenic approach to the birth of mystery fiction also validates and finds a place for the *other* works that have been cited as pre-Poe mystery fiction, including Voltaire’s *Zadig, or The Book of Fate* (1748), E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Mademoiselle de Scudéri* (1819), the anonymous *Richmond; Or, Scenes in the Life of a Bow Street Officer, Drawn Up from His Private Memoranda* (1827), and William Leggett’s “The Rifle” (1827).

We must add to this list two works that are particularly relevant to Poe: William Evans Burton’s “The Secret Cell” (1837) and Henry William Herbert’s “The Haunted Homestead” (1840). Both of these stories spotlight a smart, sharp-eyed, determined crime-solver. Both were written by writers working in the U.S. with whom Poe was familiar, and both stories appeared in print a few years before Poe’s first Dupin tale. Though Poe certainly refined and redirected this kind of story, the three authors show that crime mystery was in the air. Herbert’s tale, which is found in this book, is especially interesting in that it features a distinctly *American* detective whose

Holmesian eye for clues was honed by living in the wilderness. Perhaps more relevant to the subject at hand, it features perhaps the least communicative of ghostly clients—that is, if the manifestations that prod the detective character aren't signs from a darker power freed by the disruption of justice! Either way, occult detectives were clearly present when detective fiction itself was crystalizing, *not* over a half century later.

This is not as bold a statement as it might seem. Like Sussex, Maurizio Acari has revised and broadened the critical history of detective fiction, doing so by charting “those hybrid zones where [the genre's] conventions mingle with those of sensation fiction and the ghost story, or else are conflated with the discourses of pseudo-sciences.” He opens by reviewing the centuries-long tradition of narratives about divine justice, be they about dreams that guide a murder investigation, e.g., Chaucer's “The Nun's Priest's Tale” (c. 1395), or about ghosts returning to avenge their murder, e.g., Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1600). Zeroing in on the Victorian period, Acari then states that “precisely when the detective was acquiring growing importance as hero, other writers were ‘rediscovering’ the link between detection and the supernatural.” Regarding Victorian detectives spurred by dreams, Acari cites Wilkie Collins' “The Diary of Anne Rodway” (1856), often cited as a key work in the development of the mystery genre, one featuring a “prototypical woman detective.” Ghosts still sought justice in the 1800s, too. Acari illustrates this with W.G. Simms' “Grayling; or Murder Will Out” (1842).⁵ This latter work offers an especially straightforward example of what I'm calling the “ghostly client” figure, but its mystery-solver lacks in terms of detective skills. Furthermore, its similarities to Herbert's “The Haunted Homestead” prevented me from including it in this anthology. Interested readers can find a digital version of both Collins' and Simms' tales (with my edits and footnotes) at BromBonesBooks.com. Look for the page describing this book.

Curiously, when Acari arrives at the late Victorian period, he falls back on the traditional critical narrative of “psychic detection,” listing Hesselius, Van Helsing, and the narrator of “The Haunted and the Haunters” as antecedents. Proper occult detectives, Acari agrees, begin with Flaxman Low.⁶ This version of history reinforces the mistaken notion that writers were mingling detective fiction with the supernatural—*not* since the genre's earliest glimmers—but

only *after* it had established some of its defining conventions. An attempt to cement those conventions by regulating detective fiction and segregating its supernatural strain is seen in Julian Hawthorne's 1907 introduction to the multi-volume *Library of the World's Best Mystery and Detective Stories*. He deems it unfair "to propose a conundrum on a basis of ostensible materialism, and then, when no other key would fit, to palm off a disembodied spirit on us. Tell me beforehand that your scenario is to include both worlds, and I have no objection to make; I simply attune my mind to the more extensive scope. But I rebel at an unheralded ghostland, and declare frankly that your tale is incredible. And I must confess that I would as lief have ghosts kept out altogether; their stories make a very good library in themselves, and have no need to tag themselves on to what is really another department of fiction." By the 1920s, S.S. Van Dine and Ronald Knox each wrote a list of rules regarding writing detective fiction—and both outright forbid the use of supernatural elements.⁷ Some mystery fans still see crossing mystery and supernatural genres as breaking the rules—a "cheat"—rather than as a time-honored method of, as Hawthorne suggests, expanding readers' imaginations.

Instead of seeing occult detective fiction as a violation of rules *or* as a late comer to the mystery tradition, the works in this anthology suggest that supernatural sleuths have been around as long as the broader tradition and, in fact, contributed to its formation. Still, it helps to envision occult detectives as emerging in fluid stages—a seed opening into a sprout, growing roots one way and a shoot the other, eventually leading to blossoms and then fruit. I encourage readers to consider this when reading the selections in this book, thinking about which works exhibit what can reasonably be identified as a "mystery," a "detective," or an "occult detective."⁸ This fits with the idea that authors continually *vary* the traditions of storytelling—introducing something new into something old—to make any genre an ever-stretching, always-meandering, multi-tendrilled organism.

Despite this malleability, I've only managed to find *one* pre-1900 woman occult detective (and she appears in a work that is probably more interesting historically than artistically). When "Wanted—an Explanation" was published in 1881, women detectives were already making their mark in traditional detective fiction—albeit, very modestly—and Lady Julia Spinner should be

viewed beside Andrew Forrester's Miss Gladden, William Stephen Hayward's Mrs. Paschal, and other early attempts to introduce a female perspective to the genre. It took a few decades before the likes of Ella M. Scrymour's Shiela Crerar, and Jessie Douglas Kerruish's Luna Bartendale did the same for detective fiction infused with supernatural possibilities.⁹

Naturally, the tales you are about to read reflect, not just the sexism, but also the racism and the language style of the period in which they were written. Stereotypes of Romanies, Spaniards, and Indians stand out in particular, and be warned that I did nothing to erase them. However, I did modernize some of the punctuation, "broke" especially long sentences and paragraphs, and made similar edits. My goal was to make the language less daunting to 21st-century readers unaccustomed to such style, but I did so with eye toward preserving the personality of 19th-century storytelling.

Each tale was chosen to provide fans and scholars of the history of supernatural, mystery, and/or occult detective fiction a handy source of illustrative and rarely collected works. I strove to select tales rarely found in collections of Victorian detective fiction or ghost stories. And I'm sure I've left some of the roots of occult detective fiction still buried. A gardener will say that, in order to weed effectively, you need to pull up the *entire* root. Let's hope, though, that exposing these two roots will do the opposite. May this book help occult detective fiction flourish by unearthing its deep history.

¹ This story is told in greater detail in Catherine Crowe's *The Night-Side of Nature* (Newbury, 1850) pp. 190-194. Crowe says her source is Jung-Stilling (aka Johann Heinrich Jung). S[abine]. Baring-Gould tells a more skeptical version of the ghost story without acknowledging a source in "The Brunswick Ghost," *Cassell's Family Magazine* 13 (May, 1887) pp. 365-367.

² R.C. Finucane, *Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead & Cultural Transformation* (Prometheus, 1996), pp. 23, 126-127. A case similar to Anna Walker's in that it involves a random living agent who must be spurred by spectral intimidation is "The Apparition of James Haddock to Francis Travener, at Michaelmas, 1662" in T.M. Jarvis's *Accredited Ghost Stories* (J. Andrews, 1823) pp. 15-25.

³ Two important essays representative of this history of what has also been called "psychic detective fiction" are Mike Ashley's "Fighters of Fear: A Survey of the Psychic Investigator in Fiction" (*Voices From Shadow* [Shadow, 1994] pp. 32-52) and Barbara Roden's "No Ghosts Need Apply?" (*Ghosts in Baker Street* [Carroll & Graf, 2006] pp. 200-222).

⁴ Lucy Sussex, *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction: Mothers of the Mystery Genre* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp. 19, 45-46.

⁵ Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) pp. xii, 40, 56-57, 59-60, 77-83.

⁶ Ascari, pp. 77-83.

⁷ Julian Hawthorne, "Riddle Stories" (Vol. 1, Review of Reviews, 1907, p. 11). The two lists of rules by Van Dine and Knox are reprinted in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. Howard Haycraft (Simon and Schuster, 1946, p. 189-96).

⁸ Readers might also enjoy the following ghostly-client works: Fitz-James O'Brien's "A Pot of Tulips" (1855), B.J. Farjeon's *The Last Tenant* (1893), Arthur Machen's "The Inmost Light" (1894), Algernon Blackwood's "A Woman's Ghost Story" (1907), and Rudyard Kipling's "The House Surgeon" (1909). Along with the works by Le Fanu, Stoker, and Bulwer-Lytton noted above, demonic-culprit tales include O'Brien's "What Was It?" (1859), Machen's "The Red Hand" (1895), Lettice Galbraith's "The Blue Room" (1897), Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), Marie Corelli's *Ziska: The Problem of a Wicked Soul* (1897), and Blackwood's "With Intent to Steal" (1906). No doubt, there are many, many others.

⁹ Miss Gladden appears in *The Female Detective* (Ward, Lock, and Tyler, 1864) and Mrs. Paschal in *Revelations of a Female Detective* (George Vickers, 1864). Shiela Crerar was first published in *The Blue Magazine* (May-Oct., 1920), and Luna Bartendale appears in *The Undying Monster: A Tale of the Fifth Dimension* (London: Heath Cranton, 1922).