

BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

***A Suggestion of Ghosts: Supernatural Fiction by Women 1854-1900*, ed. by J. A. Mains**
(Kent: Black Shuck Books, 2017)

During the last two or three decades, there has been a number of publications containing exclusively supernatural/mystery tales by female authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These include anthologies like *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (1988) edited by the late Richard Dalby, to whom J. A. Mains, the editor of the present volume, refers in his editorial note, as well as the republication of ghost-story collections written individually by women writers, such as those by Marjorie Bowen and Harriet Prescott Spofford that have been edited by Jessica A. Salmonson for Ash-Tree Press in the late 1990s and early 2000s, or those by Catherine Crowe and Alice Perrin edited by Dalby for Sarob Press in the 'Mistresses of the Macabre' series around the same period. It is therefore a welcome development that, after so many years of neglect, a major press like Wordsworth Editions has, during the last decade or so, begun systematically to recover and re-evaluate uncanny fiction by female writers of the gothic and the weird from the Victorian period and the first half of the twentieth century, in their 'Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural' series. Penguin Books have also, relatively recently, released at least one anthology of ghost stories (*The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories: From Elizabeth Gaskell to Ambrose Bierce*, 2010) in which Victorian women writers of the supernatural occupy almost as much space as their male counterparts.

Certain authors that appear in these editions are well known for their non-supernatural fiction – such as Elizabeth Gaskell or Edith Wharton – while others, like Mary E. Braddon or Charlotte Riddell, are almost entirely associated with Victorian ghostly fiction and the gothic (though most of them had written a substantial amount of realist fiction as well). However, as Lynda E. Rucker points out in her very insightful introduction to the present anthology, despite their popularity in the nineteenth century, spooky tales by women writers of the Victorian period have not been as frequently anthologised as those written by men (like Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, and J. Sheridan Le Fanu). Indeed, even a cursory glance through the contents of anthologies that contain supernatural tales from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – anthologies released throughout the years by such publishing houses as Oxford University Press or Modern Library, but also by many lesser-known presses – reveals that the vast majority of the stories included were penned by men.

Rucker therefore asserts that the ghost-story genre is identified mainly with male writers, despite the fact that female writers of the genre were plentiful and prolific, while she also stresses the extremely important role that women (both as writers – such as Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve, and Mary Shelley – and as readers) played in the development of gothic horror in general, a genre that was the progenitor of everything defined as ‘horror’ today. Rucker adds that, even within the horror genre itself, women’s uncanny tales are not often regarded as worthy enough representatives – certainly not to the degree that stories by male authors like Poe and M. R. James are – due to what are usually deemed to be the ‘feminine’ or feminist concerns of their supernatural short fiction, such as the status of women, female sexuality, marriage, or motherhood. Nevertheless, the increasing number of published collections of ghostly or weird tales by women writers indicates that this perception has begun to change, and many neglected female authors of the supernatural (from Victorians like Amelia Edwards and Rhoda Broughton, to twentieth-century writers like D. K. Broster) are gaining increasing attention from critics and readers, through the republication of their fiction by major or small, independent publishing houses (including Wordsworth Editions, Sarob Press, and Victorian Secrets) in recent years.

In this context of growing interest in uncanny tales by women writers, Mains has undertaken an extensive exploration of old periodicals (newspapers and magazines) in order to discover tales by Victorian women writers that have not yet been anthologised. Thus, the present volume is a compilation of very rare ghostly tales by women, and most of the authors’ names are barely if at all recognisable – even for ghost-story aficionados. The avid reader of nineteenth-century ghost stories by women will not come across Elizabeth Gaskell, Edith Nesbit, or even Catherine Crowe in this anthology. The only relatively well-known authors who are included are American writer Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, who wrote both realist and supernatural fiction and was popular at the turn of the century, and Irishwoman Katharine Tynan, famous primarily as a poet, and then as a novelist and short-story writer.

Naturally, the Victorian tales included in this volume (which cover the second half of the nineteenth century) are full of stereotypical gothic motifs and tropes, such as a visitor spending the night in a supposedly haunted chamber, apparitions that are connected to some sort of secret inheritance or treasure hidden in an old mansion or castle, supernatural phenomena that have a natural explanation, and so on. These tales are certainly not the strongest representatives of the ghost stories produced during this period, and unquestionably not the best ghost stories written by women writers of that era – for high-quality supernatural

tales, one would have to ‘resort’ to such accomplished authors as George Eliot, Edith Wharton, Vernon Lee, Margaret Oliphant, or Mary E. Braddon. However, as Rucker observes in her introduction, these tales should not be evaluated by today’s standards, but instead understood as samples of what people enjoyed reading over a century ago; in this case, it is not their literary merit that matters most, but their historical significance. Nevertheless, out of all fifteen tales of this anthology, there are, inevitably, those that I find more worth mentioning than the others.

‘The Little Green Door’ (1896) by Freeman is more of an imaginative time-travel tale – with a moral lesson – than a traditional ghost story. It is a delightful, charming little gem, well written and very enjoyable, offering much more than a typical uncanny tale of that period usually does, with its uncommon – considering the time it was written – plot-line and sense of humour. ‘The Death Spancel’ (1896) by Tynan, my personal favourite from this anthology, is a dark tale about the dreadful consequences of lust and unbridled passion. This is a fascinating story, where witchcraft is the means by which the sinners are bound together; the author also emphasises the Victorian notion of pure, untainted love between lawful couples and the violent, sinful passion of adultery. Although ‘A Legend of All-Hallows Eve’ (1879) by Georgianna S. Hull evolves like a typical ghostly tale of that period – featuring a budding romance, a secret, and a spectre – without any particular plot twist, it has a promising beginning, introducing an intriguing young heroine, who does not conform to the social norms and the feminine stereotypes of her era. ‘The Ghost of the Nineteenth Century’ (1880) by Phoebe Yates Pember is mostly a psychological ghost story about a haunting sound that exists in the mind of the heroine, preventing her from moving on with her life; in this respect, the author presents the supernatural phenomena as a manifestation of the haunted self.

‘The Spectral Rout’ (1865) by Frances Power Cobbe – an Irish author and activist for the rights of women and animals – is a typical Victorian ghost story, with two sisters discovering a lost inheritance. The tale is more interesting for the detailed description of the impoverishment of two members of the upper class, rather than for the gothic mystery itself. Nevertheless, there are some truly chilling moments, like the image of the ghastly eighteenth-century bewigged old lady looking in her mirror, which anticipates a similarly creepy apparition in Le Fanu’s classic ‘Madam Crowl’s Ghost’ (1870). ‘The Closed Cabinet’ (1895) by Lady Gwendolen Gascoyne-Cecil is a tale that had appeared in anthologies anonymously until the present publication. This is a ghostly novelette distinguished by deep psychological

insight and a feminist subtext. It deals with the haunting of a young cousin by an old ancestor – the abused wife of an alcoholic – who committed murder and suicide. Although the story is grounded in Christian morality, condemning crime and sin, the author seems to sympathise with the tormented female apparition; moreover, the tale highlights the ability of the younger generation to release the family from an awful curse – that the crime of the ancestor provoked – purely by strength of will.

‘The Oakleigh Ghost’ (1900) by Annie Armitt is an amusing tale that satirises the metaphysical/supernatural trappings of the Victorian era, such as séances and theosophy, while also showing that the progress of science and technology can sometimes produce the same ‘eerie’ effects as otherworldly phenomena. The story ‘A Speakin’ Ghost’ (1890) by Annie Trumbull Slosson (an accomplished author and pioneer entomologist of the nineteenth century) depicts the evolving relationship between a ghost child and a solitary woman. It is a very moving tale about loneliness and the way that lonesome or abandoned people can, unconsciously or ‘metaphysically’, be drawn to each other, by transcending the boundaries between life and death. This ‘ghost’ can therefore be considered as a projection of the heroine’s secret yearnings for companionship and family. Finally, I have two brief references to make: firstly, to ‘Miss Massareene’s Ghost’ (1887) by Australian E. A. Henty, which is primarily a romantic comedy, in which the supernatural serves to bring together two young people secretly in love with one another; and secondly, ‘At the Witching Hour’ (1897) by Elizabeth Gibert Cunningham-Terry, a tale where the discomfort provoked by the supernatural agent is mainly tactile, foreshadowing the tales of M. R. James.

This is an edition addressed to readers who have already delved, at least to a degree, into the ghost stories of the Victorian era and who wish to expand their knowledge of the Victorian ghost story. It would be very suitable too for those who wish to become specialists in the uncanny tales written by women authors of the second half of the nineteenth century, since it also provides valuable information – through the inclusion of a biographical note that comes before each tale – detailing the lives and works of many long-forgotten female writers of that period.

Maria Giakaniki