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Spectral Stowaways: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ (1868)

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Spectral Stowaways:
Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ (1868)

Jen Baker  University of Bristol

Abstract
Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s Gothic short story ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ (1868) is amongst the most distinctive of ghost-child narratives to be published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is owing, foremost, to its unique topographical and social setting; taking place at sea amongst an all-male crew of mostly lower-class sailors, rather than in the large suburban or rural house of middle or upper-class families that were typical of this Anglo-American literary sub-genre. This article considers the child-figure in Phelps’s tale within intersecting frameworks: firstly, within a tradition of nautical folklore that is integral to producing the tale’s Gothic tone. Secondly, within a contemporary context of frequently romanticised depictions of child-stowaways in literature, but a reality in which they were subjected to horrific abuse. Finally, her tale is discussed as a reformist piece that, despite its singularities, draws on darker versions of literary and folkloric dead-child traditions to produce a terrifying tale of retribution.

Keywords: ghost-child, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, dead-child tradition, maritime folklore, stowaways, Gothic

Introduction

The captain gave the order then,
‘Go down below, and see who’s there.’
But silently the men return
And carry to the upper air
The little body, pale and cold,
For Dick had died down in the hold.

D. B. McKean, ‘The Little Stowaway’ (1887)

Although a few global nautical customs and superstitions exist regarding birth and baptism – such as the child’s caul as a guard from shipwreck – the sea rarely plays a role in the white European folkloric tradition of the dead-child spirit. Yet, the liminality of the open ocean, as a realm between safety and peril, corresponds with the topographical indicia in popular tales about the fate of the child’s spirit in the afterlife. This spirit typically haunts forests, deserts, moors, over its unhallowed place of death, or outside its home unable to cross the threshold – sites that metaphorically reflect the spirit’s rejection from the communities of both the living and the dead. Despite a literary penchant for the gothic and the sensational, and the influences of darker, violent ghosts of foreign folklores on the nineteenth-century Anglo-American literary tradition more widely, ghost children in literary fiction of the period generally conformed to the diaphanous, wistful, and passive type found in the domestic folkloric tradition. Owing to its combination of setting – at sea – and its characterisation of the ghost-child, however, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s story ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’, first published in periodicals in 1868, and later collected in Men, Women, and Ghosts (1869), is an unusual and transgressive piece within the genre of ghost-child tales.

It tells the tale of a boy named Kentucky, suggested to be around fifteen, although very small for his age, who is rendered both innocent victim and vengeful persecutor, seeking justice in the afterlife for the abuse enacted on him in life. He enters the story as a stowaway
– a figure frequenting and romanticised in adventure stories of the nineteenth century. Phelps’s story plays with the romantic figure in order to respond to sensational incidents reported in the press of the abuse and deaths of real stowaways which provoked public horror and outrage. Roxanne Harde suggests that, in nineteenth-century women’s writing in particular, there is an identifiable ‘transatlantic conversation about suffering children’ and a growing trend to ‘combine the Gothic mode and the child ghost into a discourse of social critique’. Yet these spectral children generally lingered unhappily but inertly and required assistance to be at peace, while in Phelps’s story Kentucky becomes a vengeful and active agent in his own fate. ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ can therefore be recognised as a tale working within folkloric traditions, and responds to contemporary literary constructions of the stowaway, but subverts these aspects by constructing a gothic tale of divine retribution achieved through violent means. Although a few scholars, Harde included, have examined Phelps’s tale in the literary tradition, I have found no other study considering it within the dead-child spirit folkloric tradition, nor for its specifically maritime setting. This article will therefore consider how historical and contemporaneous concerns about the treatment of children, and fears of reprisal for actively harming a child or not preventing its death, converge in Phelps’s short tale with maritime customs and superstitions to produce a distinct example of nautical Gothic. Ultimately, however, I demonstrate that, although one of the most singular examples of the literary ghost-child of the period, ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ nevertheless provided a clear moral and reformist agenda typical of the genre.

‘Behold in Him the Stowaway!’

The writings of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911) are generally characterised by, and examined for, their engagement with spiritualism, and as a reflection of her personal campaigns for social reform, temperance, and women’s rights. ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ does touch on some of these aspects – the men for instance, godless while at sea, gamble and consume alcohol – but a number of other features make it unique: for instance, in contrast with her writing for children, the child-figure does not remain benevolent and passive throughout its suffering. This story is also, as Tatiana Katinou suggests, the only tale featuring a vengeful spirit in the collection, and one of the few she set at sea.

The story is narrated in dialect by a sailor named Jake who claims, after his ‘land-lubber’ friend Tom has just finished telling ‘a very fair yarn’, to possess a true but strange tale from twenty years ago that affected him for the rest of his life. From the outset, then, the tale is demonstrative of what Karl Bell has identified in maritime folklore as the ‘attempt to reconnect with land-based communities after a period of absence’ through ghost stories which ‘provided a shared vocabulary through which the exotic strangeness and dangers of life at sea could be transmitted.’ Jake explains that not long after leaving his wife and infant son at the port of Long Wharf in Boston, Massachusetts, bound for Madagascar on a merchant-ship named the Madonna, a stowaway was found on-board by a sailor who ‘jerked the poor fellow out of the hold, and pushed him along to the mate’s feet’ (314). The boy was subsequently overworked and constantly beaten, abused and starved by the First Mate, Job Whitmarsh, a cruel ‘cold-blooded’ man, ‘with a wicked eye and a fist like a mallet’ (318). Eventually, Whitmarsh forced the boy to climb the ship’s mast during a storm and Kentucky fell into the sea. He was presumed dead because the ship was travelling at speed and the storm was so fierce that his body was neither seen nor recovered. A few months later, on its return voyage, the ship passed the location at which the boy fell, and was caught in another tremendous storm. To save the ship someone was required to climb the mast, but the men that attempted it hurriedly returned pale and terrified, declaring to have seen Kentucky at the top of the mast and insisting that he was telling them to go back down. The First Mate climbed
the mast and this time the boy encouraged him to keep climbing; the mate fell, or was perhaps pushed, to his death, and the boy disappeared.

Although singular among Phelps’s writings, the maritime themes with which ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ engages were not unusual in wider culture – the stowaway and its fate being a shared concern of fiction and the media in the latter half of the century. In an anecdote entitled ‘A Heroic Boy’ in Our Young Folks’ Weekly Budget (1871), for instance, the stowaway is romanticised in order to suggest to the magazine’s young audience that if a child is good and true then no harm will befall them. It tells the reader that a ‘little ragged boy, aged nine years’ was discovered on a passenger steamer and confronted by the First Mate. Each time he was questioned the boy maintained that his impoverished step-father had secreted him aboard, but the First Mate did not believe him: ‘[A]nnoyed by the boy’s holding to the same story […] seized him one day by the collar, and dragging him to the fore, told him that unless he told the truth in ten minutes he would hang him from the yard arm.’¹⁰ However, this ‘noble boy’ repeated the explanation and with only two minutes left he asked the mate ‘if he might pray’ and began reciting the Lord’s Prayer. The mate ‘clasped him to his bosom and blessed him, and told him […] how glad he was that he had been brave enough to face death, and ready to sacrifice his life to prove the truth of his word’.¹¹ Such narratives contributed to and championed the glorification of child death as a lesson in the necessity for piety.¹²

While not shying away from the potential brutality of life at sea, a number of adventure stories for children similarly romanticised the stowaway as brave and true. For instance, in ‘The Stowaways’ in Peter Parley’s Annual (1874), two teenage friends named Jack and Phil stow aboard a very rough schooner. When found, they are dragged onto the deck by their hair and seized by a sailor who ‘pinioned their arms behind them as tightly as he could, blindfolded them, and then boxing their ears, bade them remain where they were’.¹³ They are permitted to stay, but discover the crew are illegal slavers and, horrified by the brutality they witness, devise and carry out a plan to alert an official British ship to the circumstances aboard, thus becoming heroes. Not all stowaways were so lucky, as suggested by the death from suffocation and starvation in real accounts and literary texts such as D. B. McKean’s ‘The Little Stowaway’ (1887) quoted in my epigraph. The poem concludes, however, with an uplifting message that ‘Among God’s little ones above’, this ‘outcast City Child’ who ‘never knew on earth / But one to look on him with love’, is now in the care of Jesus.¹⁴

As I discuss further on, Phelps does romanticise Kentucky’s death, but she moves away from the idealised characteristics of adventure tales and benevolent tragedies by using vengeful, retributive notions of the afterlife and drawing from the more sinister circumstances of real, tragic accounts. For instance, in early 1868, the notorious cruelty committed to a group of young stowaways made the headlines. As reported by the John Bull magazine, the ship Arran, sailing from Greenock in Scotland to Quebec, discovered children on board aged between 11 and 16:

It is said that six of the lads miserably clad and two of them barefoot, were left upon a detached field of ice near Newfoundland coast, and told to walk to land, the only provision given them being a biscuit each. Four of the poor fellows were picked up in a wretched frostbitten condition by a passing boat, but it is believed the other two perished. The master and mate […] have been arrested at Greenock, where they narrowly escaped rough treatment at the hands of the mob.¹⁵

While stowaways on passenger ships often took risks out of desperation, many of these boys did so from boredom and to experience adventure, as was suggested in the fictional representations. In Phelps’s tale, Kentucky tells Jake that he ran away from his mother, and by way of explanation only offers, ‘“Father’s dead. There ain’t nobody but me. All day long
she’s been follering of me around”’ (324). Similarly, a boy from the Arran testified that the reason he had run away was ‘for a pleasure sail. I was comfortable at home. I lived with my mother but did not tell her I was going’. Whatever the reasons for stowing away, however, sympathy for the boys was urged through overtly sensational rhetoric that clearly delineated victims and perpetrators. The Liverpool Mercury asks, for instance,

Can the most callous amongst us read or think of that child cast out by the ‘good kind’ captain on that icy wilderness, and there sitting down in the unutterable loneliness and desolation to vent futile cries to the cold bleak sky, to scan vainly the relentlessly empty horizon, and to shed the bitterest of tears until frost and death at last kindly wrap him in oblivion of his woes, without feeling a flood of sympathy?

In his testimony, one of the surviving boys describes harrowing and painful incidents in which he was flogged for three minutes with a thick coil of rope before being stripped and having a bucket of salt water thrown on him, and then being brutally scrubbed with a hard brush. In a letter from one of the sailors that alerted the families and authorities to the boys’ plight, he told how the bare feet of ‘[t]wo of the little ones’ and the arctic conditions meant ‘none of them would keep on deck to work’. This angered the first mate who ‘went with a rope’s end in hand and ordered them out, and as they came out gave them a walloping, and pretty often very severely.’

Similarly, in order to emphasise the horror of the brutality and the innocence of the child, Kentucky is described as ‘a little fellow, slight for his years [...] He was hungry, and homesick, and frightened’ (314) and the details of his abuse are graphic:

I’ve seen [Whitmarsh] beat that boy till the blood ran down in little pools on the deck; then send him up, all wet and red, to clear the to’ sail halliards; and when, what with the pain and faintness, he dizzied a little, and clung to the rat-lines, half blind, he would have him down and flog him [...] he used to chase him all about deck at the rope’s end; he used to mast-head him for hours on the stretch; he used to starve him out of the hold. (319-20)

Yet Jake and his fellow crew did not, at first, intervene. Neither did the author of the letter and his shipmates on the Arran, for fear of disobeying Robert Watt, their captain. Although characterised as a generally good man, Watt was considered susceptible to the influence of the particularly cruel first mate, James Kerr, who was also his brother-in-law. In Phelps’s tale, Jake suddenly (if reluctantly) gets involved because during one particularly bad episode for Kentucky, the narrator was suddenly overcome with a vision of his wife and his own infant son. He explains, ‘the next thing I knew I’d let slip my tongue in a jiffy, and given it to the mate that furious and onrespectful [...] And the next I knew after that they had the irons on me’ (320).

Marcus Rediker explains that commonplace proverbs had long existed among seamen concerning the detrimental effect of the nautical professions for a child, who would likely turn to crime if not killed before. So the maxim goes, “whosoever putteth his child to get his living at sea had better a great deal bind him prentice to a hangman.” This long-standing concern about moral degradation at sea is echoed in Phelps’s tale by the narrator remarking that he would ‘as lief see a son of mine in a Carolina slave-gang – as to see him lead the life of a stow-away’ (314). Jake charts the moral regression of the child and notes a particular turning point during one of Whitmarsh’s worst tirades when the boy ‘turned on him, very pale and slow’ and said ‘you’ve got the power and you know it [...] and I’m only a stow-away boy, and things are all in a tangle, but you’ll be sorry yet for every time you’ve laid your
hands on me!” (321). Jake observes that the boy ‘hadn’t a pleasant look about the eyes either, when he said it’ and that the continuous abuse had given him ‘a surly, sullen way with him, some’at like I’ve seen about a chained dog’ (321). Phelps’s tale not only illustrates nautical terrors awaiting the innocent child, it provides, as with nearly all of the ghost-child stories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a warning to adults that not only earthly consequences, but celestial retribution awaits those who cause or do not avert the preventable death of a child. Although I have yet to find any direct evidence of Phelps’s awareness of the Arran case, ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ was published three months after the trial of Watts and Kerr, and the parallels between the newspaper reports and tale are compelling.

Maritime Gothic and the Dead-Child Spirit Tradition

Born and raised in Massachusetts, Phelps draws from local and global customs and demonstrates what Ernest Baughman ascertains more widely as a ‘direct borrowing of tales by the younger country, or the adoption of tale-telling traditions in North America that are similar to those existing in England’. Despite their own socio-political preoccupations, ghost-child stories from both sides of the Atlantic nevertheless expressed equivalent concerns and held cultural conversations regarding the protection of childhood. In regard to the nautical setting, Phelps’s tale contains descriptions of the voyages undertaken by the narrator, the changing nature of colonial trade, social interactions upon a ship, and the effects of the nautical life upon relationships and behaviour. She also emulates the style and vernacular of maritime folk tales of the coast of Britain which had long influenced the dialects and habits of New England owing to emigration from the old Country and the transmigration of traditions via trade routes. Although different regions of America undoubtedly had their own folklores and customs, in the New England commonwealth in particular there is a ‘continuity between the fear and wonders of the Old World and the folklore and literature of the new’. For, Faye Ringel argues, ‘explorers and settlers brought with them [...] the nightmares, monsters, and miracles of a tradition thousands of years old’. Furthermore, Bell suggests a pedagogic purpose might be achieved by nautical setting, because the telling of ghost stories aboard a ship ‘served to bind crews together, provided a narrative vehicle for practical and moral lessons, and acted as a form of cultural currency and cheap entertainment.’ In Phelps’s tale, the oral tradition is exploited for similar reasons, but predominantly the inset-story functions as a wider cautionary tale, and, specifically owing to the content, emulates the traditional dead-child folktale style.

Within this latter tradition, however, ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ is topographically and socially unique because of its setting amongst an all-male crew of lower class sailors, rather than in the large suburban manors with a strong female or familial presence that tended to characterise the wider ghost-child subgenre. As Nina Auerbach has suggested, literary stories featuring ghost-children in this period were rarely ‘gothic’ in their style – they lacked, for instance, techniques of suspense and imminent threat – but were nevertheless ‘something subtler, innocent, admonitory, and terrifying at the same time’. In many ways Kentucky conforms to this assessment, for the more vulnerable and innocent he seems in life, the more terrible his power and actions in death. Yet, the tale’s engagement with the unfathomable eeriness of the sea sets it apart and enhances the Gothic atmosphere. It employs devices from other, more sustained examples of maritime Gothic such as Marryat’s The Phantom Ship (1839) or Melville’s Moby Dick (1851), by exploiting what Coral Ann Howells identifies as the ‘borderline territory of myth and folklore, of the supernatural and the grotesque’, and by focusing on permitting the ‘marginalized discourse’ of one particular ‘displaced and dispossessed’ figure: here, the child.
So too, the Gothic tone is created through Jake’s descriptions of previous voyages to Madagascar to suggest colonial terror: he recollects times ‘when the sea was like so much burning oil, and the sky like so much burning brass, and the fo’castle as nigh a hell as ever fo’castle was in a calm’ (309). Yet it is not the strange lands alone, but how the voyage reflects the ‘true’ nature of men, that is distinctly horrifying. There are no ‘Other’ races in this tale on whom to project ideas of monstrosity, only the savage within. At its most facile the transformation that takes place as the ship moves further from land is evident in Jake who remembers watching his wife and baby ‘and thinking that I would break off swearing; and I remember cursing Bob Smart like a pirate within an hour’ (313). It is in the officers, however, that the regression is most pronounced: ‘Officers in the merchant service, especially if it happens to be the African service, are brutal men quite as often as they aint’ (311). Like the captain on the Arran, the Madonna’s captain allows the First Mate to act out his brutal impulses on the boy, only interfering ‘on a fair day when he had taken just enough [alcohol] to be good-natured’ (313).

Phelps’s utilisation of the sea is more than mere plot-device. The tale employs the liminality of the vast ocean, emphasising the maritime world’s unregulated culture to draw attention to the injustices and abuse committed upon the child. Although, as Roberson details in this issue, shifting ocean waters gave sea-burials unmarkable graves, the supernatural turn of ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ depends on the sailors’ precise charting of their location when Kentucky falls, thus creating a conceptual grave that serves as a threshold between earth and the afterlife and at which the story’s climax takes place. Jake notes that on their return journey, it was ‘just about the spot that we lost the boy that we fell upon the worst gale of the trip’ (329), that they are haunted by the child’s ghost. This suggests that Kentucky’s death created a rupture in the topographical and temporal fabric that draws both ship and ghost back to the spot and enable to the child to gain vengeance on his murderer. However, in conjunction with his murderous actions, this transitional position also makes Kentucky’s status as good or evil unclear. This is exacerbated by an intersection between maritime superstition, the dead-child tradition, and Christian eschatology: earlier in the tale the narrator mentions that the most brutal officers seem to be sent from Davy Jones’ Locker to enact their cruelty.

In Tobias Smollett’s The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle (1751), the first known euphemism for Davy Jones and his locker as a place of death for drowned sailors describes the figure thus:

This same Davy Jones, according to sailors, is the fiend that presides over all the evil spirits of the deep, and is often seen in various shapes, perching among the rigging on the eve of hurricanes, ship-wrecks, and other disasters to which sea-faring life is exposed; warning the devoted wretch of death and woe.27 (emphasis added)

Yet the fearful and ungodly presence of this mythological figure and his realm seems in league with Kentucky, not the officers. On the return journey the sailors climb the mast and quickly return yelling ‘‘He’s sitting square upon the yard’’, and explaining that the boy is (like Jones) on the beam that runs horizontal through the ship’s rigging. Seeing the boy’s ghost at the top of the mast, the narrator, who was always comparatively kind to the boy, climbs up and relates what he beheld; ‘I got to the futtock shrouds, and there I stopped for I saw him myself, – a palish boy, with a jerk of thin hair on his forehead: I’d have known him anywhere in this world or t’other’ (331). When Whitmarsh climbs, Jake hears a voice ‘straight from the figure of the boy’ repeatedly encouraging the First Mate up: ‘So he goes up, and next I knew there was a cry, – and next a splash, – and then I saw the royal flapping from the empty yard, and the mate was gone, and the boy’ (331). The sea subsequently
becomes the violent grave for the villain Whitmarsh instead, dragging him down to Davy Jones’ Locker whilst it is implied that the child is permitted to pass on to heaven.

Motifs found in the wider canon of nautical tales are central to the dead-child tradition. For instance, meteorological and sonic tropes are integral to the depictions of these wandering spirits. In Frederick Metcalfe’s travelogue *The Oxonian in Iceland* (1860), for instance, his guide tells him that the cries of ‘[t]he spirits of ‘utburdir’ (exposed infants)’ are ‘strange’ and ‘piercing’. This ‘death-screech [...] may be that this sound is the first moan of the coming tempest, the herald of a storm.’ So too, in 1895, John Fiske records a long tradition of English peasant beliefs that ‘the wail of the spirits of unbaptized children as the gale sweeps past their cottage doors’. Fletcher S. Bassett notes in *Sea-Phantoms* (1885) that, for a long time, and in different traditions, ‘[t]he wind-demon was said to be attended by the souls of unbaptized children, and English peasants say they hear their wails.’ These Anglo-American dead-child spirits, unable to rest in death, were terrifying but inert spectres. However, Phelps employs sinister imagery that corresponds more with the terrifying phantasmal incarnations found across Europe where the dead unbaptised-child’s soul is palpable and violent.  

For instance, creatures such as the *psylingar* from Sweden, inflict a ‘smart blow on the ear’, or cause anyone who encounters it to ‘fall sick’. Another version from the Faroe Isles called the *niðagrísur* would lie in wait and roll ‘at the feet of men walking in the dark, to make them go astray’, and ‘you must be careful that it does not get between the legs because in that case you will not live to the end of the year.’ As folklorists such as Juha Pentikäinen and Anne O’Connor have demonstrated, owing to uncertainty and the fears of lay peoples, a tradition emerged and persisted in which the spirit of a deceased child – unbaptised, died by violent means, or not buried in consecrated ground, and therefore denied entry to heaven and doomed to purgatory – haunted the living. Unless acts of prevention or appeasement were undertaken (such as performing baptism or naming, burying or weighing down the body), or, as in these darker European tales someone was punished for the death, the spirit would continue to haunt.

Although Kentucky himself is not explicitly identified as the cause of the storm on the return voyage, the sailors tell of Kentucky crying out to them as they climb the mast. No precautions were taken, nor atonement made, after his death, and so a death as recompense is required. In death, stripped of his humanity, Kentucky is not a passive apparition of domestic tradition but a vengeful spirit determined to punish the man directly responsible for his death. For although, due to his physical position on the boat, Jake is unable to see whether the Mate was pushed by the boy or fell from fright, Kentucky’s luring of Whitmarsh nevertheless implies that the boy was the cause of his abuser’s demise.

Yet, unlike the more sinister folkloric tales, Phelps’s rendition suggests a divine endorsement of Kentucky’s actions. Although the rest of the sailors are lax in their religious practice, in life the boy carries with him a Bible. Whitmarsh tears it apart for gun-wadding, but Kentucky manages to save the title page which also bears an inscription from his mother. As Harde notes, ‘Phelps embeds the narrative in the tropes of Christian motherhood. The ship is called the *Madonna*, and while it cannot keep the boy safe, it seems to help him fulfil his duty, in this case revenge.’ While it is suggested that the boy’s exposure to immorality and profanity on the ship means that his mortal life cannot be salvaged, his retention of the Bible fragment potentially helps exonerate him from any demonic characterisation for his revenge, and in fact suggests it is celestial not diabolic punishment that motivates him.

Jake claims to have expressed concern for their heathen attitudes earlier on in the voyage, when the boy asks whether anyone aboard has said his prayers since they left port. At the beginning of this conversation Jake notices that ‘[i]t was rather dark where we sat, with a great greenish shadow dropping from the mainsail. The wind was up a little, and the light at helm looked flicker and red’ (323). Later he reflects:
I remember watching the curve of the great swells, mahogany color, with the tip of white, and thinking how like it was to a big creature hissing and foaming at the mouth, and thinking all at once something about Him holding of the sea in a balance, and not a word bespoke to beg his favour respectful since we weighed our anchor. (325)

The sense that the abuse of Kentucky has caused an imbalance that displeases God is emphasised in the might and awe of the ship in the storm as Kentucky is forced to climb: ‘the great mast swinging like a pendulum to and fro, and the reef-points snapping, and the blocks creaking, and the sails flapping’ (327). If the sea is not in fact, a Godless place, but one kept in balance, then it seems the boy’s vengeance is part of the divine order. It has more in common with Old Testament retribution and the Catholicity of early Gothic novels, however, than New Testament forgiveness. A fellow sailor foreshadows the events and affords the boy some sort of prophetic status by declaring during one of the boy’s beatings, “when Job Whitmarsh’s time comes to go as straight to hell as Judas [...] Dead or alive that boy will bring his summons”’ (319). As the storm recedes shortly after Kentucky’s death, Jake thinks about the boy and wonders where he is now, ‘and how he liked his new quarters’, and the meteorological imagery resurfaces on the Sabbath: ‘And while I sat there thinking, the Sunday-morning stars cut through the clouds, and the solemn Sunday-morning light began to break upon the sea’ (328).

As a Calvinist, Phelps did not strictly believe in purgatory; however, as James Napier suggested in 1879, regardless of denomination, elements of religious ritual and archaic imagery were retained in social, literary and artistic customs and imagery of nineteenth-century. Furthermore, as Nina Baym explains, despite her religious upbringing, Phelps ‘discarded the central Calvinist tenet that almost everybody had been damned either by predestination or by their own free will and would therefore spend eternity in Hell’. This is suggested in Jake’s discussion with a parson who reasoned that ‘if the mate’s time had come [...] that’s the will of the Lord, and it’s he; for him whichever side of death he is, and nobody’s fault but his’n; and the boy might be in the good place and do the errand all the same’ (332). Belief that the boy’s actions were a heavenly mission does not detract from the perceived monstrosity of them, however. Rather, he resembles a fearful avenging angel sent to lead those bound for hell to their pre-destined place in the afterlife. As such, the conception of his role corresponds with the ethical laws of maritime mythology, for, in Smollett’s story, Davy Jones is not the cause but the messenger of death, whose role is merely to warn and escort those already doomed.

At the tale’s end, Jake describes his reunion with his family, and as he thought of Kentucky he had noticed an old lady sat with ‘the sun all about her, and all on the blazing yellow boards, and I grew a little dazed and dazzled’ (333). Identifying her as Kentucky’s mother, he does his final duty to appease the boy’s spirit by telling her what had happened. Although Kentucky is apparently at peace, this is not a happy ending, but morose and plaintive. There is even a suggestion of recapitulation as Jake and Molly ‘walk home together, with our little boy between us’ (334) – a child who is aligned throughout the tale with Kentucky. And as such the tale warns that without care, this boy, or one like him, could be the next abused stowaway.

Conclusion

In Phelps’s tale, the figure of the abused child stowaway is the site at which the violence and horror of foreign folklore, maritime mythology and the Gothic, and contemporary literary and real examples of the stowaway converge, in order to reflect contemporaneous fears for the
welfare of children more generally. Although the setting at sea is unusual in the dead-child spirit tradition, Phelps seems to respond to a topic fresh in the public’s sensibilities about conditions at sea for the child, and thus the open water becomes an ideal retributive space between earth and the afterlife, reflecting the liminal topographies central to dead-child folklore. In permitting the child an uncommon agency in the quest for vengeance Phelps provided an important contribution to the proliferation of reformist Gothic tales featuring the ghost-child. Yet ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ also differentiates itself from the numerous tales in the literary dead-child tradition set within the domestic suburban or rural space, and which focus on familial concerns relating to lineage and inheritance; rather Phelps’s piece reveals the extent of child-abuse across the boundaries of class and space, and exposes cruelty for cruelty’s sake. As such, it provides of a stark and bitter warning to those who abuse children that there are deadly consequences for their actions on earth as well as punishment in the afterlife; consequences that cannot be escaped even in the seemingly lawless expanse of the sea.

Notes

3 Jason Marc Harris, Folklore and the Fantastic in the Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008), pp. vii-viii.
11 Ibid.
18 ‘Extraordinary Case of Cruelty’, Sheffield & Rotherham Independent, 8 August 1868.

23 Ibid., p. 3.

24 Bell, ‘Civic Spirits’, 55.


34 Harde, “‘God, or Something Like That”, p. 352.
