Ghosts, Stories, Histories
Ghosts, Stories, Histories
Ghost Stories and Alternative Histories

Edited by

Sladja Blzan

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TO MY PARENTS, ANA AND JOSO BLAZAN
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INTRODUCTION

WELCOMING GHOSTS

SLADJA BLAZAN

The New Visibility

Our so-called “disenchanted” (Weber, “Science as a Vocation” 155) world is populated with ghosts. Not ghostly memories which veil our imagination in darkness when personal traumata make understanding undesirable, not even ghost-like secrets lurking inside old family closets and historical injustice; a manifest sign of the current Anglo-American culture is the presence of literal ghosts. Places and spaces of most probable encounter are literature, film, theater, art, and music partitions. The borders of the locations they chose are drawn with the colors of our hopes, wishes and fears. Far away from being a subject for a laudator temporis acti, in current Anglo-American cultural configurations ghosts, specters and spirits are articulating (re)current topics. Various attempts on the side of contemporary academia to ignore them have proved impossible, if only for their sheer ubiquity. Films drawing a wide audience such as The Others (Amenábar 2001), prize-winning novels such as Toni Morrison’s The Beloved (Morrison 1988), plays remaining on theater programs for years at a time such as Tony Kushner’s Angels In America (Kushner 1993) or popular series inspiring numerous academic conferences as well as devotee conventions such as Medium (NBC/CBS 2005-2007) are only the most visible sightings. The main interests of these arbitrarily chosen ghost stories—maternal ambivalence, slavery, AIDS, emancipation—already highlight one of the main qualities that apparitional figures can provide: their applicability for discussing often-avoided spheres of knowledge. Simultaneously, spectrality is becoming a methodological tool for scholars trying to come to terms with history (Benett 1999, Bergland 2000, Buse 1999, Derrida 1994, Finucane 1996, Ratmoko 2005, Weinstock 2004). These scholars chose to explore the unsaid, the invisible, the hidden elements of narratives we decide to denominate as history. The combination of minoritized spheres with a historiographic interest frequently shifts ghostliness into the realm of gender
theory. The combination of these three constituents—ghosts, gender and history—was the motivation for the present essay collection. The book grew out of a seminar under the same title, held at Princeton University as part of the American Comparative Literature Association annual conference in 2006. All but three papers were presented at this meeting.

Keeping the current spectral economy in mind, this collection continues the exploration of repeating parameters in ghostly sightings in the Anglo-American tradition including its influences starting with England in the seventeenth century, going through Western appropriations of Asian (in particular Chinese) narratives and ending with the current postnational ghost in the machine. Our focus on gender and alternative versions of history has several motivations. The aim is to point out functional and strategic, but nevertheless playful moments within the genre, that at the latest since the early nineteenth century has been appropriated by women writers and female story tellers as a means of emancipation. As this collection demonstrates, the New World Order (Derrida 1994) is not a simple re-enchantment of the world but rather a state of a noticeable novel enthusiasm for acknowledging continuity in the presence of the irrational in the popular literary imagination. Within this genealogy, ghosts have developed from divine messengers and restless souls of the dead, permitted by God to uncover wrongdoing and to punish sin in seventeenth century England, to playful, occasionally evil, but most importantly completely integrated reminders of the past that point towards the future.

While this collection opposes current readings of ghostly presence such as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s Spectral America, where the editor interprets the contemporary fascination with ghosts as a “general postmodern suspicion of meta-narratives accentuated by millennial anxiety” (Weinstock 2004, 5), it does not deny that ghostly matters have found an increased reflection in literary academic circles since the late 1980s. However, the reasons for this new sensibility are not to be found in the return of ghostly figures (since they are always present, even in their absence) but rather in the agenda-setting of leading literary journals and globally-distributed, established publication houses’ programs. Ghosts are now, other than a few decades ago, presentable in a socially acceptable manner. One of the qualities that make the ghost compatible with literary soirées and philosophical Sunday brunches is, paradoxically, their connection with issues of oppression and expropriation. In a time when university departments ask for gender studies representatives, and a simple sticker with the inscription “ethnic” on a new publication can lead to a best-seller, a ghost can be a convenient advertising sign. The spectral vocabulary has always circulated in marginalized spheres—women’s issues, so-called ethnic topics, and supernatural literature—its presence in cultural theory, on the other
hand, is new. Our current social turn in the humanities, motivated for the better or for worse by the forces of economic globalization, in the process of which marginalized spheres are highlighted while being marked as closed in their own definable systems, allowed ghosts to enter highly visible spheres. However, as Ralph Ellison demonstrates in *Invisible Man*, high visibility repeatedly leads to invisibility.

Essays collected in this publication focus on this ambiguity touching on various topics, without a border patrol policing disciplines, languages and nations. Any analysis of ghostly matters invites by the nature of the topic opposing perspectives and even contradictory interpretations. The often-quoted anachrony of the ghost, its ability to speak from the past in the present moment, and to be present while being absent, calls for an openness towards a sphere that will lead to dearly needed areas of ordering knowledge, and as a consequence new areas of knowledge production.

**Contributions**

The range of essays in this collection covers not only literary ghosts from the Restoration to the contemporary period, but also scholarly investigations in this context from history, gender studies, biographical writing, and psychoanalytical schools of thought. The first chapter is a collection of introductory essays on three major spectral themes, emancipation, tradition and articulation. While the essays in this chapter agree with scholars, who argue that ghosts voice issues of the oppressed, they also open up the discussion for a more complex view of the voice of oppression being integrated within the language of the oppressor.

A recurrent topic emerging in ghost stories written by women is the power of friendship, which is why the collection opens with this often-instrumentalized tool. Analyzing one of the most famous ghost stories of the time, frequently referred to as the first modern ghost story, penned in a best-selling version of the tale in 1706 by Daniel Defoe under the title *A True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs. Veal*, Sasha Handley demonstrates a long tradition of helpful ghosts who offer friendship through various familiar and surprisingly simple means, such as reading suggestions, listening, and understanding; thus, the ear of the ghost. Like various other articles, this essay argues for a presence of women's ghostly helpers as early as the first part of the eighteenth century. The prosaic character of communication tools used by apparitional figures indicates their integral place in women's (hi)stories. Reading the ghost story as a genre that provides unique vehicles for addressing issues of marginalized groups in early modern England, Sasha Handley opens discussion on specific elements ghostly matters hold for powerless subjects to implement. Women from a spectrum of social backgrounds take part in this unique exploration. Most of the essays in
this collection address the ability of women “to manipulate the widespread belief in the providential meaning of ghosts to expose the often turbulent nature of gender relations.” Thus, Sasha Handley suggests adding ghost stories to James C. Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak*, as “everyday forms of resistance to exploitation used by groups with limited access to formal power and authority” (Scott 1985).

This more general and introductory essay is followed by Michaela Keck’s and Meredith Goldsmith’s more detailed accounts of two American women writers from the late nineteenth century, who essentially kept their preference for the supernatural secret while reaching a highly influential status as realistic fiction writers. Louise May Alcott and Edith Wharton both use conventions of the Gothic as a means of voicing suppressed gender conflicts. Meredith Goldsmith focuses on Wharton’s use of the Gothic mode to work through issues of class and generational conflict that otherwise receive little attention in her fiction. She highlights the position of death as a great leveler in a political and social sense. Goldsmith and Keck both address stories that do not focus on the appearance of the ghost, which is according to most ghost stories written by women writers. Far from Hamlet’s father’s spectacular ghostly exits and entrances, ghosts in American women writers’ stories are typically always present. Wharton’s “After Holbein” exposes the ghostly setting merely as a tool to demonstrate social conventions, and Alcott’s “Abbot’s Ghost” introduces the ghost proper only at the end of the novel. By focusing on this despectacularization of the apparition in Alcott’s writing Michaela Keck describes a gendered topos. Ghost stories written by women writers frequently avoid the rise in action achieved by the foreshadowing and the sudden appearance of the apparition. Instead, ghosts in these narratives appear as a “natural” part of every day life. Michaela Keck and Meredith Goldsmith also demonstrate that these spectral literary figures refuse to be squeezed into the binary opposition of good and bad. Escaping the category “good ghosts” (Henry James), they don’t subscribe to the German tradition of evil apparitions either. Their departure from the strategic and dualistic model eighteenth century helper/punisher opened the door for a wide range of twentieth century realistic ghosts. Furthermore, stories like Alcott’s “The Abbot's Ghost,” which describes a “fallen woman’s” chance to begin anew instead of being ostracized, only through a confirmation by the phantom of the abbot’s ghost, highlights the power of spectrality in areas of marginalization and social isolation. However, as Michaela Keck points out, it still takes a ghost to absolve Edith Snowdown of her former sins. The chapter closes with Andrew Hock Soon Ng’s “Haunting Concubines,” a reading of Su Tong’s “Raise the Red Lantern,” a novel that has been adopted into a film version highly popular with its Western audience. Drawing on Derrida’s theory of hauntology and spectralogy, Andrew Hock
Soon Ng argues that the women in Su Tong’s novella evince the ideologically haunted individuals whose subsistence as “ghosts” declares their artifactual and prosthetic identities (artifactual, because they are mechanisms of patriarchal ideology; prosthetic because they subsist on the phantom limb of ideology). He also recourses to Bliss Cua Lim’s concept of ghosts as representation of the “non-contemporaneous” to argue that haunting vexes linear history, enabling a particular moment in time that achieves a static dimension so that a microscopic interrogation can be performed upon that moment.

While the first chapter tries to define the ghost story as an instrument to achieve certain emancipatory or possessive intentions, the second chapter opens up the discussion towards more controversial issues in the genre. Three contributors read the spectral presence through the topos of the gendered home. Alysia Kolentsis traces the “insidious and destructive code of masculinity” inscribed by female writers of supernatural fiction. In a productive opposition to many other essays in this collection, she focuses on the inability of the ghost story to establish a language outside of the patriarchal offer. By questioning interpretations of female empowerment and discovering the death of female agency in ghost stories, Alysia Kolentsis offers a counter balance to previous readings. Woman in her interpretation is as a generic symbol without substance, a ghost. Reading the stories from the position of punishment instead of retribution, she arrives at the conclusion that acquiring a voice does not mean articulation. Describing ghost stories as “smoke signals to their female readers,” she demonstrates a male-controlled domestic order in the nineteenth century American novel. Thus, she points at an insufficiently analyzed topos of the ghost story genre—the presence of the man in the haunted house and the proliferation of ghostly invasions.

While acknowledging problems involved in feminist utilization of spectral appearance, Esther Pereen focuses on two ghost stories whose apparitional protagonists allow female characters to find a “true home that is not disturbed by (the threat of) male violence.” Choosing the Middle Passage and the subjection of gendered oppression, she approaches the connection between ghostliness and homes using Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope. In doing this, she draws our attention to the specter’s quality of not only being out of time, but also ‘out of place.’ In her reading of Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1998) and Fay Weldon’s short story “Angel, All Innocence” (1991) she argues for the necessity of gendering the ghost motive in literature and culture. The last essay in this chapter highlights the fluidity of borders in the context of ghostly spheres. Angela Holzer points out reinforcing as opposed to destabilizing dimensions of the spectral. Her focus on the visible, the spectare in specter, opens discussion of ghosts to a figure that makes visible that which has been rendered invisible.
Thus, she highlights the productive use of phantasms and fantasies while tracing the importance of spectral scenography in writing history. By including Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of ghosts, she describes a repressive history that nurtures specteralization of everyday life.

The third chapter introduces migration, a foremost current sphere of ghostly sightings in Anglo-American literary narratives. Magda Romanska argues that with the rise of nationalism in late nineteenth-century Europe, the pattern of the patriarchal covenant in Hamlet paralleled the process of nation-building. Hamlet’s filial loyalty toward his Father’s ghost was perceived as a symbol of patriotic loyalty towards one’s nation/Father-land. Conversely, as a “gift of death” that cements the patriarchal contract, Ophelia became a model of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal. Lynn Ta combines all of the afore mentioned issues by stressing the difficulty of separation between work and home in the immigrant context. Home becomes a haunted space in various ways, one of which is the omnipresence of lurking work. While the separation of work and home in Victorian society highlighted by Alysia Kolentsis renders women invisible, the merging of the two spheres provides the same role for immigrant women in the twentieth century. Ghosts, whether Victorian or postmodern, never abandon the domestic sphere. Monika Elbert adds another important element within migration mapping, the question of generation. She illustrates her underlying premise, that immigrant daughters are bequeathed the forbidden words of a spectral mother, by reading Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), where the new language becomes the haunted home. Andrea Spain offers a different interpretation of the figure of the ghost in the context of history. Other than Esther Peeren, Spain does not read ghosts in postcolonial narratives as materialization or agency but as effect. Instead of the more common interpretation of the ghosts’ ability to articulate things hidden, she concentrates on the inability of ghosts to put the dead properly to rest. In her reading, the ghost does not possess the authority to act, which deprives it the fundamental qualities necessary to provoke socio-political reactions. Her reflections include Deleuze’s theorization of time via Bergson, as well as Derrida’s conceptions of futurity. The temporal disruption corresponds with Leila’s description of immigrant time in Ng’s *Bones*: “Forward and forward and then back, back” (Ng 1993, 145).

The last chapter focuses on the body as medium for ghostly messages. Robert Smith maps the textual embedding of M.R. James’s “biographical symptoms.” James claimed that the “greatest successes have been scored by the authors who allow us to be just a little in the dark as to the working of their machinery.” An examination of the mechanism of James’s machinery sheds
significant light on the horizons of response of a fin-de-siècle reader who had to be situated “a little in the dark.” Smith analyzes James’ Edwardian readers, who were “pleasantly uncomfortable” through ghost stories that enacted and performed a ‘sort’ of psychosocial therapy. As Penny Fielding observes, James’ tales “feature an astonishing variety of the social neuroses of the early 20th-century.” In particular, noting that “the repression of social and gender relations occasions the Gothic return of these determinants,” Fielding claims James’ protagonists “as they try to preserve their singular, masculine pursuits, become overtaken by precisely those complexities of gender and sexuality that they originally feared.” Robert Smith adds that the “sorting,” of a typical James ghost story, in this case “Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance,” works to subvert the identifications of its readers and exposes them to a complex experience of libidinal contradiction integral to the formal construction of Edwardian masculinity. The next contributor, Judith Zeitlin, takes us into “the heart of the work of mourning.” In seventeenth century Chinese tales about husbands who have lost adored wives to sudden death, and the man’s unresolved feelings of grief and longing that are enough to conjure up her dead spirit, Zeitlin highlights yet another sexual instrumentalization of the ghostly figure in an appropriation of a Chinese ghost story tradition for the “Western” film market. Christopher Brooks bridges early seventeenth century representations of ghostly figures and the ghost story revival in the 1980’s, thus providing a miniature exploration of the topics afore. By historicizing several ghost stories throughout the centuries through an interpretation of their, in his words, “social realism,” Christopher Brooks summarizes all of the preceding essays, which explore the connection between a being-in-the-world and the necessity to find an individual place in it. All essays demonstrate that a belief system, which includes ghosts, does not only support the existence of God but can also be used as a tool to fight against social injustice and to question the status-quo position of a divine order. Brooks’ essay focuses on an interpretation of “The Friendly Apparition,” a story in which the spectral voice of an executed murderess and alcoholic is used as a moral and religious warning against physical pleasures. He, thus, touches the omnipresent ambiguity in interpreting a ghost: On one hand, a voiceless character learns a widely audible language, on the other hand, the mortality of her diction is institutionalized and purposeful, thus the ghost is the actual medium for established views and hegemonic moral believes. The collection closes with Diane Treon’s reading of two popular apocalyptic current narratives, Akira and Ghost in the Shell, which she reads as a form of Bildungsroman. Treon explores a haunted worldview in the technological age in which ghosts change their form but not necessarily their presence and shows how ghosts connect the melodrama with the “male urban gothic.” Furthermore, her reading of a Japanese tradition of portraying ghosts and the uncanny that appeals to a
Western audience highlights the vast webs of networked discourses in the context of ghostly matters. All essays, auspiciously, demonstrate that the future is far away from being a ghost-free space.

**Works Cited**


CHAPTER ONE

GHOSTS AND CHANGE
GHOSTS, GOSSIP AND GENDER
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CANTERBURY

SASHA HANDLEY

Part I

At twelve noon on Saturday the eighth of September 1705, Margaret Bargrave, an attorney’s wife from the City of Canterbury in south-east England, sat alone in her house. Contemplating her miserable life with a drunk and abusive husband, her melancholy thoughts were disturbed by a knock at her door. Upon answering, Margaret discovered a woman, around thirty years of age, dressed in a handsome suit of night clothes, wrapping gown and a silk handkerchief tied at her neck. Closer inspection revealed the visitor to be none other than Mary Veal, a life-long friend of Margaret Bargrave. Mary was a maiden gentlewoman from Dover and she had known Margaret since childhood but the pair had been lately separated by family circumstance and they had not set eyes on each other for almost two and a half years. Margaret Bargrave was thus overjoyed to be reunited with her old friend, and eagerly invited her inside.

Entering the house, Mary drew her hand across her eyes and said that she was feeling unwell. Margaret noticed that she “look’d very pale” and had a strange blackness around her eyes, but she suspected this illness was due to the fits that had troubled her friend for many years, and so to ease Mary’s discomfort, she was seated in the comfortable elbow-chair in the sitting room (Letter from E.B. 1965, 2). Mary politely declined Margaret’s offer of food and drink and declared the purpose of her surprise visit. She was going on a journey, but had a great mind to see her old friend before she left. She explained, “My Dear Friend, I am come to renew our Old Friendship again, and to beg your Pardon for my breach of it, and if you can forgive me you are one of the best of Women” (A True Relation 1706, 3). Margaret quickly dismissed her friend’s concerns about the interruption of their acquaintance and the two women fell into easy conversation of the good old days. Chatting for almost two hours, the two women reminisced about their childhood adventures together and Margaret took time to admire Mary’s new silk gown; but the pair could hardly avoid mention of more serious topics, and particularly that of
Margaret’s mistreatment at the hands of her husband Richard Bargrave, whose loose-living and drunken behaviour had significantly reduced his wife’s fortune and circumstance in life.

Mary recalled the comfort they had both taken in reading together in troubled times, and she recommended that Margaret revisit Drelincourt’s “Book of Death,” or as it was more commonly known, The Christian’s Defence against the Fears of Death—a lengthy tract written by French Protestant clergyman, Charles Drelincourt in 1651 (Drelincourt 1720). Drelincourt’s devotional text advised readers how to prepare for death and for the life to come, and it also provided a series of prayers intended to comfort the individual in times of need. Marius d’Assigny was convinced that the book would prove popular across the Channel, and he translated the text into English, where it was first published in 1675. Mary Veal and Margaret Bargrave had often been consoled by descriptions of the blissful life that awaited them on the other side of the grave and Mary declared that in this respect, Drelincourt’s text was “an excellent Book and full of truth” (Letter from Stephen Gray 1705, 3). This hearty recommendation was followed by Mary’s own words of spiritual consolation, assuring her friend that “one minute of future Happiness will infinitely reward you for all your Sufferings” (A True Relation 1706, 3-4). She continued further, insisting in established Calvinist fashion that Margaret’s afflictions were “Marks of God’s Favour” (A True Relation 1706, 3) rather than his displeasure, and that she undoubtedly had innumerable guardian angels about her for protection (Payne 1722). According to Mary, her friend’s mean circumstances were clear signs that she would soon find true happiness as one of the elect in the life to come.

Before she took her leave, Mary Veal had one last request to make of her friend—that she write a letter to her brother Mr Veal. This correspondence was to include details of various personal bequests to be distributed among Mary’s friends and relatives in the event of her death, and it also made provision for a tombstone to be laid over the grave of Mary’s parents, since she believed that they had been buried without sufficient reverence. Margaret saw little need to perform this morbid task but Mary was insistent upon it, and so Margaret completed the letter before bidding farewell to her friend who promised to pay one final visit the following day after Church (A True Relation 1706, 5).

This encounter, though rather touching, seems quite unexceptional, and so it would have remained had Margaret Bargrave not gone in search of Mary when she failed to turn up after Church that Sunday. After making enquiries with Mary’s cousins, with whom she was staying, Margaret was informed that her dear friend, Mary Veal, had died in Dover following a sudden fit at twelve noon on Friday 7 September 1705—one day before Margaret had conversed with her in Canterbury, seemingly alive and well. Little had Mrs Bargrave
suspected that the familiar face which sat opposite her in the elbow chair on Saturday afternoon had not been the person of Mary Veal, but her ghost instead.

Part II

This particular Canterbury tale, though no Chaucerian masterpiece, went on to become the most famous and most published ghost story of eighteenth-century England. This was in large part thanks to the involvement of journalist and proto-novelist Daniel Defoe, who is widely thought to have penned the best-selling version of the tale in 1706, entitled _A True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs Veal_ (Starr 2003, 2). Defoe’s account has attracted the interest of numerous literary scholars, interested in the story for what it reveals about his elusive character and the significance of his early work. By way of contrast, this essay situates Margaret Bargrave’s narrative in wider historical and narrative contexts, suggesting that ghost stories, in both oral and printed form, provided unique vehicles for addressing the issues of marginalised groups in early modern England. This was particularly true for women, both married and unmarried and from a spectrum of social backgrounds. As this article will demonstrate, women were able to manipulate widespread belief in the providential meaning of ghosts to expose the often turbulent nature of gender relations; to contest mistreatment and abuse at the hands of men; and to inflict punishment on those who transgressed the accepted boundaries of both the moral and Christian communities of early modern England.

In the case of Margaret Bargrave, contemporary meanings attached to the appearance of ghosts and widespread belief in the reality of these supernatural figures, allowed her, and her female acquaintance, to publicly expose her vile and abusive husband Richard Bargrave, and to ruin his reputation in local credit networks. Even before the appearance of Mary Veal’s ghost, Richard Bargrave had acquired a notorious reputation in St. Mary Bredin in Canterbury, but his antics were largely confined to the boundaries of this parish. However, the flood of interest which followed the ghost’s visit meant that his behaviour was laid out before much wider audiences, indeed the story circulated in private correspondence, newspaper articles, periodicals and pamphlets which excitedly recounted Richard’s riotous lifestyle. Written just five days after Mary’s ghost appeared, a letter written by a female neighbour of Margaret Bargrave, known only as “E.B.,” told how Richard Bargrave’s “sottish and careless” (Letter from E.B. 1705, 1) behaviour at Dover led to him being sacked and forced the Bargraves’ removal to Canterbury, on a much reduced income. Richard Bargrave regularly beat his long-suffering wife and on the very day that Margaret claimed to have met with Mary Veal’s ghost, her husband had returned home drunk and locked her out of doors on a cold winter
night. When she was let back in the next morning, she was so cold that she contracted a dangerous fever.

Thanks to fluid correspondence networks in eighteenth-century England, news of Richard Bargrave’s disreputable character flowed easily from Canterbury to London, and beyond. In fact, E.B.’s letter from Canterbury benefited from these lines of communication and probably owes its survival to the illustrious hands into which it had fallen by the winter of 1705. The original manuscript letter can now be found as an interesting aside in the scientific correspondence of John Flamsteed, fellow of the Royal Society, founder of the Greenwich Observatory, and the first Astronomer Royal of England. Flamsteed spread news of the affair among his learned acquaintance, and on 31. October 1705 he received a letter from royal physician John Arbuthnot, asking him to make further enquiries into the case on behalf of Queen Anne herself (Clark 2001, 123). Eager to carry out his royal commission with speed and efficiency, Flamsteed wrote to trusted friend and amateur scientist Stephen Gray who lived in Canterbury, asking him to interview Margaret Bargrave to determine the truth of her tale.

Defying the possibility of empirical proof, the authenticity of Mary Veal’s ghost rested upon the reputation of chief witness Margaret Bargrave. Stephen Gray was eager to investigate this unusual event according to the principles of experimental philosophy and so he set about constructing a detailed circumstantial report from creditworthy witnesses of Mrs Bargrave’s character and her alleged encounter with the ghost. Making enquiries among Margaret Bargrave’s esteemed acquaintance and with the local clerical elite, Stephen Gray judged her to be “a Religious Discreet Witty and well accomplished Gentlewoman” who was “seen often to frequent the Divine Servise of the Church” (Gray 1680, 1). Margaret’s good character, religious devotion and thus her testimony, was further strengthened by comparison with her violent husband who had once beaten her for receiving the Sacrament and who Stephen Gray further discovered, could often be found in the company of prostitutes. Indeed, Margaret informed Stephen Gray that she had exposed her husband’s most recent infidelity in the garden of a public house about nine miles outside of Canterbury (Gray 1680, 6).

Margaret Bargrave’s reasons for condemning her husband may seem obvious, but the residents of St. Mary Bredin, and those who later interviewed Margaret, also came out in firm support of her testimony. The next-door neighbour’s maidservant told Stephen Gray that at the time Margaret claimed to have met with the ghost, she had heard “somebody talking very pleasantly with Mrs Bargrave” as she worked outside in the yard. 3 The maid surmised that it was not Mr Bargrave since he was “not use to be soe pleasant with her” (Gray 1680, 5). To support the veracity of his account, Gray was also keen to
emphasise that many worthy “Persons of Reputation” could be counted among Mrs Bargrave’s supporters. These included the minister of St Andrew’s, the chaplain of Countess Anne Coventry and George Stanhope—an eminent chaplain of King William and Queen Mary and Dean of Canterbury Cathedral (Nicols 1812, 150-165).

Nobody except Margaret Bargrave had seen the ghost of Mary Veal, so why did so many people choose to support her testimony so whole-heartedly? As historian Bernard Capp has suggested, the answer may lie in changing notions of civility among the middling sorts who formed a good proportion of Margaret’s acquaintance in Canterbury (Capp 2003, 377). The kind of marital abuse to which Margaret was subjected was increasingly condemned in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and wife-beating in particular, came to be seen as “barbaric.” Richard Bargrave was also guilty of more than just wife-beating, he had committed all three of the primary abuses of marriage identified by Capp in this period—violence, adultery and failure to provide for his spouse (Capp 2003, 85).

Nonetheless, a more persuasive answer to this question presents itself when we place Margaret Bargrave’s tale within broader narrative and religious contexts. Despite noted advances in natural philosophy, seventeenth-century England was a society understood within a broadly providential framework—that is to say that men, women and children from a variety of social and confessional backgrounds were familiar with the interventions of God to chastise sinners and to encourage faithful members of the lay community. The appearance of ghosts was largely understood and explained with this in mind. Ghosts were divine messengers, or restless souls of the dead, permitted by God to uncover wrongdoing and to punish sin. 4 Margaret Bargrave’s narrative thus satisfied contemporary expectations of ghostly appearances; Mary’s ghost had returned to comfort Margaret in her hour of need, to encourage her religious devotion, and to ensure the right punishment of Richard Bargrave who had transgressed the moral boundaries of the local and Christian communities.

**Part III**

Daniel Defoe’s *True Relation of the Apparition of Mrs Veal* has often been identified as the first modern ghost story, but familiar narrative conventions and expectations associated with ghosts, certainly existed before this time. Ghost stories were not a fixed literary genre in early modern England but these figures took starring roles in cheaply printed ballad and chapbook accounts especially in murder pamphlets and ballads centred on the tribulations of love and courtship. Time and again, the ghosts made famous by producers of cheap print assumed the role of supernatural sleuth to expose the crime of murder where it
Sasha had gone undetected, but more interesting for our purposes are those ghosts that regularly appeared to punish inconstancy and betrayal in affairs of the heart.

Another example is set in the naval town of Gosport in Hampshire. The ballad of Nancy’s Ghost told of the murder of a young woman by her lover after she had fallen pregnant with his child. Forsaking his vow to marry her, the young man, who was a ship’s carpenter, stabbed her to death with a penknife and buried her in a pre-prepared grave. After his ship had set sail, Nancy’s ghost appeared before him one night with babe in arms, vowing to haunt her murderer until she was revenged (Nancy’s Ghost 1774). In a similar vein, the ballad of The Two Unfortunate Lovers (1670) told the tragic tale of Susan Mease who was so dismayed by the fickle affections of her intended marriage partner that she was, quite literally, “kill’d with loving him” (The Two 1670, 1). Her ghost returned to haunt the young betrayer, and the shock of this appearance proved too much for him, since he died soon afterwards.

In ballads, chapbooks and contemporary literature, ghosts were essential plot devices. No doubt they were sensationalised, and cannot be read as direct representations of social reality: but here, elements of both fantasy and reality coexisted. Rather than proving an unworkable tension, this fusion often added to the drama and appeal of these texts. As Lennard Davis has persuasively argued, the separation of “fact” from “fiction” was a project that was barely underway at the start of the eighteenth century (Davis 1983). Moreover, many ghost stories, which appeared in chapbook form, began life in oral communities and were frequently intended to effect real, material consequences. Published in 1662, The Strange and Wonderfull Discovery of a horrid and cruel Murther was based on a series of depositions taken by magistrates in the county of Yorkshire. A maidservant named Isabel Binnington claimed that she had been visited by the ghost of Robert Elliott, a Londoner who had been robbed and murdered by three women whilst sleeping in Binnington’s house some fourteen years earlier. To corroborate her story, Isabel dug up a pile of human bones from under the floor before identifying the three local women that she, and the ghost, wished to accuse of murder (Caciola 1996, 27). Isabel’s testimony, like that of Margaret Bargrave, stuck to the familiar narrative conventions associated with the appearance of ghosts in this period—namely sudden death, murder and immorality or sin. Familiarity with this tried and tested narrative formula may well have helped to persuade the magistrates that Isabel’s testimony was authentic, despite her humble status. Justice of the Peace Thomas Crompton was sufficiently convinced to formally record Isabel’s accusations and to make enquiries in neighbouring parishes where Isabel claimed the murderers now lived. The criminal implications of Isabel’s testimony ensured that it reached the ear of local officials and this legal context was an important area in which the
interests of more illustrious personages overlapped with those of a modest maidservant.

Likewise, Margaret Bargrave’s tale was clearly constructed as both an imaginative and realistic story, designed to persuade listeners or readers of the truth of her experience, and to condemn her husband at the same time. As such, its force rested on widespread acceptance of the reality of ghosts and the circumstances in which they could be expected to appear. Currents of belief in the reality of ghosts were also central to “The Lady’s Revenge,” a narrative sent to the periodical, *The Female Spectator* in 1745 and purporting to be a true and “recent Transaction” by the author (The Lady's 1745, 155). It told the story of a lady of good fortune who was courted and ultimately betrayed by her lover who married a wealthier woman behind her back. Determined to indulge her powerful feelings of resentment, the lady faked her own suicide and appeared before her former lover one evening, “dress’d all in white” and calling out his name (The Lady's 1745, 173). Haunted by his own guilty conscience, the Gentleman declared that it was “no other than her Ghost” (The Lady's 1745, 173). He soon fell into a delirium and refused to sleep alone, afraid that heaven’s justice would come to claim him. It was not long before “every one’s Mouth was full of the News, that a Gentleman had seen a Spirit” after he betrayed his lover (The Lady's 1745, 175). He was thus exposed as a cheat and a coward and was shunned whenever he went into company. The editor of the *Female Spectator* clearly approved of this theatrical trick, recommending to her readers “that all Women who have been abandoned and betrayed by Men...would assume the Spirit she did, and rather contrive some Means to render the ungrateful Lover the Object of Contempt” (*The Female Spectator* 1745, 177). Ghost stories were thus highly effective in punishing men for breach of vow and they represented important outlets for expressions of personal and public dissatisfaction.

Evidence from diaries, court and parish records also suggest that ghost stories like that of Margaret Bargrave were loosely based on contemporary expectations of courtship and marriage, in which love and affection were important ingredients. Persistent inconstancy, adultery and excessive violence were, by contrast, condemned. Indeed, an extract from the journal of Cassandra Willoughby in 1700 proves that Margaret Bargrave was not alone in choosing a ghost story within which to frame accusations of spousal abuse, since the intervention of this divine nemesis lent greater authority to common rumour and gossip. Willoughby told the story of a local woman whose husband “beat her lamentably” as she lay critically ill with a fever. The husband’s fit of violence was motivated by a fancy that his wife “had hid some money which he should never find after her Death” (An Account 1722, 56). The wife died soon
afterwards but before she passed away “she begged it might please God to permit her, to appear to her Husband after her Death, that so she might be revenged of him.” On the third night after she died, her ghost appeared and beat her husband “in so terrible a maner that he was all covered with blood from head to foot.” The ghost’s attack was so ferocious that the man survived his wife by just a few days, although he managed to crawl to his neighbour’s house to tell them how he had come by his injuries (An Account 1722, 57). This story revealed the physical vulnerability of wives within the home but also articulated a strong thirst for vengeance, which was sanctioned by the local community judging by the lack of sympathy afforded to this violent husband.

For women who were largely unprotected from marital violence and neglect by law, it was thus a common response to formulate a narrative strategy to expose spousal misdeeds. Ghost stories formed an important part of this repertoire and these supernatural tales were often effective in securing the condemnation of abusive men among friends and neighbours who intervened to express disapproval. Ghost stories thus provided opportunities for marginalised groups to assert power and authority in public spaces in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England.8 This strategy was by no means confined to women of a certain social status, and men were equally adept at manipulating the conventions of the ghost narrative to achieve particular and material ends—sometimes to ward off rent increase by grasping landlords, to expose abusive masters or to complain about the infidelities and inconstancies of lovers.9 Women were however, the most frequent narrators of such tales, perhaps due to the fragile nature of courtship relations in these years. For those who were engaged but as yet unmarried, the threat of illegitimate pregnancy and social disgrace made women more physically, economically and socially vulnerable when romantic liaisons broke down. For those who were married but suffering physical or sexual abuse, there were limited options available for redress. Separation was an unattractive prospect, both financially and socially, and legal remedy or divorce on the grounds of adultery or abuse was almost unheard of. The telling of ghost stories can then be understood as an effective narrative response to the potentially hazardous pitfalls of love, courtship and marriage. In this sense, ghost stories might be added to James C. Scott’s Weapons of the Weak, as everyday forms of resistance to exploitation used by groups with limited access to formal power and authority (Scott 1985).

That said, ghost stories like that of Margaret Bargrave had a limited shelf-life. As the reality of ghosts began to be questioned and to some extent, undermined by the patchy progress of enlightenment thought and desacralisation in eighteenth-century society, the potential for these narratives to inflict this-worldly punishment on sinners was ultimately weakened. These tales stretched
the boundaries of the “real” and the “possible,” but ultimately worked within
these constraints. Nonetheless, as the objective reality of ghosts was
increasingly questioned, ghost stories began to work in a different way. As the
eighteenth century wore on, the telling of ghost stories rarely led to formal or
material punishments but they did persist as useful vehicles for protesting
injustice, championing moral rectitude, and articulating minority issues on a
broader, more intangible level. As with Derrida’s Specters of Marx, the rationale
of ghost stories as moral parables survived as islands of disembodied knowledge
in a sea of scepticism, commercialism and corruption.

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