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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)

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### 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)<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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3 – a figure frequenting and romanticised in adventure stories of the nineteenth century.  
4 Phelps's story plays with the romantic figure in order to respond to sensational incidents  
5 reported in the press of the abuse and deaths of real stowaways which provoked public horror  
6 and outrage. Roxanne Harde suggests that, in nineteenth-century women's writing in  
7 particular, there is an identifiable 'transatlantic conversation about suffering children' and a  
8 growing trend to 'combine the Gothic mode and the child ghost into a discourse of social  
9 critique'.<sup>4</sup> Yet these spectral children generally lingered unhappily but inertly and required  
10 assistance to be at peace, while in Phelps's story Kentucky becomes a vengeful and active  
11 agent in his own fate. 'Kentucky's Ghost' can therefore be recognised as a tale working  
12 within folkloric traditions, and responds to contemporary literary constructions of the  
13 stowaway, but subverts these aspects by constructing a gothic tale of divine retribution  
14 achieved through violent means. Although a few scholars, Harde included, have examined  
15 Phelps's tale in the literary tradition, I have found no other study considering it within the  
16 dead-child spirit folkloric tradition, nor for its specifically maritime setting. This article will  
17 therefore consider how historical and contemporaneous concerns about the treatment of  
18 children, and fears of reprisal for actively harming a child or not preventing its death,  
19 converge in Phelps's short tale with maritime customs and superstitions to produce a distinct  
20 example of nautical Gothic. Ultimately, however, I demonstrate that, although one of the  
21 most singular examples of the literary ghost-child of the period, 'Kentucky's Ghost'  
22 nevertheless provided a clear moral and reformist agenda typical of the genre.

23  
24  
25  
26 'Behold in Him the Stowaway!'<sup>5</sup>

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29 The writings of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911) are generally characterised by, and  
30 examined for, their engagement with spiritualism, and as a reflection of her personal  
31 campaigns for social reform, temperance, and women's rights.<sup>6</sup> 'Kentucky's Ghost' does  
32 touch on some of these aspects – the men for instance, godless while at sea, gamble and  
33 consume alcohol – but a number of other features make it unique: for instance, in contrast  
34 with her writing *for* children, the child-figure does not remain benevolent and passive  
35 throughout its suffering. This story is also, as Tatiana Katinou suggests, the only tale  
36 featuring a vengeful spirit in the collection, and one of the few she set at sea.<sup>7</sup>

37  
38 The story is narrated in dialect by a sailor named Jake who claims, after his 'land-lubber'  
39 friend Tom has just finished telling 'a very fair yarn', to possess a true but strange tale from  
40 twenty years ago that affected him for the rest of his life.<sup>8</sup> From the outset, then, the tale is  
41 demonstrative of what Karl Bell has identified in maritime folklore as the 'attempt to  
42 reconnect with land-based communities after a period of absence' through ghost stories  
43 which 'provided a shared vocabulary through which the exotic strangeness and dangers of  
44 life at sea could be transmitted.'<sup>9</sup> Jake explains that not long after leaving his wife and infant  
45 son at the port of Long Wharf in Boston, Massachusetts, bound for Madagascar on a  
46 merchant-ship named the *Madonna*, a stowaway was found on-board by a sailor who 'jerked  
47 the poor fellow out of the hold, and pushed him along to the mate's feet' (314). The boy was  
48 subsequently overworked and constantly beaten, abused and starved by the First Mate, Job  
49 Whitmarsh, a cruel 'cold-blooded' man, 'with a wicked eye and a fist like a mallet' (318).  
50 Eventually, Whitmarsh forced the boy to climb the ship's mast during a storm and Kentucky  
51 fell into the sea. He was presumed dead because the ship was travelling at speed and the  
52 storm was so fierce that his body was neither seen nor recovered. A few months later, on its  
53 return voyage, the ship passed the location at which the boy fell, and was caught in another  
54 tremendous storm. To save the ship someone was required to climb the mast, but the men that  
55 attempted it hurriedly returned pale and terrified, declaring to have seen Kentucky at the top  
56 of the mast and insisting that he was telling them to go back down. The First Mate climbed  
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3 the mast and this time the boy encouraged him to keep climbing; the mate fell, or was  
4 perhaps pushed, to his death, and the boy disappeared.

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

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

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

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

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54 While stowaways on passenger ships often took risks out of desperation, many of these boys  
55 did so from boredom and to experience adventure, as was suggested in the fictional  
56 representations. In Phelps's tale, Kentucky tells Jake that he ran away from his mother, and  
57 by way of explanation only offers, "Father's dead. There ain't nobody but me. All day long  
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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'.<sup>16</sup> 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?<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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 wallop, and pretty often very severely.'<sup>19</sup>

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.'"<sup>20</sup> 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

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3 *hands on me!*” (321). Jake observes that the boy ‘hadn’t a pleasant look about the eyes  
4 either, when he said it’ and that the continuous abuse had given him ‘a surly, sullen way with  
5 him, some’at like I’ve seen about a chained dog’ (321). Phelps’s tale not only illustrates  
6 nautical terrors awaiting the innocent child, it provides, as with nearly all of the ghost-child  
7 stories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a warning to adults that not only  
8 earthly consequences, but celestial retribution awaits those who cause or do not avert the  
9 preventable death of a child. Although I have yet to find any direct evidence of Phelps’s  
10 awareness of the *Arran* case, ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ was published three months after the trial of  
11 Watts and Kerr, and the parallels between the newspaper reports and tale are compelling.  
12  
13

#### 14 Maritime Gothic and the Dead-Child Spirit Tradition

15

16 Born and raised in Massachusetts, Phelps draws from local and global customs and  
17 demonstrates what Ernest Baughman ascertains more widely as a ‘direct borrowing of tales  
18 by the younger country, or the adoption of tale-telling traditions in North America that are  
19 similar to those existing in England’.<sup>21</sup> Despite their own socio-political preoccupations,  
20 ghost-child stories from both sides of the Atlantic nevertheless expressed equivalent concerns  
21 and held cultural conversations regarding the protection of childhood. In regard to the  
22 nautical setting, Phelps’s tale contains descriptions of the voyages undertaken by the narrator,  
23 the changing nature of colonial trade, social interactions upon a ship, and the effects of the  
24 nautical life upon relationships and behaviour. She also emulates the style and vernacular of  
25 maritime folk tales of the coast of Britain which had long influenced the dialects and habits  
26 of New England owing to emigration from the old Country and the transmigration of  
27 traditions via trade routes. Although different regions of America undoubtedly had their own  
28 folklores and customs, in the New England commonwealth in particular there is a ‘continuity  
29 between the fear and wonders of the Old World and the folklore and literature of the new’.<sup>22</sup>  
30 For, Faye Ringel argues, ‘explorers and settlers brought with them [...] the nightmares,  
31 monsters, and miracles of a tradition thousands of years old’.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Bell suggests a  
32 pedagogic purpose might be achieved by nautical setting, because the telling of ghost stories  
33 aboard a ship ‘served to bind crews together, provided a narrative vehicle for practical and  
34 moral lessons, and acted as a form of cultural currency and cheap entertainment’.<sup>24</sup> In  
35 Phelps’s tale, the oral tradition is exploited for similar reasons, but predominantly the inset-  
36 story functions as a wider cautionary tale, and, specifically owing to the content, emulates the  
37 traditional dead-child folktale style.  
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41 Within this latter tradition, however, ‘Kentucky’s Ghost’ is topographically and socially  
42 unique because of its setting amongst an all-male crew of lower class sailors, rather than in  
43 the large suburban manors with a strong female or familial presence that tended to  
44 characterise the wider ghost-child subgenre. As Nina Auerbach has suggested, literary stories  
45 featuring ghost-children in this period were rarely ‘gothic’ in their style – they lacked, for  
46 instance, techniques of suspense and imminent threat – but were nevertheless ‘something  
47 subtler, innocent, admonitory, and terrifying at the same time’.<sup>25</sup> In many ways Kentucky  
48 conforms to this assessment, for the more vulnerable and innocent he seems in life, the more  
49 terrible his power and actions in death. Yet, the tale’s engagement with the unfathomable  
50 eeriness of the sea sets it apart and enhances the Gothic atmosphere. It employs devices from  
51 other, more sustained examples of maritime Gothic such as Marryat’s *The Phantom Ship*  
52 (1839) or Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), by exploiting what Coral Ann Howells identifies as  
53 the ‘borderline territory of myth and folklore, of the supernatural and the grotesque’, and by  
54 focusing on permitting the ‘marginalized discourse’ of one particular ‘displaced and  
55 dispossessed’ figure: here, the child.<sup>26</sup>  
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3 So too, the Gothic tone is created through Jake's descriptions of previous voyages to  
4 Madagascar to suggest colonial terror: he recollects times 'when the sea was like so much  
5 burning oil, and the sky like so much burning brass, and the fo'castle as nigh a hell as ever  
6 fo'castle was in a calm' (309). Yet it is not the strange lands alone, but how the voyage  
7 reflects the 'true' nature of men, that is distinctly horrifying. There are no 'Other' races in  
8 this tale on whom to project ideas of monstrosity, only the savage within. At its most facile  
9 the transformation that takes place as the ship moves further from land is evident in Jake who  
10 remembers watching his wife and baby 'and thinking that I would break off swearing; and I  
11 remember cursing Bob Smart like a pirate within an hour' (313). It is in the officers,  
12 however, that the regression is most pronounced: 'Officers in the merchant service, especially  
13 if it happens to be the African service, are brutal men quite as often as they aint' (311). Like  
14 the captain on the *Arran*, the *Madonna's* captain allows the First Mate to act out his brutal  
15 impulses on the boy, only interfering 'on a fair day when he had taken just enough [alcohol]  
16 to be good-natured' (313).

17  
18 Phelps's utilisation of the sea is more than mere plot-device. The tale employs the  
19 liminality of the vast ocean, emphasising the maritime world's unregulated culture to draw  
20 attention to the injustices and abuse committed upon the child. Although, as Roberson details  
21 in this issue, shifting ocean waters gave sea-burials unmarkable graves, the supernatural turn  
22 of 'Kentucky's Ghost' depends on the sailors' precise charting of their location when  
23 Kentucky falls, thus creating a conceptual grave that serves as a threshold between earth and  
24 the afterlife and at which the story's climax takes place. Jake notes that on their return  
25 journey, it was 'just about the spot that we lost the boy that we fell upon the worst gale of the  
26 trip' (329), that they are haunted by the child's ghost. This suggests that Kentucky's death  
27 created a rupture in the topographical and temporal fabric that draws both ship and ghost  
28 back to the spot and enable to the child to gain vengeance on his murderer. However, in  
29 conjunction with his murderous actions, this transitional position also makes Kentucky's  
30 status as good or evil unclear. This is exacerbated by an intersection between maritime  
31 superstition, the dead-child tradition, and Christian eschatology: earlier in the tale the narrator  
32 mentions that the most brutal officers seem to be sent from Davy Jones' Locker to enact their  
33 cruelty.

34  
35 In Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751), the first known  
36 euphemism for Davy Jones and his locker as a place of death for drowned sailors describes  
37 the figure thus:

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

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46 Yet the fearful and ungodly presence of this mythological figure and his realm seems in  
47 league with Kentucky, not the officers. On the return journey the sailors climb the mast and  
48 quickly return yelling "'He's sitting square upon the yard'", and explaining that the boy is  
49 (like Jones) on the beam that runs horizontal through the ship's rigging. Seeing the boy's  
50 ghost at the top of the mast, the narrator, who was always comparatively kind to the boy,  
51 climbs up and relates what he beheld; 'I got to the futtock shrouds, and there I stopped for I  
52 saw him myself, – a palish boy, with a jerk of thin hair on his forehead: I'd have known him  
53 anywhere in this world or t'other' (331). When Whitmarsh climbs, Jake hears a voice  
54 'straight from the figure of the boy' repeatedly encouraging the First Mate up: 'So he goes  
55 up, and next I knew there was a cry, – and next a splash, – and then I saw the royal flapping  
56 from the empty yard, and the mate was gone, and the boy' (331). The sea subsequently



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3 becomes the violent grave for the villain Whitmarsh instead, dragging him down to Davy  
4 Jones' Locker whilst it is implied that the child is permitted to pass on to heaven.

5 Motifs found in the wider canon of nautical tales are central to the dead-child tradition.  
6 For instance, meteorological and sonic tropes are integral to the depictions of these  
7 wandering spirits. In Frederick Metcalfe's travelogue *The Oxonian in Iceland* (1860), for  
8 instance, his guide tells him that the cries of '[t]he spirits of 'utburdir' (exposed infants)' are  
9 'strange' and 'piercing'. This 'death-screech [...] may be that this sound is the first moan of  
10 the coming tempest, the herald of a storm.'<sup>28</sup> So too, in 1895, John Fiske records a long  
11 tradition of English peasant beliefs that 'the wail of the spirits of unbaptized children as the  
12 gale sweeps past their cottage doors'.<sup>29</sup> Fletcher S. Bassett notes in *Sea-Phantoms* (1885)  
13 that, for a long time, and in different traditions, '[t]he wind-demon was said to be attended by  
14 the souls of unbaptized children, and English peasants say they hear their wails.'<sup>30</sup> These  
15 Anglo-American dead-child spirits, unable to rest in death, were terrifying but inert spectres.  
16 However, Phelps employs sinister imagery that corresponds more with the terrifying  
17 phantasmal incarnations found across Europe where the dead unbaptised-child's soul is  
18 palpable and violent.<sup>31</sup> For instance, creatures such as the *psylingar* from Sweden, inflict a  
19 'smart blow on the ear', or cause anyone who encounters it to 'fall sick'. Another version  
20 from the Faroe Isles called the *niðagrísur* would lie in wait and roll 'at the feet of men  
21 walking in the dark, to make them go astray', and 'you must be careful that it does not get  
22 between the legs because in that case you will not live to the end of the year.'<sup>32</sup> As folklorists  
23 such as Juha Pentikäinen and Anne O'Connor have demonstrated, owing to uncertainty and  
24 the fears of lay peoples, a tradition emerged and persisted in which the spirit of a deceased  
25 child – unbaptised, died by violent means, or not buried in consecrated ground, and therefore  
26 denied entry to heaven and doomed to purgatory – haunted the living.<sup>33</sup> Unless acts of  
27 prevention or appeasement were undertaken (such as performing baptism or naming, burying  
28 or weighing down the body), or, as in these darker European tales someone was punished for  
29 the death, the spirit would continue to haunt.

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

41  
42 Yet, unlike the more sinister folkloric tales, Phelps's rendition suggests a divine  
43 endorsement of Kentucky's actions. Although the rest of the sailors are lax in their religious  
44 practice, in life the boy carries with him a Bible. Whitmarsh tears it apart for gun-wadding,  
45 but Kentucky manages to save the title page which also bears an inscription from his mother.  
46 As Harde notes, 'Phelps embeds the narrative in the tropes of Christian motherhood. The ship  
47 is called the *Madonna*, and while it cannot keep the boy safe, it seems to help him fulfil his  
48 duty, in this case revenge.'<sup>34</sup> While it is suggested that the boy's exposure to immorality and  
49 profanity on the ship means that his mortal life cannot be salvaged, his retention of the Bible  
50 fragment potentially helps exonerate him from any demonic characterisation for his revenge,  
51 and in fact suggests it is celestial not diabolic punishment that motivates him.

52  
53 Jake claims to have expressed concern for their heathen attitudes earlier on in the voyage,  
54 when the boy asks whether anyone aboard has said his prayers since they left port. At the  
55 beginning of this conversation Jake notices that '[i]t was rather dark where we sat, with a  
56 great greenish shadow dropping from the mainsail. The wind was up a little, and the light at  
57 helm looked flicker and red' (323). Later he reflects:

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4 I remember watching the curve of the great swells, mahogany color, with the tip of  
5 white, and thinking how like it was to a big creature hissing and foaming at the mouth,  
6 and thinking all at once something about Him holding of the sea in a balance, and not a  
7 word bespoke to beg his favour respectful since we weighed our anchor. (325)  
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10 The sense that the abuse of Kentucky has caused an imbalance that displeases God is  
11 emphasised in the might and awe of the ship in the storm as Kentucky is forced to climb: ‘the  
12 great mast swinging like a pendulum to and fro, and the reef-points snapping, and the blocks  
13 creaking, and the sails flapping’ (327). If the sea is not in fact, a Godless place, but one kept  
14 in balance, then it seems the boy’s vengeance is part of the divine order. It has more in  
15 common with Old Testament retribution and the Catholicity of early Gothic novels, however,  
16 than New Testament forgiveness. A fellow sailor foreshadows the events and affords the boy  
17 some sort of prophetic status by declaring during one of the boy’s beatings, “‘when Job  
18 Whitmarsh’s time comes to go as straight to hell as Judas [...] Dead or alive that boy will  
19 bring his summons’” (319). As the storm recedes shortly after Kentucky’s death, Jake thinks  
20 about the boy and wonders where he is now, ‘and how he liked his new quarters’, and the  
21 meteorological imagery resurfaces on the Sabbath: ‘And while I sat there thinking, the  
22 Sunday-morning stars cut through the clouds, and the solemn Sunday-morning light began to  
23 break upon the sea’ (328).  
24

25 As a Calvinist, Phelps did not strictly believe in purgatory; however, as James Napier  
26 suggested in 1879, regardless of denomination, elements of religious ritual and archaic  
27 imagery were retained in social, literary and artistic customs and imagery of nineteenth-  
28 century.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, as Nina Baym explains, despite her religious upbringing, Phelps  
29 ‘discarded the central Calvinist tenet that almost everybody had been damned either by  
30 predestination or by their own free will and would therefore spend eternity in Hell’.<sup>36</sup> This is  
31 suggested in Jake’s discussion with a parson who reasoned that ‘if the mate’s time had come  
32 [...] that’s the will of the Lord, and it’s he; for him whichever side of death he is, and  
33 nobody’s fault but his’n; and the boy might be in the good place and do the errand all the  
34 same’ (332). Belief that the boy’s actions were a heavenly mission does not detract from the  
35 perceived monstrosity of them, however. Rather, he resembles a fearful avenging angel sent  
36 to lead those bound for hell to their pre-destined place in the afterlife. As such, the  
37 conception of his role corresponds with the ethical laws of maritime mythology, for, in  
38 Smollett’s story, Davy Jones is not the cause but the messenger of death, whose role is  
39 merely to warn and escort those already doomed.  
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42 At the tale’s end, Jake describes his reunion with his family, and as he thought of  
43 Kentucky he had noticed an old lady sat with ‘the sun all about her, and all on the blazing  
44 yellow boards, and I grew a little dazed and dazzled’ (333). Identifying her as Kentucky’s  
45 mother, he does his final duty to appease the boy’s spirit by telling her what had happened.  
46 Although Kentucky is apparently at peace, this is not a happy ending, but morose and  
47 plaintive. There is even a suggestion of recapitulation as Jake and Molly ‘walk home  
48 together, with our little boy between us’ (334) – a child who is aligned throughout the tale  
49 with Kentucky. And as such the tale warns that without care, this boy, or one like him, could  
50 be the next abused stowaway.  
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### 53 Conclusion

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55 In Phelps’s tale, the figure of the abused child stowaway is the site at which the violence and  
56 horror of foreign folklore, maritime mythology and the Gothic, and contemporary literary and  
57 real examples of the stowaway converge, in order to reflect contemporaneous fears for the  
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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

<sup>1</sup> D. B. McKean, 'The Little Stowaway' *Chatterbox*, 15 (26 February 1887), 114-15 at 114.

<sup>2</sup> 'Popular Errors, Prejudices, and Superstitions', *Illustrated Magazine of Art*, 1 (1 January 1853), 366-67 at 367.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Marc Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in the Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008), pp. vii-viii.

<sup>4</sup> Roxanne Harde, "'At Rest Now': Child Ghosts and Social Justice in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing", in Monika Elbert Goodwin and Bridget M. Marshall (eds.), *Transnational Gothic: Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2013), pp. 189-200 at p. 190.

<sup>5</sup> Woolson Morse, 'The Little Stowaway' (Boston, Louis P. Goullaud, 1879), monographic sheet music. Library of Congress. Music Division.

<sup>6</sup> See Roxanne Harde, "'God, or Something Like That': Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's Christian Spiritualism', *Women's Writing*, 15:3 (2008), 348-370. Lisa A. Long, 'The Postbellum Reform Writings of Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps', *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (2001), pp. 262-83.

<sup>7</sup> Samantha Christensen, 'Elizabeth Stuart Phelps: Trauma and Children's Literature in the Nineteenth-Century', *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 50:1 (2012), 75-77. Tatiana Kontou, *Women and the Victorian Occult* (London, Routledge, 2013), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps [Ward], 'Kentucky's Ghost', *Men, Women, and Ghosts* (Boston, J.R. Osgood, 1869), pp. 309-34 at p. 309). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Bell, 'Civic Spirits? Ghost Lore and Civic Narratives in Nineteenth-Century Portsmouth', *Cultural and Social History*, 11:1 (2014), 51-68 at 56.

<sup>10</sup> 'A Heroic Boy', *Our Young Folks Weekly Budget of Tales, News, Sketches, Fun, Puzzles, Riddles &c.*, 36 (2 September 1871), 284.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See Gillian Avery, 'Intimations of Mortality: The Puritan and Evangelical Message to Children', in Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds (eds.), *Representations of Childhood Death* (Houndmills, Macmillan, 2000), pp. 87-110.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Stowaways', in William Martin (ed.), *Peter Parley's Annual: A Christmas and New Year's Present for Young People* (London, Ben George, 1874), pp. 169-200 at p. 189.

<sup>14</sup> McKean, 'Little Stowaway', 115.

<sup>15</sup> 'Law and Police', *John Bull*, 2 (15 August 1868), 448.

<sup>16</sup> William Roughead, *Nothing but Murder* (Lanham, M. Evan, 1946), p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> 'A Heartrending Story', *Liverpool Mercury etc.*, 27 November 1868.

<sup>18</sup> 'Extraordinary Case of Cruelty', *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, 8 August 1868.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Case of Cruelty to the Boy Stowaways', *Manchester Times*, 15 August 1868.

<sup>20</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700-1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1966), p. vi.

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<sup>22</sup> Faye Ringel, *New England's Gothic Literature: History and Folklore of the Supernatural from the Seventeenth through the Twentieth Centuries* (Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Bell, 'Civic Spirits', 55.

<sup>25</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (London, Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Coral Ann Howells (ed.), 'Introduction: Maritime Gothic' in *Where are the Voices Coming From?: Canadian Culture and the Legacies of History* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2004), pp. ix-xxiii at p. xviii.

<sup>27</sup> Tobias Smollett, 'The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle' in *The Novels of Tobias Smollett* (London, Hurst, Robinson & Co, 1821), pp. 197-528 at p. 227.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Metcalfe, *The Oxonian in Iceland* (London, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), pp. 202-3.

<sup>29</sup> John Fiske, *Myths and Myth-Makers* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1895), p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Fletcher S. Bassett, *Sea Phantoms: or, Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and of Sailors in all Lands and at all Times* (Chicago, Morrill, Higgins & co, [1885] 1892), p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> Juha Pentikäinen, *The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition* (Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1968), p. 221.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Thorpe, *Northern Mythology: Comprising the Principal Popular Traditions and Superstitions of Scandinavia, North Germany, and the Netherlands*, vol. 2 (London, Edward Lumley, 1851), p. 95. Schröter quoted in Pentikäinen, *Nordic Dead-Child Tradition*, p. 221

<sup>33</sup> See Pentikäinen, *Nordic Dead-Child Tradition*. Anne O'Connor, *Child Murderess and Dead-Child Traditions: A Comparative Study* (Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1991).

<sup>34</sup> Harde, "'God, or Something Like That'", p. 352.

<sup>35</sup> James Napier, *Folk Lore: Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland, Within this Century* (New Jersey, Lethe Press, 2008), p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Nina Baym, 'Introduction', *Three Spiritualist Novels by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. vii-xxiv at p. viii-ix.