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**'Visions of an Unseen World': The Production and  
Consumption of English Ghost Stories, c.1660-1800**

**by**

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of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university. A small amount of material from chapter one will be published in a forthcoming article in *Studies in Church History* in 2005, but not in the same form as it appears here.

**Sasha Handley**

## Abstract

This thesis traces the cultural significance of ghost beliefs in English society from c.1660 to c.1800. It is an attempt to partially re-enchant these years and to nuance historical characterisations of eighteenth-century England as an enlightened, secularising and 'anti-superstitious' nation. Moreover, I aim to restore ghost beliefs to historical legitimacy and my central argument is that they played a crucial role in shaping the specific social, political, economic and religious contours of eighteenth-century life. Ghosts have been largely exorcised from existing accounts of this period and so this research represents a fresh contribution to historical understandings of the long eighteenth century and to historiographies of the supernatural more generally.

The following chapters describe how ghost beliefs blended with the religious cultures of Anglicanism and Methodism by reinforcing orthodox theological teachings. The idea that dead souls could return to earth also complemented clerical initiatives to reform lay spirituality and to temper the extremes of rational religion. I chart how ghost beliefs fared in the face of new enlightenment philosophies, and how they informed discourses of politeness, individuality and interiority. This is accompanied by explorations of the relevance of ghost beliefs in everyday life. I describe the places and spaces in which ghost stories were told, the people who narrated them and those who listened. This 'thick description' emphasises how the spread of ghost stories was encouraged by contemporary labour relations, by the expansion of British imperial and trading interests overseas, and by patterns of sociability that were intrinsically linked to the realities of eighteenth-century life.

I have harnessed insights from socio-linguistics and the sociology of literature to theorise the relationship between ghost stories and ghost beliefs. I have examined the production, circulation and consumption of ghost stories, as well as their form and content, to explain how these texts reflected and shaped the opinions of a variety of readers. In so doing, this thesis suggests an important relationship between literary forms and historical change.

## Abbreviations

ESTC	-	English Short Title Catalogue
JP	-	Justice of the Peace
MCA	-	Methodist Church Archives, University of Manchester
S.P.C.K.	-	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
S.P.G.	-	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel



## Introduction

It is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it, but all belief is for it.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking in 1778, Samuel Johnson, the famous man of letters and social commentator, usefully summed up the uncertainty surrounding the existence and appearances of ghosts in the ‘age of reason’. This thesis is an attempt to add meat to the bones of Johnson’s statement, through an exploration of the ways in which ghost beliefs both fitted and clashed with the changing cultural landscapes of English society in the long eighteenth century and the daily lives of the men and women who lived in it. Through an analysis of ghost stories, which are understood here as complex expressions of ghost beliefs, this thesis is a study in the imaginative force and flexibility of an idea, or rather a set of ideas, surrounding the nature, status and location of the dead, and the changing meanings attached to their appearances among the living.

Particular ideas and beliefs have particular histories; they enjoy cycles of influence and are also subject to revision, transformation and rejection. The years 1660-1800 form an especially interesting case study in this respect because this period saw ghost beliefs put under the microscope as never before. They were dissected and anatomised by enlightened philosophers, medical practitioners, ladies and gentlemen of fashion and by some of the leading lights of natural philosophy who articulated vehement challenges to the meanings of ghostly appearances and to

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson in *Everybody’s Boswell, Being the Life of Samuel Johnson abridged from James Boswell’s complete text and from the “Tour to the Hebrides”* (Hertfordshire 1989), p.290.

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the existence of ghosts per se. Nevertheless, the story that remains untold describes how ghost beliefs were able to survive these obstacles and to complement processes of social, economic, religious and political change. Scrutiny of ghost beliefs and of ghost stories harmonized with the thirst for knowledge of the natural and invisible worlds. These narratives also accompanied the drive for social distinction that was especially marked in this period. The interaction of ghost beliefs with these familiar historical processes forms part of my story, but I will also emphasise the unique value of ghost stories for highlighting intellectual counter-currents and for throwing light on neglected aspects of the eighteenth-century experience.

Ghost stories expressed the priorities and preoccupations of eighteenth-century life and thought. They did not just exist in the individual imagination but had the power to shape wider patterns of thought and behaviour and to effect material consequences. Ghost stories have important things to say about the character of eighteenth-century religious life, about the lifestyles, social mores and expectations of ordinary men and women, and they give important insights into the psychological side effects of enlightenment, consumerism, and industrialisation. More significantly, these narratives provide valuable access to the thoughts and concerns of people who might otherwise remain hidden from the limited gaze of the historian.

The central aim of this thesis is then to reinsert ghost beliefs and ghost stories into the imaginative and material histories of the long eighteenth century and to suggest that they played a vital role in forging the distinctive character of English society in the years 1660-1800. Ghost beliefs must then be rescued from the realm of 'superstition', since this term implies a stasis and discordance with the prevailing historical forces that characterised eighteenth-century English society – something that is simply not borne out by contemporary evidence. By focusing on the places, spaces and contexts in which ghost stories featured, this thesis reconstructs the



diverse public and private contexts in which they continued to be legitimate and effective social narratives. It is my contention that ghost beliefs, and the ghost stories through which they were expressed, formed a vital part of the eighteenth-century cultural experience rather than being a trivial by-product.

## I Historiography

Post-1770s England has been identified as the golden age of gothic fictions and the literary significance of English ghost stories in eighteenth-century culture has been subject to some attention.<sup>2</sup> The historical import of these narratives has however been strangely neglected. This historiographical gap is no mere oversight and must be attributed in large part to the commanding influence of Sir Keith Thomas' canonical text, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.<sup>3</sup> Thomas offered a brilliant and comprehensive survey of why men and women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed in ghosts. So convincing was his thesis that people stopped seeing ghosts in the eighteenth century because they 'were losing their social relevance' and were rendered 'intellectually impossible' by the progress of enlightenment thought and practice, that few have dared to challenge his conclusions.<sup>4</sup> Although the quality of Thomas' work has since the 1970s given legitimacy and impetus to historical studies of a wide variety of popular belief, paradoxically, it has proved a deterrent to more in-depth historical investigations of ghost beliefs in eighteenth-century England. Alongside Thomas, Ronald Finucane has briefly examined eighteenth-

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<sup>2</sup> E. Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror: a Study of Gothic Romance* (London, 1921). J. Briggs, *Night Visitors, The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London, 1977); G. Cavaliero, *The Supernatural and English Fiction* (Oxford, 1995); E.J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge, 1995); R. Geary, *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction: Horror, Belief, and Literary Change* (New York, 1992); J.E. Hogle, 'Frankenstein as Neo-Gothic: From the Ghost of the Counterfeit to The Monster of Abjection', in *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre*, ed. T. Rajan and J. Wright (Cambridge, 1998); H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic, Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1971), chapter 19.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p.724.

century ghost beliefs as part of a broader chronological span, but both accounts have done little to dethrone the prevailing characterisation of this period as a time of dwindling belief in the preternatural world, dominated instead by discourses of empiricism, desacralisation and rationalism. This historiographical neglect provides the essential motivation for this thesis, since the decline of ghost beliefs has been both overstated and mistimed. Historians have neglected the variety and fragmentation of learned opinion surrounding the reality of ghosts, as well as the complex attitudes towards ghosts that surfaced among different religious, social, gender and age groupings in this period.

Historians of eighteenth-century England have usually assumed a disjuncture between the idea of ghosts and the civilizing missions of enlightenment thought, the rational and commercial focus of early industrialisation and imperial expansion, the fragmentation of religious identities, and the growing desire for social distinction implicit in new developments in art, philosophy and literature. The few historians who have addressed the status of otherworldly phenomena in this chronology have largely rejected its significance. Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston described an emerging cultural opposition between the enlightened and the marvellous with the former triumphant and the latter characteristic of vulgarity and ignorance.<sup>5</sup> According to such narratives, belief in the interventions of the divine and of his ghostly messengers was deemed to be in conflict with the central Enlightenment focus on man as a perfectible being and as the essential motor of social development and progress.<sup>6</sup>

At one level, historians are of course correct to identify some clash between ghost stories and the new intellectual currents that circulated in these years. Ghostly interventions undermined the self-regulating mechanisms of the natural world and

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<sup>5</sup> L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York, 1998), p.14, 20, 331.

<sup>6</sup> D. Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1990).



questioned overly optimistic views of man and nature, reminding contemporaries of the omnipotence of God and of the fragility of the human condition. By highlighting inconsistencies in historical discourses of enlightenment and desacralisation, eighteenth-century ghosts deserve a more sophisticated re-evaluation as valuable sites of cultural contestation. Indeed, the sheer volume of ghost stories that were produced and purchased between 1660 and 1800 suggests that a reassessment of these narratives is long overdue.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the familiar expectation that ghosts intervened amongst the living to regulate social mores and to publicise and punish moral abuse, locates these preternatural phenomena as essential accompaniments to the historical developments of eighteenth-century life, restraining the worst extremes of empiricist and materialist thought, and combating the immoral excesses of an increasingly consumer-orientated society. As the fundamental expression of ghost beliefs, ghost stories must be recast both as essential complements to the processes of 'modernisation', and as notable evidence of counter-currents in eighteenth-century thought. It will become clear in the chapters that follow that ghost beliefs were geographically and socially diffuse, incorporated multiple meanings, surfaced in diverse contexts, and were subject to ongoing revision, rationalisation and transformation between 1660 and 1800. Ghost stories were important barometers of cultural change that add balance and complexity to historical assessments of eighteenth-century society as a secularising, rational and anti-miraculous monolith.

Borrowing from the sociological terminology of Max Weber, it was the late Bob Scribner who associated the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with accelerating the process of 'disenchantment' begun by the Protestant Reformation. Scribner, along with Keith Thomas, noted the exceptions and ambiguities in this thesis of 'disenchantment.' Recent revisionist works, most notably by Alexandra

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<sup>7</sup> The volume of ghost stories produced in these years is explored more fully in the chapters that follow, especially in chapter two.

Walsham, Peter Marshall, Peter Lake and Stuart Clark have continued to nuance and develop understandings of how Protestantism fostered its own lively brand of miracles, wonders and sacred interventions from the invisible world.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, with the exception of Owen Davies and Ronald Hutton, who have examined the vitality of witchcraft beliefs into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such a comprehensive reassessment has yet to be attempted for the eighteenth century in general and for ghost beliefs in particular.<sup>9</sup> This is partly due to the traditional and somewhat artificial division of labour between historians of early modern England who tend to study the period up to 1640 or 1700 and historians of the eighteenth century who have tended to shape their narratives in anticipation of nineteenth-century economic, social, political and religious change. As a result, important continuities between these two chronologies have been obscured and the eighteenth century has all too often been regarded as a very different world from that which went before, and to which the heyday of ghost beliefs, and supernatural beliefs more generally, supposedly belonged.

## II Ghost and Witch

Thanks to the work of Peter Marshall, Jean-Claude Schmitt and Nancy Caciola, a more respectable historiography of ghost beliefs is now emerging in embryonic form for medieval and early modern Europe but this has not extended to include the long

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<sup>8</sup> A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002); P. Lake, 'Popular Form, Puritan Content? Two Puritan Appropriations of the Murder Pamphlet from Mid-Seventeenth-Century London', in A. Fletcher and P. Roberts (eds), *Religion, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1994); P. Lake with M. Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat, Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (London, 2002); S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons, The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> O. Davies, *A People Bewitched: Witchcraft and Magic in Nineteenth-Century Somerset* (Bruton, 1999); *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736-1951* (Manchester, 1999). R. Hutton, 'The English Reformation and the Evidence of Folklore', *Past and Present*, No. 148 (August, 1995).



eighteenth century in England.<sup>10</sup> This neglect provides another justification for this study and a further reason for the current marginalisation of ghost beliefs in historical studies of this period, which have been subsumed thus far under the well-heeled historiography of witchcraft. Keith Thomas classified belief in ghosts as an ‘allied belief’ of witchcraft and too few historians have distinguished between the two categories, even though contemporaries often did so during the period under study here. In order to explain both the persistence and cessation of belief in supernatural wonders historians have employed regional and national comparisons, but the category of the ‘supernatural’ itself must also be broken down to appreciate the important differences between the phenomena generally included under this heading.

Whilst concepts of gender will feature in this study and played a part in fashioning responses towards ghost stories, discussions of female physiology, fantasy and psychology are less relevant in explaining the intensity and longevity of ghost beliefs than they are in delineating attitudes towards witchcraft.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the need to separate the historical trajectory of ghost beliefs from that of witches is further demonstrated by the work of Ian Bostridge whose book, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations*, has most recently reinforced the historical association of the early eighteenth century with the declining influence of witchcraft beliefs. Bostridge also described how the Witchcraft Act was removed from the statute books in 1736 amidst heated religious and political squabbles between opposing Tory and Whig politicians.<sup>12</sup> Debate over the existence and nature of ghosts did take on significant political overtones at various intervals over the course of the eighteenth century and became tainted with ‘popish’ associations in contemporary polemic, but these beliefs

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<sup>10</sup> J.C. Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages, The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (London, 1998); N. Caciola, ‘Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture’, *Past and Present*, No. 151 (August, 1996); Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, chapter 6.

<sup>11</sup> See especially L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> I. Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations c.1650-c.1750* (Oxford, 1997), chapter 8.

were not exclusively linked to a dwindling Tory or High Church faction and were variously adopted and appropriated by men and women from a variety of political and confessional backgrounds. Moreover, the repeal of the Witchcraft Act was intimately linked to the legal and criminal context of witchcraft accusations that again marks a key distinction from the status of ghost beliefs. It was never a crime to believe in ghosts, or to claim to have seen and conversed with one, and ghost beliefs provided no direct justification for torture, trials and executions nor for widespread outbreaks of persecution.

Owen Davies' work has highlighted the persistence of popular belief in witchcraft beyond the 1736 repeal: the criminal associations of witchcraft remained intact with individuals and communities attempting both to prosecute and persecute suspected witches for material crimes into the nineteenth century and beyond.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as the examples of John Webster and Francis Hutchinson demonstrate, distaste for the idea of witchcraft, for the material consequences of its punishment and for its polemical associations, created greater hostility towards the idea of witchcraft among educated men and women in the years 1660-1800 than did the idea of ghosts. Both Webster and Hutchinson publicly dismissed the legitimacy of witchcraft whilst affirming that ghost stories retained important spiritual meanings. If diabolical witchcraft was conceived of as an inversion of right religion, then ghost stories by way of contrast were more flexible and could be fashioned more easily as orthodox supports of Restoration and eighteenth-century Anglicanism and Methodism. These key differences help to explain why ghost beliefs deserve an independent historiography from that of witchcraft, since they were less offensive to the educated and to the clerical ministry and thus enjoyed a longer shelf life, in various forms of public discourse.

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<sup>13</sup> O. Davies, *A People Bewitched*.



In the field of witchcraft studies, the new social history of the 1960s has led to a flood of micro-histories, extending and complicating understandings of the chronological, geographical and social spread of witchcraft beliefs, presenting the ideas of ordinary people and introducing feminist discourses to transform historical understandings of this phenomenon. Historical conceptions of ghost beliefs have not developed along such lines and have only been studied for the eighteenth century in outmoded intellectual terms that neglect the variety and fragmentation of scholarly opinion and that lay a heavy emphasis on the impact of natural philosophy in exploding the legitimacy of ghost stories. Michael Hunter and Stuart Clark, among others, have outlined the limitations of this functionalist approach, and the complementarity of natural philosophy with deeply held convictions about the intervention of otherworldly forces is now commonplace.<sup>14</sup> The response of natural philosophers, medics and psychologists to the realm of ghost beliefs supports the contention that 'scientific' and preternatural beliefs could and did coexist, and reveals a colourful mixture of enthusiastic interest, cautious credulity and outright dismissal. Nonetheless, an exclusive focus on intellectual responses to ghost beliefs relies too heavily on the presumed chasm between learned and unlearned conceptions of the spirit world. Thus, whilst Peter Burke's suggestion that the eighteenth century witnessed the divergence of high and low cultures remains credible, the presumed conflict between the 'great' and 'little' traditions requires qualification since it oversimplifies fluid social categories, downplays important cultural interactions and neglects the agency of the more marginalized social groupings.<sup>15</sup> This study will highlight a two-way process of cultural exchange by refusing to correlate the labels of 'sceptic' and 'believer' with hierarchies of wealth and social status. Such a standpoint is essential in explaining how and why real-life experiences of ghosts

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<sup>14</sup> M. Hunter, *Science and Society in Restoration England* (Cambridge, 1981); S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons*.

<sup>15</sup> P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978).

were repeatedly translated from speech communities into manuscript and into diverse printed forms, providing important connections between local and national cultures.

### III Terms and Definitions

Before proceeding any further the type of ghosts that haunt this text must be defined more carefully. In order to distinguish the particular meanings attached to ghosts, I am not concerned here with anonymous angelic or evil spirits such as are generally involved in cases of witchcraft and demonic possession. Instead I have followed contemporary terminology in defining the eighteenth-century ghost and my object of study as 'A spirit appearing after death'. Most often, these ghosts were well known or related to those that saw them or were former inhabitants of the place in which the percipient lived.<sup>16</sup> The term 'ghost' was most often used in this period to refer to the familiar spirit of a dead person, but there is also some crossover with the word 'apparition' and 'spectre' that according to Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of 1755, also delineated 'a walking spirit' or an 'appearance of persons dead'.<sup>17</sup> Where these terms are used to refer to the spirit of a dead person, they are included in this study. The changing understandings and ambiguities of these expressions will form an important part of the chapters that follow.

Just as the concept of ghosts must be separated from that of witches, both Stuart Clark and Alexandra Walsham have pointed out that the term 'supernatural' must be carefully defined and indeed distinguished from that of 'preternatural'; the former being something 'above the powers of nature', the latter referring to something 'Different from what is natural' or 'irregular'.<sup>18</sup> This differentiation is especially important for understanding the fluctuating legitimacy of ghost stories in

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<sup>16</sup> 'Ghost' in S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Volume I (London, 1755).

<sup>17</sup> 'Apparition' and 'Spectre' in Johnson, *Dictionary*.

<sup>18</sup> 'Supernatural' and 'Preternatural' in Johnson, *Dictionary*; Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p.258; A. Walsham, 'The Disenchantment of the World? The Ambiguous Legacy of the Reformation' (Unpublished Paper, University of Exeter, 2004).



intellectual discourse throughout the long eighteenth century that took place amidst wrangles over the correct identification and classification of diverse natural and spiritual phenomena. Preternatural wonders should be located somewhere in between the natural and supernatural worlds, as something out of the ordinary but potentially explicable by a combination of natural law and divine agency. The ghosts of this thesis hovered on the boundaries of these categories, but the most frequent descriptions of ghosts and iconographic representations of these figures suggest that, by and large, they should be classified as preternatural phenomena. Ghosts usually appeared in familiar human form, sometimes in the clothes they wore when alive or more often in the winding sheets in which they had been buried. Contemporary advances in optical instrumentation and chemical knowledge destabilised the iconography of ghosts and slowly rendered some of them incorporeal and shadowy substances, but in spite of this ghosts were rarely described or depicted as transparent. They were regularly invested with human qualities, and were thought capable of moving material objects and of inflicting physical harm to the living. Similarly, those who were confronted by ghosts believed that they could inflict material damage by shooting or stabbing the spirit with conventional weapons.<sup>19</sup> Ghosts were thus thought to possess a curious hybrid of divine qualities and human characteristics, which must be partly explained by their intimate association with the physical processes of death and decomposition, which ensured that they retained important affinities with the natural world. It is with this in mind that the existence and explanation of ghostly phenomena makes sense as a key problematic for natural philosophers and enlightened thinkers in these years, and that the configuration of ghosts as objects of morbid contemplation can be understood.

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<sup>19</sup> See for example the case of the 'Hammersmith Ghost' as reported in *The Times*, Issue 5912, 6 January 1804, p.3.

#### IV Methodology

How do historians access the question of belief? This perennial historical problem is one to which scholars have offered a variety of solutions – all insightful but none comprehensive.<sup>20</sup> By their very nature, personal beliefs are ephemeral, elusive and almost impossible to reconstruct on a large scale from the sources available to the historian. The material that does survive in the form of diaries, for example, is usually weighted to reflect the views of literate, middle and upper class men and neglects the histories of more marginalized social groups whose literacy skills were less developed or who found little leisure time or need to record their own thoughts and feelings in writing. In order to combat this bias and to gauge the depth and social diffusion of ghost beliefs, I am not going to focus solely on the rich canonical literature of the period in which a few eminent individuals debated the reality of ghosts, but on a whole gamut of genres and texts in which ghost stories cropped up and that were accessed by men, women and children of all kinds. Following the pioneering work of Bernard Capp and Margaret Spufford who have done so much to underline the importance of the cheap print market for delineating the attitudes and beliefs of even the poorest sections of early modern society, my analysis begins at the least expensive end of the print market, in Grub Street and with the ghosts of ballad and chapbook fame.<sup>21</sup> From the most widely disseminated texts, my study extends through to the most expensive and socially exclusive texts.

Fortunately the eighteenth century saw a great proliferation in the publication and purchasing of ghost stories in a wide diversity of forms and genres, but my decision to examine this inclusive spread of texts also has significant methodological implications. By juxtaposing different kinds of texts and audiences, I want to

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<sup>20</sup> R.W. Scribner, 'Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?', *History of European Ideas*, No. 10(2) (1989), pp.175-191.

<sup>21</sup> B. Capp, 'Popular Literature' in B. Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1985); M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories, Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1985).



emphasise the place of eighteenth-century ghost stories as sites of cross-over and interaction between oral and literate communities and between different social, geographical, confessional, gender and age groupings. The physical production, dissemination and consumption of ghost stories will also be used to highlight the mixed marketplace that existed for these publications. This thesis therefore approaches the question of belief through the medium of narrative, and it combines close textual analysis with a broad conception of historical change. In so doing, it draws on important concepts from socio-linguistic theory and the sociology of literature. My approach will outline why ghost stories were told, the ways in which they were manufactured and disseminated, how they performed as texts and how they tried to shape the beliefs of their readers. Readers must be granted a degree of autonomy in constructing independent meaning from the written word, but these meanings were inevitably influenced by the text itself, which was the product of dynamic interaction between market-conscious writers, commercially minded publishers and reader expectations.

By focusing on the production, circulation and consumption of eighteenth-century ghost stories, I hope to avoid a reductive analysis of 'elite' and 'popular' ghost beliefs. By highlighting the ways in which the same texts could appeal to mixed audiences, this approach is valuable for highlighting mutual exchange between different social, religious and gender groupings in a chronology that has often been associated with the distancing of high and low cultures, the fragmentation of Protestant denominations, and the separation of male and female activities into public and private contexts.<sup>22</sup> In taking this approach, I assume that these publicly instituted narratives had important affinities with the beliefs, experiences and

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<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Barry has alerted historians' attention to 'the imprecision and variability of all efforts to pin down social structure and relationships' and has rightly called for 'a social analysis in which gender, age and position in the life-cycle are integrated with notions of class derived from birth, occupation or wealth.' J. Barry, *The Middling Sort of People, Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800*, ed. J. Barry and C. Brooks (Basingstoke, 1994), pp.2-3.

attitudes of the society that they represented.. Relevant here is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'field of cultural production', in which he asserts that the value of a cultural product is determined by the way it fits with the interests and preoccupations of the society in which it is produced.

Given that works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such, the sociology of art and literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work.<sup>23</sup>

In the words of Kevin Sharpe and Steven Zwicker - 'we are what we read'.<sup>24</sup> The ghost stories of eighteenth-century England were constructed from the raw imaginative materials available to their authors. Insofar as these texts were intended for commercial success, they had to connect with the expectations and tastes of readers rather than simply reflecting the views of an isolated and culturally dissonant individual. As Terry Eagleton argues, a text is not valuable in and of itself; readers determine its value in relation to their own ideals and preferences.<sup>25</sup> The relationship between text and society, between ghost stories and ghost beliefs was and is one characterised by symbiosis and mutual exchange.<sup>26</sup> Ghost stories are therefore understood in this thesis as 'things', as desirable material products, but also as imaginative resources that linked up to the mental processes and narrative habits of

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<sup>23</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. R. Johnson (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> K. Sharpe and S.N. Zwicker (eds), *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003), p.23.

<sup>25</sup> T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (Oxford, 1988), p.11.

<sup>26</sup> Joel Mokyr describes this relationship in terms of a division between propositional knowledge and prescriptive knowledge. *The Gifts of Athena, Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton, 2002), pp.4-5.



daily life. These texts both reflected the complex and often contested nature of eighteenth-century ghost beliefs and helped to shape them afresh in line with the priorities of public and private discourse. The imaginative and physical production of ghost stories, the techniques used to entice and persuade readers, and the reception, recycling and raw statistics of publication success are thus of central importance in this thesis. The changing status of ghost beliefs will then be studied through the material culture of individual texts but also by assessing the importance of the diverse literary genres in which ghost stories appeared. I want, therefore, to support Lennard Davis' contention that there are important, if complex connections between literary genres and historical change. The migration of ghost stories between different categories of literature therefore reflects shifts in the way that these narratives were conceived in social life and thought.<sup>27</sup>

People read ghost stories for a number of different reasons and I will examine the myriad ways that authors, printers and publishers catered for divergent consumer interests by varying the format, content, linguistic structure, typeface, illustration, length and price of these publications. The role of the printing industry is foundational to this study since it configured ghost stories in a wider range of printed forms than ever before, including cheap ballads and chapbooks, sermons, extended religious tracts, medical treatises, scientific journals, educational treatises, newspapers, periodicals, national histories, folkloric collections, local histories, novels, poems, drama and working-class autobiography. Such diversity highlights the fluidity of the idea of ghosts as well as the persistent social relevance and flexibility of ghost stories that migrated between traditional texts and new literary genres over the course of the long eighteenth century.

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<sup>27</sup> L.J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York, 1983), p.88.

Refinements of the formal techniques of printing enabled texts to be produced more cheaply and distributed more widely than ever before, and the physical circulation of ghost stories in eighteenth-century England certainly benefited from these advances. However, the impact of the volume and variety of printed ghost stories for delineating perceptions of ghosts is nonetheless ambiguous and the proliferation of these narratives was not a straightforward reflection of serious belief in the existence of ghosts. As Walter Ong has argued, the technology of print could also be a 'time-obviating and otherwise radically decontextualising mechanism'.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the positive benefits of the commercialisation process to which ghost stories were subjected in these years must be regarded with a degree of caution. By translating these essentially oral narratives into printed forms and thus distancing them from the original contexts that often secured their legitimacy, the enshrining of ghost stories in print may have helped in the long term to undermine the authenticity of these narratives as their key formulas became more familiar, less extraordinary and increasingly vulnerable to manipulation.

This tension between the physical production of ghost stories and the ways in which they influenced belief will be addressed by examining how authors and publishers intended readers to believe the essential truth of ghost stories. Advocates of reader-response theory have demonstrated the plurality of ways in which individual readers appropriated the same texts, and yet the assumed relationship between narrative and belief has persisted as one of the key modes of historical enquiry in recent years. As Ian Green, Tessa Watt, Alexandra Walsham and Peter Lake have demonstrated, it was the presumed connection between the printed word and the shape of lay piety that led Protestant churchmen of the sixteenth and

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<sup>28</sup> W.J. Ong, 'Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought', in G. Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford, 1986).



seventeenth centuries to engage with a whole variety of cheap printed wares.<sup>29</sup> As the main body of the thesis will illustrate, this technique was still current in the eighteenth century although the messages with which these texts were inscribed were updated to suit contemporary need and the popularity of printed sermons provided an alternative outlet for this process of instruction and modification.

Since this study is largely based on textual analysis of ghost stories, it is imperative to emphasise that contemporaries perceived the relationship between text and belief to be a dynamic and affective one. Indeed, the ghost stories examined here display important techniques that were intended to fascinate, persuade and instruct potential readers. As chapter two describes in more detail, the ghost stories of cheap print were especially notable for incorporating dialogue, a high density of circumstantial detail and character analysis - techniques usually associated with oral forms of communication. This methodology may well have been favoured to keep printed ghost stories as close as possible to their original oral contexts and to allow them to flow back into speech patterns by facilitating the public performance of these narratives in the local alehouse or in domestic settings. The frequent and dramatic use of visual imagery in printed ghost stories is also suggestive of the way in which readers were expected to interpret these texts. As if fresh from the grave, striking images of ghosts in winding-sheets regularly accompanied many of the narratives studied here and they helped to underline the serious, contemplative meaning of the text. Indeed, as Roger Chartier insists, such images were intended to engage 'the unflinching adherence of the beholder and, even more than or better than the text that it accompanied, to induce persuasion or belief'.<sup>30</sup> Walter Ong's proposition that print radically distanced the reader from the original context of the narrative and allowed

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<sup>29</sup> I. Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); T. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge, 1996); A. Walsham, *Providence; Lake in Fletcher & Roberts, Religion, Culture and Society*.

<sup>30</sup> R. Chartier (ed.), *The Culture of Print, Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1989), p.6.

the authenticity of the text to be questioned must then be qualified. The ghost stories that feature in this study are especially illustrative of the interdependence of the spoken and the written in eighteenth-century print culture and this mixture was intended to inculcate rather than to suspend belief. Adam Fox's brilliant description of the ways in which print overlaid and reinforced the authority of speech and oral culture firmly underpins this thesis.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, the extent to which ghost stories had the potential to encourage or discourage belief depended on access to these narratives, and in the case of printed ghost stories on levels of literacy and reading practices. Adam Fox and Roger Chartier have most recently demonstrated that access to print culture cannot be quantified by counting the number of people with the ability to read and write. The sources available to the historian inevitably render this a flawed task, but such a strict definition of 'literacy' also neglects the myriad ways in which early modern men and women were able to engage and interact with printed texts. Thanks to the work of Bernard Capp, Margaret Spufford, Adam Fox, and Tessa Watt we now know more about the widespread practice of communal reading in early modern England than ever before.<sup>32</sup> The ghosts of ballads and chapbooks lent themselves to public readings whilst taverns, alehouses, fairs and markets provided the crucial spaces in which these readings were carried out. In the eighteenth century, access to print was facilitated by the proliferation of booksellers in the capital and in provincial centres, by the establishment of circulating libraries and subscription libraries across Britain, by a sophisticated second-hand book trade and by the informal but regular habit of borrowing and lending books, pamphlets and textual ephemera to friends, family,

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<sup>31</sup> A. Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp.14-30; M. Spufford, *The Great Reclothing of Rural England: Petty Chapmen and Their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1984); B. Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press, English Almanacs 1500-1800* (London, 1979), p.287; Fox, *Oral and Literate Cultures*.



and neighbours.<sup>33</sup> New technologies of print and new modes of dissemination fostered new kinds of reading practices with fictional novels and poetry encouraging habits of private reading. Moreover, as John Brewer has illustrated, circulating libraries provided a reliable source of entertainment and instruction for large numbers of men and women who were captivated by such texts.<sup>34</sup>

The early modern period in general and the eighteenth century in particular thus witnessed a series of mini-revolutions in reading practices. However, following the recommendation of Margaret Spufford and on the understanding that ghost stories were desirable commodities, this study will also take account of reading tastes as well as reading habits and abilities. The specialisation of the print market enabled ghost stories to appeal to diverse tastes and audiences. The ghosts of novels and verse were designed to shape private sensibilities, and in the second half of the eighteenth-century publishers increasingly catered for a youth market, encouraging the habit of childhood reading and of 'polite' parents interacting with their children as readers. The prominence of ghost stories among this literature will be an important focus of the final chapter. Although this study emphasises diverse constructions of ghost stories in printed texts, I recognise that the vast majority of ghost stories that were published in this period originated in oral communities and as Walter Ong has argued, 'Writing can never dispense with orality'.<sup>35</sup> Where possible I have traced the ways in which these narratives spread through oral channels, emphasising the performative aspects of this mode of transmission and the heightened persuasive force of face-to-face storytelling.

I want to suggest then that although the two were not coextensive, important connections remained between eighteenth-century ghost stories and ghost beliefs.

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<sup>33</sup> For fuller description see J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination, English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2000), pp.167-197.

<sup>34</sup> Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.179.

<sup>35</sup> W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word* (London, 1982), p.8.

Further proof of the affective impact of ghost stories on the eighteenth-century imagination surfaces in contemporary complaint literature. John Locke in his *Essay on Humane Understanding* most forcefully articulated the particular success of these narratives for instilling ghost beliefs in the minds of young children. Locke's rejection of the concept of innate ideas, further underlines the manufactured rather than inherited nature of eighteenth-century ghost beliefs and his disapproving commentary identified one of the major sources of narrative reproduction and dissemination – the storytelling of servants.<sup>36</sup> Familiar echoes of Locke's concerns persisted throughout the eighteenth century and intensified in its closing decades when good parenting manuals advised conscientious mothers and fathers to ban ghost stories from the vocabulary of servants and thereby save their children from a lifetime of fear and credulity. According to Locke and a whole host of educational reformers who were influenced by his work, youthful introduction to frightening and dramatic tales of ghosts stirred human emotions, clouded reason and judgement and made an indelible mark on the fancy. A stream of working-class autobiographies at the close of the eighteenth century similarly attested to the formative influence of ghost stories recounted in childhood, emphasising the importance of spoken and printed ghost stories in cementing belief in the real existence of ghosts and the scenarios in which they could be expected to materialise. Indeed, the history of ideas and the history of ghost beliefs in particular, can be understood as a history of what people remember and it seems that ghost stories exerted an especially potent force upon the eighteenth-century memory.

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<sup>36</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (London, 1690), pp.4-14.



## V Meanings

Given that ghost stories exerted an important influence on the individual and collective imagination, it is important to outline the kinds of messages that were inscribed in these narratives. Underpinning this thesis is the assumption that ghost beliefs were intimately connected with the mortuary culture of eighteenth-century England. They expressed important emotional and spiritual meanings for individuals and for early modern communities that were confronted with their own mortality or with that of loved ones. As dramatic representations of immortality, ghost stories diluted the finality of death by extending the ritual process of mourning and bridging the physical and conceptual gap between this world and the next. By haunting familiar places and people they reinforced structures of social memory and provided an important source of cultural continuity. Almost inevitably, eighteenth-century ghost stories say something interesting about attitudes towards death and towards the dead, and yet historians who have focused on these themes have treated these narratives as curious remnants of popish and pagan superstition or have disregarded them entirely. Ralph Houlbrooke's *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750* offers a cohesive and insightful survey of the evolutions of early modern death culture, and yet he makes only brief reference to ghost beliefs.<sup>37</sup> Clare Gittings linked the mortuary culture of eighteenth-century England to discourses of individuality and yet instead of tracing the connections between ghost beliefs, interiority, and the persistence of the personality after death, she dismissed ghost beliefs and the rituals surrounding them as 'superstitious practices' with no contemporary relevance.<sup>38</sup> Throughout this thesis I will outline the ways in which ghost stories linked up to diverse anxieties and expectations surrounding death and

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<sup>37</sup> R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford, 1998), p.40, 291.

<sup>38</sup> C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London, 1984), p.111.

It may well be the case that the so-called sense of individualism embodied in literary and artistic responses towards death was not new in the eighteenth-century, but the means of expressing such sentiments was more readily available in these years.

the imagined fate of the dead beyond the grave. As material products, the ghost stories of cheap print and the vivid woodcuts of ghosts in winding sheets that accompanied them must be understood as a form of *memento mori*, as visual and textual reminders of the fragility of human life and the social levelling that it entailed.

By way of contrast, the poems of the Graveyard School in the mid-eighteenth century present a sense of revulsion and morbid fascination with the dead that was focused through the lens of ghost stories. Philippe Ariès' sweeping generalisation that the eighteenth century saw a physical and imaginative distancing of death must also be revised in light of the dramatic physical representations of death furnished by ghost stories.<sup>39</sup> Ariès' assertion that 'death had been tamed' in an age of Enlightenment focused too heavily on intellectual discourses of death. The evidence of ghost stories suggests that terrifying ideas of death were at best displaced, but not subdued.<sup>40</sup> Ruth Richardson's insightful work has highlighted the liminality of death in the eighteenth century and the centrality of the human corpse to popular mortuary culture. According to Richardson, 'It was believed and feared that the dead could return' and she also identified consistent desires to preserve and identify the dead. In so doing, Richardson's work suggests that the complex patchwork of beliefs that surrounded death in this period have not been sufficiently elucidated. The relation of eighteenth-century ghost stories to this social history of death is thus an important contribution.<sup>41</sup>

By locating ghost beliefs and ghost stories within the social history of death, this study owes a debt to the pioneering work of Peter Marshall who has explored the

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<sup>39</sup> P. Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, trans. H. Weaver (London, 1987), p.314.

<sup>40</sup> Ariès, *Hour of Our Death*, p.394. John McManners advanced a similarly reductive argument for eighteenth-century France, suggesting that enlightened views of death downplayed its corporeal aspect and emphasised 'hope and consolation' rather than 'judgment and fear'. J. McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment, Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1981), p.202.

<sup>41</sup> R. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London, 1987), p.7, 13.



role of ghost beliefs in fashioning cultural responses towards the dead in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Marshall's work is also foundational to the present study thanks to his analysis of how ghost beliefs integrated with the complex formation and fragmentation of religious identities in Reformation England. This thesis is both a continuation and a departure from Marshall's work in its examination of the relevance of ghost beliefs to theological debates and processes of confessional formation between 1660 and 1800. The religious significance of ghost beliefs in this chronology has important antecedents in the pre-civil war years and is specifically related to the ambiguity that surrounded appearances of the dead following official Protestant rejections of Purgatory in mid-sixteenth century England. By denying the existence of a 'middle state' between heaven and hell from where the souls of the deceased were thought to return to earth to plead for intercessory prayer and to confess sin, official Protestant disavowals of Purgatory removed the cornerstone of the conceptual edifice that authorised pre-Reformation ghost beliefs. Nonetheless, Marshall has discovered crucial inconsistencies within learned conceptions of ghosts, and discrepancies between these official formulations and the quotidian perception of ghosts within lay communities. What emerges is a patchwork of Catholic, reformed and atavistic folkloric ideas about the appearance of departed souls, which were often accepted and even encouraged by Protestant parish ministers who appropriated ghost stories to serve particular devotional purposes.<sup>42</sup> Similar clerical appropriations of ghost stories will be highlighted in Restoration England and throughout the eighteenth century, but it will become clear that these narratives were linked to the specific religious and political preoccupations of this later period. I will suggest how traumatic memories of civil war radicalism helped to refashion ghost stories as more

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<sup>42</sup> P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, pp.252-258.

orthodox supports of the Church of England, and that these narratives fitted more easily with the changing theological emphases of post-Restoration Anglicanism.

The spiritual meaning of ghost stories was the most consistently expressed context in which these tales were recommended to readers in the years 1660 to 1800. Ghost stories were used to encourage but also to offset anxieties about the ambiguous process of salvation, to promote good devotional habits, to lend succour to formal doctrines of the soul's immortality and the resurrection and to defend the authority of the Trinity by furnishing fresh evidence of the workings of the Holy Spirit. The rejection of miraculous signs and wonders and all things supernatural by rational dissenters has led historians to ignore the theological significance of ghost stories or to suggest that they represented an essential perversion of eighteenth-century spirituality. Of course, elements of contemporary rhetoric support these findings but evidence from the local level and from published sermons and tracts also suggests that ghost stories were tacitly accepted and even encouraged by some Anglican clergymen who sought to build upon existing connections between ghost beliefs and the religious faith of the laity. This is an important contribution to historical assessments of eighteenth-century religion and the consistent association of ghost stories with orthodox defences of the Trinity suggest these narratives should sit closer to the mainstream of Anglican theology and worship than has so far been allowed. Indeed, Samuel Johnson's definition of a 'ghost' in his 1755 dictionary included reference to 'The third person in the adorable Trinity', whilst 'Ghostliness' was described as something with 'spiritual tendency' that was decidedly 'not secular'.<sup>43</sup>

The adoption of ghost stories by leaders of the early Methodist movement accentuates points of dissension between fragmented Protestant groupings, but the

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<sup>43</sup> 'Ghost' and 'Ghostliness' in Johnson, *Dictionary*.



recasting of these narratives as attacks on 'atheists', immorality and as vehicles for anti-Catholic and patriotic propaganda also highlight important points of confessional unity. Anti-Catholic emphases of eighteenth-century ghost stories are especially significant since they suggest that ghost beliefs were no longer perceived as popish survivals but were now thoroughly suffused with the priorities of Restoration and eighteenth-century Protestantism.<sup>44</sup> Changing theories of providential intervention will also be explored, since the idea of a transcendent divine power that rarely intervened in the natural world had a significant influence on the way that ghost stories were perceived. Nevertheless, it will be a central tenet of my argument that the place of special or particular providences has been significantly underestimated in historical assessments of eighteenth-century spirituality. These findings add a new dimension to the revisionist work of William Gibson, John Spurr, Anthony Armstrong, and Jeremy Gregory who have rightly debunked the idea that the Church of England was disengaged from the spiritual priorities of the laity as well as emphasising the overlapping interests of orthodox and dissenting Protestants.<sup>45</sup>

Peter Marshall, Jean-Claude Schmitt and Malcolm Gaskill have shown how assumptions about the providential intervention of ghosts were manipulated to encourage lay piety, but also to achieve specific practical objectives. Understood as expressions of divine displeasure, ghost stories publicised instances of social injustice, exposing secret murderers, deceitful executors and adulterous spouses. Ghosts continued to protest against these crimes in the long eighteenth century, but they were also vehemently opposed to usury and to expressions of 'atheism' or

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<sup>44</sup> This was also due to changing perceptions of anti-Catholicism, which was feared more as a political threat than as a viable religious preference.

<sup>45</sup> W. Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832, Unity and Accord* (London, 2001); J. Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England* (London, 1991); A. Armstrong, *The Church of England, the Methodists and Society 1700-1850* (London, 1973); D.A. Spaeth, *The Church in An Age of Danger, Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* (Cambridge, 2000). J. Gregory and J.S. Chamberlain (eds), *The National Church in Local Perspective* (Woodbridge, 2003).

irreligion, instances of which were thought to be particularly rife in these years. Indeed, ghost stories were increasingly fashioned to articulate anxieties about the evils of eighteenth-century economic life. Functioning as important expressions of anti-consumerist rhetoric, ghost stories can be linked to a neglected aspect of the economic history of this period that is usually dominated by descriptions of a burgeoning imperial economy and the luxury goods that were increasingly imported onto the British market.<sup>46</sup> As I emphasise throughout this thesis, the primarily oral roots of ghost stories allowed them to be utilised by men and women of differing social backgrounds. Disgruntled servants and abused, neglected or abandoned wives and fiancé(e)s regularly manipulated belief in preternatural phenomena to gain revenge on masters, husbands and lovers. The persistence of these practices and the attention that they received shows how the revelations of a ghost could do considerable damage to personal reputation, sometimes leading to an arrest or even an execution. Pervasive belief in the providential agency of ghosts allowed the female and servant voice to be authorised outside of purely domestic contexts, thus highlighting the interrelationship of public and private discourses. Ghost stories were not simply harmless or entertaining tales and could be both affective and effective. The narrative act itself must then be understood to have important imaginative and material consequences. In this context, this study reinforces and extends the work of Bernard Capp and Laura Gowing by figuring ghost stories as weapons of the weak and dispossessed.<sup>47</sup>

If the perceived imminence of the holy sustained the legitimacy of ghost stories for some, new philosophical arguments also emerged to justify the telling and retelling of ghost stories in more secular frames of reference. The newly established

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<sup>46</sup> M. Berg, *The Age of Manufactures, 1700-1820* (Totowa, 1985).

<sup>47</sup> B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet, Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003). L. Gowing, 'The Haunting of Susan Lay: Servants and Mistresses in Seventeenth-Century England', *Gender & History*, No. 14(2) (2002), pp.183-201.



periodical press forged an innovative association between ghost beliefs and codes of gentlemanly behaviour, emphasising how contemplation of these narratives was an important exercise for the imagination, helping to instil values of moral fortitude and civic virtue. These philosophical discourses had a transforming influence on the status of ghost stories as instruments of instruction and sources of entertainment. The truth or falsity of ghost stories gradually became less significant than the moral lessons that they taught, helping to explain how ghost stories gradually shaded into the genres of poetry, drama and novels. Imaginary ghosts had appeared in print for centuries but the configuration of ghosts in new literary genres intensified this process of fictionalisation in the eighteenth century. By eroding the 'true-to-life' status of these narratives, ghost stories were subtly displaced from the particular settings and contexts that lent them meaning and the idea of ghosts was reformulated and internalised as an imaginative tool with which to frame thoughts about personal immortality and life after death.

It will be stressed however, that this process was both gradual and inconsistent. 'Real' and 'imagined' ghost stories coexisted for much of the period studied here and, as Terry Eagleton points out, insistence on a sharp distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction' had more relevance for twentieth-century audiences than for eighteenth-century readers.<sup>48</sup> The relationship between truth and fiction must then be understood as one of instability and ambiguity and this was especially true in the eighteenth century where influential discourses of domesticity brought the idea of 'fiction' closer to the human life-world and where the novel was distinguished 'by being more often related to real life'.<sup>49</sup> As Raymond Williams points out poems, plays, novels and other literary texts were first and foremost social products, growing out of and responding to the ideas, anxieties and preoccupations of a particular

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<sup>48</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p.2.

<sup>49</sup> R. Williams, *Keywords, A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1988), p.135.

society at a particular moment in time.<sup>50</sup> The process of fictionalisation and invention bore close relation to the narrative practices in which people took part during everyday life and thus Lennard Davis's assertion that 'certain social forces manifest themselves fairly directly on literary works' has particular relevance.<sup>51</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge recognised the importance of this fit between fiction and reality in preserving the element of belief in fiction, enabling the reader to sanction 'a willing suspension of disbelief'.<sup>52</sup> If ghost stories did not always offer particular truths, they could confidently claim to articulate more general truths that were intimately related to the experiences of social life. Indeed, inscribed in these narratives were important cultural reactions against the narrow rationalism of empirical philosophy, against the geographical and social dislocations of an early phase of industrialisation, and against the emotional traumas of imperial expansion. It will be my contention that the ghosts of eighteenth-century verse, prose and drama did not fatally undermine the proposition that 'real' ghosts existed, but that these texts allowed ghosts to be subtly relocated in safer, sophisticated and more aesthetically pleasing spaces where educated readers could contemplate the meanings of ghosts from their armchairs. As Roger Chartier insists, the subtle shifts engendered by novels and extended works of prose and poetry made the practice of reading 'more private, freer, and totally internalized'.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the reality of ghosts was displaced, domesticated and relocated to the interior imagination - but not rejected. Indeed, it will be my suggestion that the very uncertainty about the real or imagined status of ghosts was essential to the drama and performance of these texts.

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<sup>50</sup> R. Williams, *Culture* (London, 1981); *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London, 1959).

<sup>51</sup> Davis, *Factual Fictions*, p.86.

<sup>52</sup> S.T. Coleridge cited in M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (London, 1999), p.96.

<sup>53</sup> Chartier, *Culture of Print*, p.2.



## VI Structure

The “long eighteenth century” is a fresh chronology within which to study the changing status of ghost beliefs and an unusual periodisation in which to attempt a cultural history of this nature. The years 1660-1832 are primarily associated with political landmarks in English and subsequently British history, namely the restoration of King Charles II in 1660 and the Great Reform Act of 1832. Although the shape and status of ghost beliefs was certainly influenced by the political settlement of Restoration England, my start point of 1660 is justified by the religious, social and intellectual changes that accompanied this political watershed, and in which the legitimacy of ghost beliefs was revived as part of myriad attempts to extinguish painful memories of civil war and republican government.

I have covered a period of one hundred and forty years in this study partly due to the nature of the source material available, but primarily to capture for the reader a sense of the non-linear, ongoing and cyclical process by which ghost beliefs and ghost stories were degraded, re-appropriated and transformed in public and private discourses. The theory of survivals articulated by Ronald Hutton is therefore of limited value in explaining the persistence of ghost beliefs post-1660, which owed less to the dwindling mental landscapes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than to the specific religious, social, political and economic realities of eighteenth-century England.<sup>54</sup> It was the contested cultural atmosphere of the years 1660 to 1800 that made men and women willing and able to negotiate a place for ghost beliefs. Although the evidence presented in this study has some projections into the early nineteenth century, the years immediately following the outbreak of the French Revolution mark a more natural break in the cultural history of eighteenth-century England than the legislative manoeuvrings of 1832.

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<sup>54</sup> Hutton, ‘The English Reformation and the Evidence of Folklore’, *Past and Present*, pp.92-95.

My focus on English rather than British ghost stories requires justification given the current historiographical trend towards integrating the histories of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland in a period that, according to Linda Colley, witnessed the forging of the British nation in both political and cultural terms.<sup>55</sup> The first and most practical reason for my concentration on England is due to the sheer volume of ghost stories that circulated in this period. An analysis of British ghost stories in the long eighteenth century is a worthwhile project but one that lies beyond the scope of this present study. The methodological difficulties of synthesising English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish ghost stories are however more foundational to the chosen structure of this thesis. For much of the period under study here the union of 'Britons' was of a largely political nature and significant differences in the religious and cultural contours of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland persisted throughout the eighteenth century. Although Linda Colley was right to emphasise the common Protestantism of many Britons as a point of unity, particularly during the period of 'Protestant ascendancy' in Ireland, the vitality of Scottish Presbyterianism as well as Episcopalian and Catholic Highland support for the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745 mark key points of disjuncture with the prevailing religious cultures of eighteenth-century England.<sup>56</sup> Since this thesis emphasises the links between ghost stories and the specific confessional formations and theologies of English Protestants, there is a danger of drawing too many similarities between the four kingdoms. Furthermore, a British survey may run the risk of obscuring the rich tradition of folk tales that were particularly evident in Ireland and Wales, with the latter maintaining a peculiar hybrid between ghosts and fairies throughout this period.<sup>57</sup> Having said all this, I have incorporated some ghost stories from Ireland, Scotland and Wales but only when they are printed in England and are therefore

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<sup>55</sup> L. Colley, *Britons Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> J. Gregory and J. Stevenson (eds), *Britain in the Eighteenth Century, 1688-1820* (London, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> E. Jones, *A Relation of Apparitions in the Principality of Wales* (Trevecca, 1780).



assumed to have particular relevance. The exchange of ghostly tales within Britain was especially marked in the second half of the eighteenth century, no doubt facilitated by the rapid expansion of printing presses throughout the four kingdoms. The ghost stories of James Hogg are particularly interesting for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and highlight important cultural affinities within the Border regions, rather than a straightforward division between Scottish and English beliefs and tastes. Nonetheless, this period also witnessed the importation of ghost stories from the European continent and from a wide variety of colonial ports that are discussed in the final chapter of the thesis and that underline the point that 'English' cultural identity was not simply shaped by a sense of Britishness. Any straightforward analysis of "British" ghost stories would therefore be somewhat artificial, oversimplifying important distinctions in the narrative traditions of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and neglecting the complex processes of cultural formation.

## **VII Organisation**

This thesis has been organised in a largely chronological fashion and is split into three blocks of time, from 1660-1700, 1700-1750 and 1750-1800. This lengthy time-span and segmentation is intended to incorporate a sense of both continuity and change in the shape of eighteenth-century ghost beliefs and in the shifting form and content of ghost stories. As I have already stated, this is not a story of progressive disenchantment, and I hope that the reader will share my own understanding of the non-linear nature of the transformations, recycling and redefinitions to which ideas about ghosts were subjected. Reflecting the emphasis of this thesis on patterns of production, circulation and consumption of ghost stories, different chapters introduce the various genres of print in which ghost stories surfaced, suggesting the points at

which different genres became more influential than others. In so doing, I assume an important relationship between literary genres and historical change. Each chronological block incorporates two chapters that juxtapose polemical representations of ghosts with the everyday relevance of these narratives. The division between private and public representation is necessarily artificial but is intended to highlight interaction rather than reinforcing divergence.

Chapters one and two cover the years 1660 to 1700 and they should be read as two halves of a whole since they introduce the key dichotomy that runs throughout this thesis – the ghost story as a desirable material product and as a flexible imaginative resource. The first chapter examines the rehabilitation of ghost stories within the intellectual discourse of Restoration England. Focusing on the legacies of Civil War and Interregnum, this chapter discusses the process of deconfessionalisation to which ghost stories were subject, the relation of these narratives to the institutional fortunes of the Church of England and their appropriation as vehicles of clerical reform. Chapter two examines how and why these clerical strategies may have been successful, focusing on ghost stories within the buoyant marketplace of cheap print. This chapter addresses the question of access to ghost stories, and examines how a variety of authors and publishers constructed ghost stories to persuade and entice readers. Discussion focuses on the material culture of cheap printed ghost stories, the mixed audiences to which they appealed and the interrelationship of oral and literate cultures.

Chapters three and four cover the years 1700-1750. Chapter three is centred on a Canterbury ghost story that became the most famous of the eighteenth century and its configuration in oral communities, in manuscript and in a whole variety of printed texts. It figures the ghost story as an important bridge between local and national cultures and highlights the mutual exchange between learned and unlearned



conceptions of ghosts. This is the only chapter of the thesis based on a detailed case study and it is valuable for tracing the transformation and reinterpretation of the same narrative over a long span of time. Through an analysis of Daniel Defoe's involvement with the episode, this chapter also addresses the complex relationship between 'fiction' and 'reality' in the eighteenth-century ghost story. Through the medium of the periodical press, chapter four situates reactions to the Canterbury ghost in a wider context, tracing the impact of Enlightenment thought, assessing the influence of discourses of politeness and the drive for social distinction. These developments are linked to the migration of ghost stories to new fictional spaces, the fit of ghost stories with notions of interiority, the sublime and Romanticism in anticipation of gothic fictions of the later eighteenth century.

Chapter five focuses on the years 1750-1800 and tracks the fluctuating status of ghost stories through the lens of confessional tension and political transformation. It discusses the role of ghost stories in forging moments of confessional conflict and unity between Methodist and Anglican ministers and in relating the revived status of ghost stories to anti-Catholic and loyalist discourses in the years leading up to the French Revolution. Polemical renunciations of ghost stories are juxtaposed with pastoral appropriations of these narratives at the parish level. The final chapter of the thesis is a detailed examination of the relevance of ghost beliefs and ghost stories within everyday life in the closing years of the eighteenth century. It examines the places and spaces in which ghost stories were told, the motivations of those that narrated them and the reasons behind the perennial reproduction of these tales. This chapter revisits many of the themes that arise in earlier sections, but is weighted towards the close of the eighteenth century, examining how ghost stories benefited from an early phase of industrialisation, from patterns of migration, and from the physical processes of overseas expansion. What emerges from this study is a sense of

the durability of ghost beliefs as expressed through the medium of ghost stories. The disjuncture of these narratives with certain trends in eighteenth-century life and thought should not be denied, but at the same time the ways in which ghost stories complemented the particular themes and problems of the long eighteenth century can no longer be ignored. Though by no means comprehensive, I hope that this thesis will go some way towards reasserting the historical value of ghost stories and to enhancing our understanding of the contested cultural landscapes of English society in the age of reason.



## Chapter One

### Reclaiming Ghosts in Restoration England

On Wednesday 1 June 1692, a young man, about fifteen years of age, went to his bed. He had no sooner lain down than he heard 'a Hand sweeping on the wall'. Then it came 'with a rushing noise on his beds-head' and 'stroaked him over the face twice very gently'. Opening his eyes he saw before him 'an apparition of a woman cloathed in black apparel'. Following this eerie encounter, other members of his family reported seeing the apparition 'in the same room with a lighted candle'. Perplexed by these unexplained visits the mistress of this 'Civiliz'd Family' wrote to the editors of the bi-weekly periodical the *Athenian Mercury* desiring to know 'what should be the occasion of the disturbance' and 'whether it be advisable to ask the question of the apparition?'<sup>1</sup> Samuel Wesley (father of John), Church of England Minister and co-editor of the *Mercury*, advised the woman to speak to the ghost, find out its purpose and discover how it might be satisfied.<sup>2</sup>

The status of ghosts was highly contested in the religious polemic of post-Reformation England and so Samuel Wesley's advice in this episode might appear surprising. His interest in this haunting, however, neatly epitomises a rehabilitation of ghost stories in Restoration England that peaked in the 1690s and which forms the subject of this chapter. The years 1660-1700 saw ghost beliefs and ghost stories restored to public prominence thanks to their congruence with the religious, political, intellectual and social imperatives that followed Charles II's return to the throne. Although the reality of returning ghosts was not universally accepted, the Restoration period arguably produced the most energetic and public defence of ghost beliefs and ghost stories that Protestant England had ever seen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Athenian Mercury*, No. 28 (London, 1692).

<sup>2</sup> Although individual editorial responses were anonymous, questions relating to religion were most likely to be answered by Samuel Wesley.

The distinctive importance of ghost stories in this period will be described under three main headings. Firstly, the increasingly common adoption of ghost stories by Anglican, and especially Latitudinarian ministers will be examined to show how and why these narratives became so relevant to the religious ideologies of the newly restored Church. Shorn of popish and 'enthusiastic' associations, linked to sound theological tenets and promoted by eminent clergymen, ghost stories would play an important role in shaping the most significant religious battle of the Restoration period, and perhaps of the long eighteenth century itself - the struggle for a balance between revelatory and natural religion, between a faith of the heart and one of the head.

Secondly, the intellectual relevance of ghost stories will be established by examining the work of Henry More and Joseph Glanvill. Ghost stories were compatible with the Latitudinarian theology of these men, but they also gave impetus to one of the most important intellectual developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the growth of natural philosophy. Ghost stories became legitimate subjects for philosophical inquiry and proved invaluable to a fledgling 'scientific' community that was seeking to justify new empirical inquiries into the natural and preternatural worlds.

The final section of this chapter again highlights the relevance of ghost stories to contemporary religious discourses but shifts away from the public stage to examine the pastoral uses to which these narratives were put. Discussion will focus on the 1690s when ghost stories were employed as weapons in a clerical campaign to stamp out vice and immorality among the laity and to revitalise Christianity at grass roots level. This reforming project cut across denominational boundaries, complicating the simplistic categories of 'conformist' and 'nonconformist' imposed by the Act of Uniformity (1662) and highlighting the Church of England's failure to



grant indulgence to men with very similar theological outlooks. Richard Baxter's *The Certainty of the World of Spirits* (1691) will be used to highlight clerical engagement with lay perceptions of ghosts that filled the pages of John Dunton's long-running periodical the *Athenian Mercury* (1691-97). Taken together, these texts point to the devotional utility of ghost stories, to the shifting priorities of Restoration Protestantism that saw ghost stories publicly reinstated as legitimate sources of spiritual reflection, and to a shared interest in ghost stories by men and women of different social ranks, albeit for a variety of reasons.

## **I The Radical Legacy**

The characters responsible for the renewed propagation of ghost stories were mostly educated men, but their engagement with these narratives served different interests and objectives. What they all shared, however, was revulsion at the religious, political and social turmoil generated by the Civil Wars and Interregnum. The breakdown of ecclesiastical and civil society along with the spread of radical religious ideas led to an intellectual backlash by a broad spectrum of clergymen, polemicists and natural philosophers that helped to regenerate interest in preternatural phenomena. In many ways the identity of the Restoration elite was forged by the Puritan revolution of the 1640s and 1650s and the events of these years provided the immediate impetus for polemical engagement with ghost stories. Radical religious ideas were perceived as the chief enemies of a lawful and godly society. This was confirmed by the activities of sectarian groups including Ranters, Diggers, Quakers, Muggletonians, Baptists, Seekers and Fifth Monarchy Men who, free from clerical guidance after the abolition of episcopacy and the church courts, rejected the authority of Church government and challenged established ideas about the reality and nature of heaven, hell and even of God.



This was no lunatic fringe and many of these idealists were motivated by distaste for the fundamentals of Protestant, and particularly Calvinist teaching. The avowed infallibility of Scripture emphasised by early Protestant reformers led to close and creative readings of the Bible in the hands of freethinking radicals. The Book of Revelation was interpreted literally by the Fifth Monarchy men who prepared for the arrival of a new millennium; others treated its stories as mere allegories, or rejected its authority entirely in favour of a guiding inner light.<sup>3</sup> However, the most consistent criticism was directed towards the Calvinist scheme of salvation. The psychological torment that often resulted from the doctrine of double predestination led Quaker George Fox and Fifth Monarchist John Rogers to doubt the benevolence of God and eventually to question the existence of hell. Meanwhile, the Digger Gerrard Winstanley believed that religion served only a repressive social function, designed to distract men from their poor situation on earth and so he rejected the physical reality of an afterlife altogether.<sup>4</sup> These tenets posed threats to both the civil and religious establishment; the Diggers seized common lands at St. George's Hill to establish an independent commune, whilst the Quakers caused outrage through the refusal of hat honour and the use of 'mechanick preachers'.<sup>5</sup> The ultimate failure of these radicals to secure enduring social, political or spiritual reformation was less important to contemporaries than the radical attempt to re-imagine the world in which they lived. If England was not completely 'turned upside down' by 1660, civil war radicals had left an indelible mark that shaped the priorities of Restoration writers, eager to restore peace and stability to civil and religious life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down, Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, 1991), p.182.

<sup>4</sup> C. Hill, 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution', in J.F. McGregor & B. Reay (eds), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1988). See also C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, pp.151-183.

<sup>5</sup> C. Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p.15, 233.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus, or, Full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions* (London, 1681).

## II Restoration and Re-enchantment

Keith Thomas and Ronald Finucane have tackled Restoration-era ghost beliefs as part of broader chronological surveys, but little has been said about the preternatural world in relation to the institutional fortunes of the Church. This historiographical gap needs to be filled and the excesses of mid-seventeenth century England provide the key to the re-adoption of ghost stories by ministers of the newly restored Church of England. As John Spurr rightly suggests, the Church was 'on the defensive' in the early years of its restoration, internally divided and desperate to reestablish its relevance and authority at the heart of English society. The religious and political orthodoxies of the new regime were fashioned in opposition to the 'enthusiasm' of the Puritan revolution and these events did much to reaffirm the value of clerical supervision, theological moderation and religious conformity, which became key priorities for Anglican ministers seeking to forge a new identity for the Church. In many ways, ghost stories interacted with these goals, helping to shape a new theological outlook that comprehended a healthy balance of both reason and revelation and attacking the twin spectres of 'Atheism' and 'Sadducism' that were lambasted in pulpit and print as the most monstrous perversions of the Christian faith.

Broadly defined, the label 'atheist' was applied not only in its modern-day sense to the denial of divine existence, but more regularly to a range of heterodox religious views and to displays of licentiousness that were accounted 'practical atheism' – a catch-all term for those who transgressed the moral and behavioural codes of Christianity.<sup>7</sup> A 'Sadducee' referred to anyone who denied the resurrection of the body and the existence of spirits, tenets that were perceived as inevitable precursors to the denial of God and Christianity. As Michael Hunter suggests, the

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<sup>7</sup> For fuller exploration of the concept of 'atheism', see M. Hunter, *Science and Society in Restoration England* (Cambridge, 1981), chapter 6.



perceived spread of 'atheism' in Restoration England was greatly exaggerated by contemporaries who used the label as a polemical tool with which to attack their enemies. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that genuine fear of irreligion and immorality did exist on some level and the publication of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* in 1651 did little to calm these anxieties since it offered firm theoretical foundation to materialist religious philosophies, which rejected the reality of divine intervention.

It was no coincidence then that Anglican ministers were among the most enthusiastic supporters of ghost stories because these narratives provided a particularly dramatic defence against extreme beliefs, representing visible and immediate proof of divine intervention, the immortality of the soul and the reality of an afterlife. Joseph Glanvill, vicar of Bath and Chaplain in Ordinary to Charles II considered ghost stories to offer 'standing evidence' against both atheists and Sadducees.<sup>8</sup> In his *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences* (1697), the vicar of Walberton in Sussex, William Turner, eagerly catalogued a number of ghost stories as well as other providential phenomena which he believed was 'one of the best Methods' to refute 'the abounding Atheism of this Age'.<sup>9</sup> Turner dedicated his book to John Williams, Bishop of Chichester who may well have approved of his efforts. Moreover, Turner's publication was a collaborative effort, since this collection of providences was begun by the Reverend Matthew Poole some thirty years earlier.

Ghost stories did more than defend against 'atheists', however, and churchmen often credited these relations because they offered proof of the most fundamental Christian beliefs. 'GOD is a Spirit' argued Turner and to deny that a

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<sup>8</sup> J. Glanvill, *A Blow at Modern Sadducism in Some Philosophical Considerations About Witchcraft* (London, 1668), pp.115-117.

<sup>9</sup> W. Turner, *A Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences* (London, 1697), author's introduction.



vital spirit world existed was therefore to deny that God himself existed.<sup>10</sup> In 1678 Ralph Cudworth was similarly optimistic about the relevance of ghost stories to orthodox Christian beliefs when he claimed in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* that 'If there be once any visible ghosts or spirits acknowledged as things permanent...it will not be easy for any to give a reason why there might not be one supreme ghost also, presiding over them all and the whole world'.<sup>11</sup> In the same year the Anglican divine Benjamin Camfield reaffirmed Cudworth's emphasis on the relationship between ghost stories and the Trinitarian consensus of orthodox Restoration theology. The denial of spirits, he believed, led inevitably 'to the dethroning of God, the supreme Spirit, and Father of Spirits'.<sup>12</sup> Ghost stories were thus explicitly linked to the basic Christian doctrines of immortality, resurrection and the tripartite division of the Godhead – beliefs that remained fundamental to the Anglican faith throughout this period. Fervent propagation of ghost stories showed that the religious fervour of the preceding decades had not disappeared, but was instead redirected towards the defence of the Church and of Christianity itself. Along with a series of attempts to enforce religious conformity and to reassert the value of clerical mediation, ghosts proved to be crucial weapons in a battle to re-enchant England, at least partially.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, the drive towards religious moderation assumed a number of different forms and the appropriation of ghost stories was by no means universal. Samuel Clarke, John Toland, Anthony Collins and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury were leading figures of an amorphous group of thinkers often termed 'Deists'. The most effective antidote to religious fanaticism they believed was to advance its

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<sup>10</sup> Turner, *A Compleat History*, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), p.642.

<sup>12</sup> B. Camfield, *A Theological Discourse of Angels and their Ministries* (London, 1678), p.172.

<sup>13</sup> Fear of these heresies was evidenced by a series of measures against nonconformity in this period. See P. Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp.40-43 and J. Spurr, 'Religion in Restoration England', in L. Glassey (ed.), *The Reigns of Charles II and James II & II* (London, 1997), pp.92-94.

opposite – a sober brand of natural religion. In an attempt to demonstrate the rational foundations of religion, Samuel Clarke tried to prove the existence of God not through Scripture but by a method ‘as near to Mathematical, as the nature of such a Discourse would allow.’<sup>14</sup> Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred History of the Earth* (1681) included an explanation of the Flood based on mechanical principles,<sup>15</sup> whilst John Wilkins held that astronomy proved ‘a God and a providence’ and ‘incites our hearts to a greater admiration and fear of His omnipotency’.<sup>16</sup> Deists varied in the intensity of their commitment to natural theology; early adherents sometimes preserved belief in the immortality of the soul but often rejected revelation along with the need for divine intervention. Lord Shaftesbury was one of Deism’s more extreme proponents, condemning religious excess of any kind,<sup>17</sup> whilst John Toland’s provocative *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) claimed that neither God nor His revelations were above the understanding of human reason.

Arguably, Deism was never widely accepted in England and its popularity peaked in the later eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In the late seventeenth century John Toland’s work provoked a number of scathing responses that condemned it as the most complete rejection of revelation since Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. As vivid manifestations of heavenly intervention and the afterlife of the soul, ghosts were naturally denied a place in Hobbes’ schema. He described them as mere ‘Idols, or Phantasms of the braine’ and they were similarly rejected by Deist writers.<sup>19</sup> Natural religion began as a logical counterpart to the more emotional anti-dogmatic faith of the Pietists, yet in the eyes of men like Sir Thomas Browne, Isaac Barrow and John

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<sup>14</sup> S. Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (London, 1705).

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Hunter, *Science and Society*, p.173.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in R.S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Boston, 1958), p.34.

<sup>17</sup> A. Ashley Cooper, ‘A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, to My Lord \*\*\*\*\*’ (1708), in L.E. Klein, ed., *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> See E.A. Livingstone, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by R.E. Flathman (London, 1997), p.247.



Mapletoft, it went too far in its denial of agency and mystery to God and by downplaying the spiritual teachings of the Christian faith.<sup>20</sup>

The growth of the so-called Cambridge Platonists was another important intellectual movement that shaped the theological outlook of the Restoration Church along with more positive attitudes towards ghosts. Ralph Cudworth and Henry More were founding members of the Platonist movement and Joseph Glanvill came to sympathise with their beliefs during his time at Oxford University. It is no coincidence that all three men were chief figures in the renewed circulation of ghost stories in Restoration England because their particular brand of religious philosophy was sufficiently flexible to integrate ghost beliefs with Church doctrine. Platonists accorded less significance to dogmatic truth, ritual and church government and emphasised the essentials of religion rather than its external forms. The simplified moral theology associated with the movement also reflected a dilution of strict Calvinist orthodoxies and a revived interest in Arminian theology that laid greater stress on the value of human agency in faith and worship. These values were also used to amend the rigid schema of salvation advanced by Calvinist theology, replacing its precepts with a more liberal belief in a dynamic afterlife. The work of More and Glanvill will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but for now it is important to note that the theology of these men, initially labelled 'Latitudinarian' as a term of abuse, would go on to achieve much greater prominence within the Church, especially among those who sought to heal the clerical divisions imposed by the divisive terms of the Clarendon Code.

James and Margaret Jacob have asserted that latitudinarianism became 'the defining ecclesiastical mode of the Whig settlement after 1688' and Richard Kroll

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<sup>20</sup> Westfall, *Science and Religion*, pp.146-161.



similarly labelled it 'a virtual orthodoxy after 1688'.<sup>21</sup> Latitudinarians comprehended a wide spectrum of polity and ways of worship in their theology and according to one of their chief apologists, Edward Fowler, Bishop of Gloucester (1691-1714), ghost stories were an important part of this conciliatory outlook. In his *Free Discourse on the Principles and Practice of certain Moderate Divines... called Latitudinarians* (1670), Fowler defended a practical, moral theology that was relevant to the concerns of everyday life and which underlined the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. Ghost stories fitted neatly with this approach and Fowler supplied his friend Henry More with a regular stream of them, many of which were included in More's edition of *Saducismus Triumphatus*. The dissenting physician Henry Sampson approvingly described Fowler as 'a great collector of such storys & others of like importance to prove the Being of Spirits'.<sup>22</sup> The Deist apologist Lord Shaftesbury was less complimentary, referring to Fowler as 'a zealous Defender of Ghosts' who was able to 'extend his faith so largely as to comprehend in it not only all scriptural and traditional miracles, but a solid system of old wives' stories'.<sup>23</sup> In response Fowler did not deny the accusation, but instead underlined the limits of human knowledge about the immaterial world. 'We know not well the System of the Invisible World, the Laws, Permissions, Powers, or Varieties of it; and how easy it is, in certain Cases, for them to play their Pranks, or busy themselves amongst Men'. Nonetheless, Fowler claimed that he was certain 'of both the existence and activity of certain unseen spirits'.<sup>24</sup> The adoption of ghost stories by certain Latitudinarian theologians thus brought them closer to mainstream Anglicanism than has previously been

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<sup>21</sup> James and Margaret Jacob cited in R. Kroll, R. Ashcraft and P. Zagorin (eds), *Philosophy, Science, and Religion in England 1640-1700* (Cambridge, 1994), p.2. Kroll cited in Kroll, Ashcraft and Zagorin, *Philosophy, Science and Religion*, p.2.

<sup>22</sup> P. Elmer, Valentine Greatrakes, the Body Politic and the Politics of the Body in Restoration England (Unpublished Manuscript, Open University), p.86.

<sup>23</sup> Cooper, 'A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm', in Klein, ed., *Characteristics* (Cambridge, 1999), p.5.

<sup>24</sup> E. Fowler, *Reflections upon a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm to my Lord \*\*\*\*\** (London, 1709), p.63.

acknowledged. Moreover, a number of Latitudinarians also shared an interest in natural philosophy, and as I will argue in the next section, the endeavour to find a *modus vivendi* between empiricist philosophies and revelatory religion assisted in fashioning a more positive relationship between Protestantism and the returning spirits of the dead.

**III Natural Philosophy**

Stuart Clark, Richard Westfall and Michael Hunter have reconfigured the historical relationship between the ambitions of natural philosophers and the status of revelatory religion, a relationship, which was once thought so corrosive.<sup>25</sup> In line with this historiographical shift, the connection between natural philosophy and ghost beliefs must also be re-examined. The long-term implications of increased ‘scientific’ knowledge for the status of ghosts will be discussed in detail in chapter four but here the years 1660-1700 will be addressed, when empirical investigations revitalised interest in ghosts rather than undermined it.

The work of the poet and theologian Henry More combined curiosity about metaphysics with a healthy appetite for ghost stories. His interest in ghosts was both polemical and personal and began at an early age. Raised as a Calvinist and plagued by fears of damnation as a young boy, More later reacted against the rigid principles of predestinarian thought during his time at Christ’s College, Cambridge. As discussed above, he put forward a more liberal theology that concentrated on moral values and introduced an element of free will into the process of salvation. Along with fellow Platonist Ralph Cudworth, More sought to reconcile religion with

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<sup>25</sup> Clark, *Thinking with Demons*; Westfall, *Science and Religion*; Hunter, *Science and Society*.



science and faith with reason and to steer a middle ground between healthy belief in an active spirit world and utter incredulity.<sup>26</sup>

Ghosts formed a crucial part of More's vision of a "dynamic" afterlife and drawing on the vocabulary of Restoration polemicists, he set out to refute Thomas Hobbes' claim that contemplation of the spirit world was futile by proving that the human mind was indeed capable of knowing immaterial substance. Henry More was among the most advanced thinkers of his generation and one of a number of natural philosophers who believed that the primary role of 'science' was to glorify God by studying his creations on a scale hitherto unknown. The English naturalist and botanist John Ray echoed More's thoughts in a series of lectures delivered at Cambridge in the 1650s, which were later published under the fitting title *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691). Henry More was convinced that science had the capability to strengthen belief in the existence and benevolence of God by throwing light on the workings of the preternatural world. The existence of ghosts was, moreover, intrinsic to More's religious and philosophical outlooks; there was no saying so true in Metaphysics, he claimed as 'No Spirit, No God'.<sup>27</sup> He was particularly excited by the potential of Robert Boyle's air-pump to prove his hypothesis of an 'Immaterial Being that exercises its directive Activity on the Matter of the World'<sup>28</sup> and his own efforts to support this conclusion would also be achieved by empirical methods.

More investigated and catalogued what he considered to be legitimate ghost sightings, helped in his endeavour by friend and unofficial pupil Viscountess Anne Conway. This was a supreme act of empiricism: ghosts had to exist argued More,

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<sup>26</sup> For full biographical details see Sarah Hutton, 'More, Henry (1614-1687)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19181> (accessed 21 Feb 2005)].

<sup>27</sup> H. More, *Antidote of Atheism, or An Appeal to the Natural Faculties of the Minde of Man, whether there be not a GOD* (London, 1653), p.164.

<sup>28</sup> Hunter, *Science and Society*, p.181.



because so many people had seen them, often people of unquestionable character. Conway had an independent interest in ghosts that stemmed from her unorthodox belief that the universe was composed 'entirely of spirit, in which all creatures are modes of one spiritual substance emanating from God, and in which matter itself is a kind of congealed spirit.'<sup>29</sup> Conway's organic conception of spirit reflected the contracting boundaries between the natural and preternatural realms and within this schema, ghosts constituted one of the purest forms of this amorphous spiritual substance.

Conway's fascination with this subject led to a blossoming correspondence with Henry More, with whom she regularly swapped tales of ghostly appearances. In 1662 both were captivated by the story of Francis Tarverner, a porter to the Earl of Donegal in Ireland who claimed to have seen the ghost of James Haddock, a local man who had died five years previously. Haddock's ghost appeared a number of times on a mission to reclaim his son's inheritance from the usurping grasp of his new stepfather. Conway examined Tarverner in person, accompanied by the renowned Anglican divine and spiritual writer, Dr. Jeremy Taylor, who became Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore in 1661. Taylor's involvement is highly significant since he was a leading Restoration Latitudinarian and clearly willing to accommodate ghosts within his wide-ranging and heterodox theology.<sup>30</sup> Both Conway and Taylor were so convinced by Tarverner's story that the Bishop prepared a special spirit's catechism for Tarverner to quiz the ghost about its nature, origin and habitation the next time it appeared. Sadly when Tarverner attempted the

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<sup>29</sup> M. Hope Nicolson (ed.), *The Conway Letters, The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and their Friends 1642-1684* (Oxford, 1992), xv. Anne Conway's peculiar conception of spirit was constructed by a process of cultural bricolage. Important parallels can be drawn with the religious outlook of Carlo Ginzburg's Menocchio, the sixteenth-century Italian miller of the Friuli. C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms, The Cosmos of A Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. J. and A. Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1992), pp.27-44.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor was most famous for his devotional writings, especially *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* (London, 1650) and *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying* (London, 1651).

interrogation the ghost 'gave him no answer, but crawl'd on its hand and knees over the wall again, and so vanished in white with a most melodious harmony'.<sup>31</sup> Despite this disappointment, Henry More was convinced of the authenticity of the ghost; distinguished witnesses had verified it and More was particularly impressed that Tarverner's horse had taken fright at the approach of the ghost. The sensitivity of animals to the presence of ghosts was a traditional folkloric motif, and More was struck by the 'agonies Horses and Dogs are cast [into] upon their approach', judging these reactions 'a good circumstance to distinguish a reall Apparition from our own Imaginations'.<sup>32</sup> As will be discussed with regard to the work of Joseph Glanvill, investigations of ghosts opened up important spaces for the fruitful exchange of new philosophical learning with more established paths to knowledge, including oral traditions. Henry More included Tarverner's account in his 1681 revision of Joseph Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus*, which also featured the story of David Hunter, neat-herd to the Bishop of Down, a case that was similarly investigated by Conway and Taylor. In 1663 Hunter claimed to have seen the ghost of an old woman named Margaret who charged him to settle 'the charge unpayed at my Funeral' and to persuade her son to forego his dissolute life before it was too late.<sup>33</sup> Again the story came well attested but it also conformed to customary folkloric expectations of the occasions on which ghosts were likely to appear, often to settle unpaid debts and encourage godly living. These are themes that will be explored more fully in the following chapter but for now it is important to highlight the affinities between Henry More's acceptance of ghost stories and more popular conceptions that influenced his own thoughts on this subject. Indeed, More showed his sympathy with popular ghost beliefs and his divergence from Calvinist doctrine when he argued that

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<sup>31</sup> Nicolson, *Conway Letters*, p.175.

<sup>32</sup> More, *Antidote of Atheism*, p.147.

<sup>33</sup> H. More, *Saducismus Triumphatus* (London, 1683), Relation XXVII.



‘all created Spirits are Souls in all probability, and actuate some Matter or other.’<sup>34</sup> Ghosts were more likely to be souls of the dead rather than Angels or Demons he claimed, because they had ‘more affinity with mortality and humane frailty’ and were thus ‘more sensible of our necessities and infirmities, having once felt them themselves’.<sup>35</sup> By emphasising the corporeal qualities of ghosts, Henry More kept them closely tied to the physical world and rendered them worthy subjects of empirical investigation.

In the scientific community Joseph Glanvill, joined Henry More in his accreditation of ghost stories. Alongside his pastoral duties in Bath and at the court of Charles II, Glanvill was chief apologist for the Royal Society - the institution that encompassed most of the leading lights of natural philosophy. Glanvill had much in common with More; he was a convert to Platonic thought, shared the same integrated ‘religio-scientific’ worldview, and positioned spirits at the crux of his theological outlook.<sup>36</sup> ‘If the notion of a Spirit be absurd’ he wrote, ‘that of a GOD and a SOUL distinct from matter, and immortal, are likewise absurdities.’<sup>37</sup> Glanvill is most famous for his defence of ghosts in *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), where he joined the chorus of condemnation against ‘Atheists’ and ‘Sadducees’ in order to establish the validity of his own dabbling with natural theology. Glanvill collected evidence of ghostly activities to confirm the vitality of divine providence and to advance a more harmonious Christian outlook than that expressed by both ‘Atheists’ and Deists, one which comprehended both reason and revelation. His moderation however, was called into question by his somewhat eccentric ideas about the capabilities of witches, who he believed could ‘fly out of windows’ and ‘transform themselves into animals’. John Webster took issue with these conceptions and rejected the existence

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<sup>34</sup> More, *Saducismus Triumphatus*.

<sup>35</sup> More, *Antidote of Atheism*, p.145.

<sup>36</sup> Term coined by R.M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles, From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, 1981), p.12.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, p.7.

of witchcraft entirely. However, he did not challenge Glanvill's treatment of ghosts and was willing to confess his own belief in the same because they provided 'a sensible Argument of our Immortality'.<sup>38</sup>

Glanvill's advocacy of ghost stories stands alongside Henry More's contribution as one of the most comprehensive early attempts to apply precise principles of natural philosophy to the study of ghosts. His philosophy of spirits theorised about the vehicles of the soul, aerial casings or bodies that enabled ghosts and other immaterial spirits to travel long distances and so visit friends and relatives still living. Glanvill's theory also enabled scientists to bring ghosts more firmly into the realm of the preternatural than the supernatural, that is to say that ghosts were increasingly understood to have natural or physical qualities that were potentially explicable rather than representing something that was beyond the scope of nature.<sup>39</sup>

Glanvill thus brought a new optimism to 'The LAND OF ESPIRITS', which he considered to be 'a kind of America, and not well discover'd Region' that was ripe for greater human enquiry. Just as knowledge of the physical environment was advanced through experimentation and the study of natural phenomena, there was, claimed Glanvill, 'the same way of speculating immaterial nature, by extraordinary Events and Apparitions, which possibly might be improved to notices not contemptible, were there a Cautious, and Faithful History made of those certain and uncommon appearances.'<sup>40</sup>

Glanvill's experiments on immaterial substance began with the pressing of a Linen Bag 'in which some Spirit was moving'<sup>41</sup> but he also developed a consistent methodology for corroborating the authenticity of ghost stories through the

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<sup>38</sup> Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.35.

<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to Alexandra Walsham for suggesting this distinction. A. Walsham, 'The Disenchantment of the World? The Ambiguous Legacy of the Reformation' (Unpublished Paper, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> Glanvill, *Blow at Modern Sadducism*, pp.115-117.

<sup>41</sup> More, *Saducismus Triumphatus*.



interrogation of human testimony and by advancing the principle of context – identifying certain situations in which ghostly appearances were plausible and credible. This principle of context brought Glanvill and his readers into contact with more popular conventions about the appearances of ghosts, which is usefully illustrated by examining just a few of the stories that he was supported in his writing. Glanvill presented well-established philosophical, historical and scriptural rationales for the existence of ghosts in *Saducismus Triumphatus*, but the mainstay of his narrative was devoted to practical demonstration of their appearances, reported by a variety of people in the course of everyday life. True to his empirical commitments, Glanvill claimed that these ghosts were ‘fresh and near, and attended with all the circumstances of credibility’.<sup>42</sup>

The story of Thomas Goddard, a weaver from Marlborough in Wiltshire was one such account and it centred on the ghost of Edward Avon who appeared to Goddard, his son-in-law, on a number of occasions. Avon came on well-established errands to settle his debts in the community, to enquire after his family, to reassure his daughter Mary that he was in heaven - and to confess to the murder of a local man more than thirty years previously. Avon had fought with the man over money and run him through with his sword before burying him in a copse. Accompanied by a ‘Mastiff dog’ and eager to confess his sins, Avon’s ghost brought Thomas Goddard to the shallow grave and told him to dig for the bones of the murdered man and expose his crime to the world. In line with Protestant teaching, Avon’s ghost did not seek to alter its own spiritual state, but served instead as an example of pious repentance. Luckily for Joseph Glanvill, Thomas Goddard involved the local authorities who offered no objection to his story and even instructed him to question

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<sup>42</sup> Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, p.54.

the ghost about 'who was confederate with him in this murder'.<sup>43</sup> The participation of town officials strengthened Goddard's testimony but Glanvill also justified his support for Goddard's tale because he 'had the repute of an honest Man' and was 'a constant frequenter of the Church'. Glanvill overlooked the fact that Goddard had recently fallen off to the non-conformists and suffered from epileptic fits. These factors he claimed, did not impair Goddard's 'external senses' and nor could he have gained any personal benefit by fabricating such a story. The ghost moreover, materialized for godly reasons, to repent of his sins and to commend the value of moral living to his surviving relatives – a virtuous and credible context for a ghost to appear.

Glanvill justified the ghost of one Mr. Bower on the same principle of context, even though the only witness to its appearance was a highwayman who was in prison. This ghost came with a 'great gash cross his Throat almost from Ear to Ear, and a wound down his Breast' to expose his murderers who were in the same Guilford prison with the highwayman. News of this ghost reached a Surrey magistrate who turned out to be the cousin of the murdered Gentleman. The highwayman was questioned under oath and was adjudged to have no personal design, having ties neither with the accused nor the victim. Evidence from the ghost was not admissible in the court room but the suspicions aroused by its appearance eventually led to the trial and conviction of the two men accused and so satisfied deeply held principles of social justice.<sup>44</sup> The ghost of Mrs. Bretton who appeared to recover some lands for the poor and another which came to recover a field for his child were also morally justifiable and provided customary and righteous contexts for

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<sup>43</sup> William Bayly took Goddard's deposition and he was further examined by Lypyatt Major, town clerk Rolf Bayly and by Joshua Sacheverell, Rector of St. Peters in Marlborough. Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, Relation IX.

<sup>44</sup> More, *Saducismus Triumphatus*.



ghosts to appear; this is a recurrent theme in many ghost stories of this period.<sup>45</sup> They will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

As the historian R.M. Burns points out, Joseph Glanvill's reasoning formed part of a more general willingness shared by other members of the Royal Society to retain faith in the value of human testimony, despite the increasing exposure of its defects.<sup>46</sup> The Royal Society was established in 1660 and although it came to represent the pinnacle of philosophical achievement in the later eighteenth century, its members struggled for positive recognition in its early years. The Society was, moreover, firmly tied to the ideologies of the establishment, enjoying parliamentary support and receiving a Royal Charter in 1662. The move away from philosophical certainties was then, as Michael Hunter suggests, symptomatic of the Society's eagerness to exercise caution over the extent to which human knowledge could supplant the holy truths of Scripture.<sup>47</sup> Glanvill relied on the theory of 'probabilism' when judging the legitimacy of preternatural episodes, that is to say that ghosts probably existed because so many people had claimed to see them and some were of unquestionable character. Nevertheless, Glanvill was not only willing to credit the views of the learned but also left space open for the testimonies of less educated men and women. The palpable experiences of ordinary men, women and even children justified their narratives 'for in things of Fact' he claimed 'the People are as much to be believ'd, as the most subtile Philosophers'.<sup>48</sup> These reports were by no means inferior, he argued, because 'the manner of the Narrative is so simple, plain and rural, that it prevents all suspicion of fraud or Imposture in the Relatour'.<sup>49</sup> Glanvill thus created a space for the expression of customary, folkloric conceptions of ghosts alongside more philosophically sophisticated accounts of their activities. In fact,

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<sup>45</sup> Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, Relation XIV.

<sup>46</sup> Burns, *Great Debate on Miracles*, p.31.

<sup>47</sup> Hunter, *Science and Society*, p.180.

<sup>48</sup> J. Glanvill, *Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion* (London, 1676).

<sup>49</sup> Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, p.277.

Glanvill's rendition of Edward Avon's ghost appears to be based on a cheap pamphlet, *The Deemon of Marleborough*, published in 1674.<sup>50</sup> The similarities of the two accounts are striking and include vivid descriptions of the 'Clothes, Hat, Stockings and Shoes' worn by the ghost and the reactions of a mastiff dog. Glanvill's most famous case, *The Drummer of Tedworth*, also shared similar linguistic and explanatory structures to a successful black-letter ballad written by the undistinguished Abraham Miles.<sup>51</sup> When presented in different contexts and forms, the same ghost stories could flow through different texts and thereby reach a variety of audiences.

The empirical study of preternatural phenomena by More and Glanvill provided a fresh and legitimate forum for the discussion of ghosts in educated circles and essentially loosened them from negative associations with popery in service of more pressing priorities. The renewed distribution and estimation of these narratives certainly owed something to the work of these men, but the debt was also reciprocal. The association of ghost stories with traditional Christian doctrines and rejections of religious extremism – the stated priorities of mainstream Anglican polemic – provided a crucial cloak of legitimacy for new experimental methods that might otherwise have been more vulnerable to accusations of materialism and usurping divine authority. In the hands of less scrupulous men, the introduction of too great a degree of reason into religion could be used to question the spiritual truths of Christianity rather than uphold them. Part of the problem lay in the prioritisation of

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<sup>50</sup> This tale is also recounted in the ballad *The Disturbed Ghost* (London, 1675).

<sup>51</sup> The two accounts use strikingly similar language to describe the spirit at Tedworth and the providential interpretation given by Glanvill to the drumming matches that found in the ballad. A. Miles, 'A Wonder of Wonders', in H.E. Rollins (ed.), *The Pack of Autolycus* (Harvard, 1969), pp.118-119. Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*. Douglas Hay and Paul Craven have used a similar linguistic analysis to establish the transmission of British employment legislation in colonial statutory contexts. According to Hay and Craven, linguistic affinities suggest important patterns of borrowing and exchange, which can be applied to the language of ghost stories. D. Hay and P. Craven (eds), *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955* (North Carolina, 2004), pp.15-21.



secondary causes by natural philosophers, which was seen to detract from the primary and originating cause – God himself. William Turner understood the delicacy required in advancing the conclusions of empirical enquiries and in the preface to his book, he was careful to recommend that his readers ‘look over all these Secondary Causes, and little Instruments that are moved here below, and look up to, and fix his Eye upon the Spring and Original Wheel, that gives Motion to all the rest.’<sup>52</sup> Ghost stories afforded extra protection to natural philosophers by restoring the balance between rational, demonstrable religious principles and the revealed religion of God. Robert Boyle, one of the most eminent natural philosophers of his day, exercised caution by limiting the extent to which God became synonymous with nature. This attitude fitted well with his support for a ghost story from Masçon in France, to which I will return.<sup>53</sup> Ghost stories were thus used to promote a sensible engagement with natural philosophy, restraining its logical excesses by sustaining links with acceptable strands of Anglican theology.

#### **IV Political and Pastoral Objectives**

The final reason for the public rehabilitation of ghost stories in Restoration England stemmed from campaigns to restore confessional harmony and to reform the spirituality of lay people. The employment of ghost stories for didactic purposes was not unique to this period and Peter Marshall has outlined similar processes at work in Elizabethan and Jacobean England with Protestant ministers diluting or even reversing the orthodox rejection of ghosts at parish level to put preternatural episodes to sound pastoral use.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, these early accommodations largely took place

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<sup>52</sup> Turner, *Compleat History*.

<sup>53</sup> Boyle believed that the introduction of reason into religion, if unchecked threatened to reduce God’s role and powers outside of nature. See Hunter, *Science and Society*, p.182.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002), chapter 6. On the ambiguous legacy of the Protestant Reformation see A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999).

behind closed doors and on an *ad hoc* basis. It was not until the final decades of the seventeenth century that the relationship between Protestantism and ghosts blossomed into one of more thoroughgoing reciprocity, and was consistently acknowledged in public and private contexts. Furthermore, the 1690s witnessed a significant intensification of efforts to amend the religious beliefs and social behaviour of the multitude. Ghost stories were to play an important role in this because many clergymen believed, and not without some justification, that these narratives had a relevance to the daily practice of religious life and a significant emotional impact on the imaginations of the laity.

I have already outlined how and why ghost stories were co-opted into the service of the Church of England, but as I will suggest here, they were not exclusively shackled to the interests of the established Church. A number of Presbyterian divines took part in this reforming project, and were happy to promote the devotional utility of ghost stories, along with a few Congregationalists and dedicated laymen. This cross-confessional investment in ghost stories represented an ideological and practical bridge between the ill-defined categories of conformist and nonconformist. It is no coincidence that the main propagators of ghost stories were also committed to realising a theologically inclusive religious settlement that sought to reincorporate disenfranchised brethren into a united Protestant Church. In this endeavour Henry More, Joseph Glanvill and Anne Conway were joined by the likes of Simon Patrick, Samuel Hartlib and John Beale who were enthusiastic supporters of a vibrant spirit world. As Peter Elmer suggests, John Beale understood his engagement with ghost stories as part of a broader attempt to break down boundaries between Anglicanism and nonconformity by identifying common theological precepts on which they could agree.<sup>55</sup> The unified advocacy of ghost stories was

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<sup>55</sup> Elmer, Valentine Greatrakes, p.92.



partly an attempt to promote confessional reconciliation but a secondary and more significant motivation also rallied these men and women to support the legitimacy of ghost stories – the need to reform lay spirituality.

If ghost beliefs represented a potential solution to religious disunity they also appeared to highlight escalating trends of lay vice and immorality. ‘Irreligion...hath been still the companion of every Age’, wrote Charles Wolseley in 1672, yet ‘’Tis but of late that men come to defend ill living and secure themselves against their own guilt, by an open defiance to all the great maxims of Piety and Virtue’.<sup>56</sup> Wolseley blamed this newfound arrogance on Thomas Hobbes’ materialist legacy, correlating his advocacy of freethinking with ‘libertinism’ and ‘dissolute behaviour’. Thomas Bromhall similarly decried ‘iniquity, impiety, and dissolute living’ and specifically linked such immoral behaviour to the denial of ghosts and spirits in his *Treatise of Specters* – an unmistakable symptom of an atheist mindset.<sup>57</sup> New legislation against sin and vice lent further support to these polemical outbursts and in 1691 King William issued a Proclamation ‘for preventing and punishing immorality and profaneness’; a request from the House of Commons later that year demanded that the laws were fully enforced and that the Proclamation be read four times a year following Divine Service.<sup>58</sup> What is more, the regular appearance of departed souls was itself regarded as a sign of divine displeasure, sent to protest against episodes of sin and debauchery. As Peter Elmer argues, many clergy were agreed that instances of ghostly intervention proved that the nation was struggling ‘under some providential malaise, punishment no doubt for the sins of its people.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Wolseley, *The Reasonableness of Scripture-Belief* (London, 1672), cited in Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.34.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Bromhall, *A Treatise of Specters. Or, an History of Apparitions, Oracles, Prophecies, and Predictions* (London, 1658), p.343, cited in Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.34. Thomas Browne reaffirmed the centrality of believing in ghosts since those that denied them were he argued ‘a sort, not of Infidels, but Atheists’, Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.41.

<sup>58</sup> W.K. Lowther Clarke, *A History of the S.P.C.K.* (London, 1959), p.2.

<sup>59</sup> Elmer, Valentine Greatrakes, p.75.

For Anglican clergy, images of lay vice were not simply to be blamed on the spread of 'atheism'. These complaints disguised deeper fears that the Church had failed to reassert its influence at parish level despite the official restoration of its supremacy in 1662. Moreover, the status of the Church was reduced to 'established' rather than 'national' following William III's accession, and the prospect of religious toleration that was so distasteful to the so-called 'High Church' party throughout this period loomed ever larger after the concessions of the 1689 Toleration Act. The failure of the Church's push for religious uniformity had effectively killed off any prospect of Protestant unity and in many ways, it strengthened the independent identity and resolve of a new generation of Presbyterian clergy and nonconformist congregations who no longer sought accommodation within the Church, focusing instead on strengthening their own congregations and attracting new followers. For the hard-line Tory cleric, the prospect of a free marketplace of religion intensified confessional rivalries with Dissenters but also provided the motivation behind vigorous attempts to engage with the priorities of lay religion to secure their loyalty to the Church.

However, the years after 1689 saw the Latitudinarian party reign triumphant within the Church of England and they represented a stronger force within this reforming campaign, often with the help of their nonconformist counterparts. The theological outlook of the clerics that I described above emphasised the essentials of religious belief alongside the duties of repentance, piety and holy living, and as such allowed more harmonious relations with a large group of Dissenters – mainly Presbyterians - with whom they shared common ground. As N.H. Keeble and John Spurr have established, the arbitrary labels of 'conformist' and 'nonconformist' largely reflected disagreements over the structure of Church government, and there



was less doctrinal division between these men than has been commonly supposed.<sup>60</sup> In fact cross-denominational collaboration and friendships were maintained throughout the years 1660-1700. In the 1690s clergy from dissenting and conforming backgrounds worked side by side to establish Societies for the Reformation of Manners in London, Westminster and the provinces ‘for the effecting of a National Reformation’.<sup>61</sup> The same collaboration was also evident in the parallel spread of Religious Societies, which concentrated on the regeneration of personal religious beliefs instead of promoting the public face of religion. Dr. Thomas Bray blamed lay people’s immorality on ‘gross ignorance of the principles of the Christian religion’ and sought to improve their education by founding the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.) in 1699. Confessional rivalry may have intensified Protestant sponsorship of ghosts to a degree and some clergymen did purposely channel lay fascination with these creatures to secure pastoral loyalty. Nevertheless, cooperation was more characteristic than conflict, Latitudinarian and Presbyterian clergy were united in their concerns about spiritual apathy and in their hatred of irreligion and immorality. The circulation of ghost stories and their promotion as pastoral aids was one important expression of this collaboration.

The next section examines some of these tales in more detail, specifically comparing interpretations of ghost stories in the work of the Presbyterian divine Richard Baxter with the bi-weekly periodical the *Athenian Mercury*, edited by the Anglican minister Samuel Wesley. Both were published in the 1690s, a period which proved especially fertile for clerical appropriations of ghost stories. Taken together, they highlight the shared affinities between these tales and the dominant concerns of late-Restoration theology. More importantly, however, they emphasise the

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<sup>60</sup> N.H. Keeble, *The Restoration, England in the 1660s* (Oxford, 2002), pp.116-120. J. Spurr, ‘Religion in Restoration England’, p.106.

<sup>61</sup> Lowther Clarke counted 39 societies in London and Westminster alone, *History of the S.P.C.K.*, p.3.

importance of ghost stories as vehicles through which to engage with the religious beliefs of the laity, for as evidence from the *Mercury* suggests, these tales commanded a dramatic and unique place in the imagination of ordinary men and women.

## V Richard Baxter

In 1691 Richard Baxter's *Certainty of the World of Spirits* was first published in England. This tract was the final publication of Baxter's illustrious career and ghost stories were employed here to capture the attention of lay people, to shape their religious ideas and to encourage them to lead godly lives. Baxter's project was influenced by years of correspondence on the subject of ghosts with Henry More and Joseph Glanvill and his text provides one of the most illuminating examples of how ghost stories were transformed into clerical narratives in Restoration England.<sup>62</sup> Baxter borrowed from the rhetoric of these men to present his work in the language of orthodoxy. It was he claimed, a concerted attack on 'Atheists' and 'Sadducees' whose pernicious influence he suspected from a recent upsurge in licentious living. For those who placed their trust in demonstration alone, ghostly visitations gave immediate and persuasive evidence that religious skeptics had got it wrong.

However, Baxter was less interested in the polemical utility of ghost stories to undermine the philosophies of so-called 'atheists' than in the dramatic effect of these narratives as moral exemplars, denouncing acts of immorality (expressions of 'practical atheism') in the most dramatic fashion. True to his Puritan roots, he used these episodes to shake lay people out of spiritual lethargy, and to encourage the virtues of a godly life. As signs from a benevolent God who had a care to purge the

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<sup>62</sup> N.H. Keeble and G.F. Nuttall (eds), *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter* (Oxford, 1991).



sins of the faithful, Baxter allowed ghosts to take an active part in the process of salvation, which lay at the heart of individual religious experience.

The *Certainty of the World of Spirits* extended the potential uses to which tales of ghostly appearances could be put in legitimate religious contexts. Baxter was famed for dedication to his flock and it was for the more enduring devotional uses to which he put ghost stories that his work remains important. Baxter's appropriation of ghosts blended with the renewed popularity of Arminianism among Latitudinarian churchmen. Baxter described them as 'ingenious Men and Scholars'<sup>63</sup> and his sympathy with their theology was reflected in his attempt to reconcile the idea of a loving and benevolent God with the image of a cruel and vengeful Lord in his discussions of the preternatural world.

As Eamon Duffy suggests, Baxter's concern for the spiritual welfare of the uneducated was also shaped by his own theological outlook and particularly by his Puritan sympathies that were officially outlawed by the Church of England. In this context, Baxter's ghosts must be seen as part of an evangelising mission, encouraging moral reformation on this side of the grave, aiming to instil godly principles in his readers and pressing the need for self-examination and an introspective faith to prevent the appearance of evil spirits.<sup>64</sup> Baxter admonished his audience by claiming that evil spirits were more frequently seen than angelic ones, but those that were visited by the Devil's minions were not to despair but to look upon such appearances as a test of faith, a call to righteousness by a compassionate God without whose will and permission 'no Spirits can do any thing'.<sup>65</sup> In this sense Baxter used ghost stories to awaken sinners to the need for repentance – a trademark emphasis of Puritan pastoral activity.

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<sup>63</sup> Keeble, *The Restoration*, p.126.  
<sup>64</sup> E. Duffy, 'The Godly and the Multitude in Stuart England', *Seventeenth Century*, No. 1 (1985).  
<sup>65</sup> R. Baxter, *The Certainty of the World of Spirits fully evinced* (London, 1691), pp.3-4.

Baxter's treatise included several letters about one such terrifying ghost that haunted the house of Lieutenant Colonel Bowen in Glamorgan. Bowen rose to prominence in the army during the late civil wars and his occupation introduced him to mortalist philosophies that eventually led him to be labelled 'an absolute Atheist'. Bowen was not yet dead but so far he had led 'a careless and sensual Life' which was no doubt a reflection of his spiritual degeneracy since he denied the existence of an afterlife, of God and the Devil and accounted 'Temporal Pleasures all his expected Heaven'.<sup>66</sup> In December 1656 an apparition in Bowen's shape appeared to his wife when in her chamber one evening. The ghost requested conjugal favours but this 'Godly Gentlewoman' was not to be fooled since she was lately estranged from her husband and knew him to be in Ireland at that time. Nonetheless, this malicious spirit was not easily deterred and returned to torment the household on several occasions. That this was an evil spirit provoked by the sins of Bowen was not hard to fathom and Baxter underlined the point with descriptions of the spirit's violent antics and by including popular motifs of ghost stories in his commentary. When the spirit appeared, Mrs. Bowen felt something 'like a Dog under her Knees' that lifted her from the ground; the candles burned blue at its approach and the ghost introduced 'an unsufferable Stench' into the house 'like that of a putrified Carcase'. To combat this spirit Mrs. Bowen called on others to join her in prayer and when Mr. Miles (an Anabaptist Minister) and four other 'Godly Men' answered her plea the household rested peacefully. Maurice Bedwell, a minister at Swansea investigated the case and having quizzed Bowen's maidservant he judged her to be 'thoroughly Godly' and could find nothing to invalidate the tale. The opinions of learned and unlearned, clerical and lay combined to bring this relation to public notice and because the ghost had assumed the very form and countenance of Bowen, Baxter concluded that it

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<sup>66</sup> Baxter, *World of Spirits*, p.23.



brought a clear message from God that the atheist was headed straight for hell unless he repented.

If Bowen was a lost cause then a gentleman of rank from London who had fallen into 'the sin of drunkenness' offered a better prospect for reform. This man received numerous visits from a concerned ghost who knocked at his bed's head every time he lay down drunk. His brother, a sober and 'pious Man' and a member of Richard Baxter's congregation, resolved to watch while he slept and restrained his brother's hands 'lest he should do it himself'. He could only confirm the actions of this spirit however when a pair of shoes levitated from underneath the bed. Clerical guidance was sought and the sinner was brought before Baxter himself who interpreted the ghost as an urgent sign from God that the drunkard must kick his habit before it was too late. God clearly had a care of this man's soul and when Baxter asked him 'how he dare so sin again, after such a warning', the gentleman was sobered by his heavenly messenger and could offer no excuse for his wayward behaviour. Reflecting on this marvellous providence, Baxter was himself unsure what kind of spirit would take 'such a care of this man's soul'. 'Do good spirits dwell so near us? Or are they sent on such messages? Or is it his Guardian Angel? Or is it the soul of some dead friend, that suffereth, and yet, retaining Love to him, as Dives to his brethren, would have him saved?'<sup>67</sup> Baxter maintained his commitment to established Protestant orthodoxy by admitting the regular intrusion of angels and demons into the natural world. However, it is highly significant that he also allowed for the return of dead souls amongst the living, which as evidence from the *Athenian Mercury* suggests, was a commonly held belief among sections of the lay population.

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<sup>67</sup> Baxter, *World of Spirits*, p.60.

## VI The Athenian Mercury

The *Athenian Mercury* ran from 1691 to 1697 and set out to resolve any curious questions that its readers cared to submit. Unlike any other periodical of its generation, the *Mercury* was based around an interactive question and answer format; readers wrote in with real-life issues and the editors, John Dunton, Richard Sault and Samuel Wesley, addressed them in print. The readership of the *Mercury* is of course difficult, if not impossible to identify with absolute certainty. Nevertheless, there are clues to suggest that its audience was decidedly mixed. Dunton, Sault and Wesley certainly aimed at a broad social audience, ambitiously claiming that the reason for setting up the periodical was ‘to advance all knowledge, and diffuse a general Learning through the many, and by that civilize more now, in a few years, than Athens it self’.<sup>68</sup> The *Mercury* positioned itself in opposition to elitist institutions like the Royal Society that led G.D. McEwen to label it ‘an instrument of popular education’ because of its efforts to popularize learning through broad sections of society.<sup>69</sup> The target audience was by no means prescribed, but the editors sought specifically to engage people with little formal education, inquisitive women who wished to keep abreast of new advances in natural philosophy, or with any curious person that had a question to be resolved. Furthermore, in an effort to deter intellectual snobbery, the editors preserved reader anonymity for those who feared ‘appearing ridiculous by asking Questions’.<sup>70</sup> Those readers who can be identified included Sir William Temple, but the *Mercury* also featured anonymous contributions from maidservants who had managed to acquire a degree of literacy.

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<sup>68</sup> ‘The Epistle Dedicator, to the Gentleman of the Athenian Society’, *Athenian Mercury*, Issue 1 (London, 1691), p.10.

<sup>69</sup> G.D. McEwen, *The Oracle of the Coffee House, John Dunton’s Athenian Mercury* (Los Angeles, 1972), p.18. See also H. Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture, The Cultural World of the Athenian Mercury* (Aldershot, 2003).

<sup>70</sup> ‘The Epistle Dedicator’, *Athenian Mercury*, Issue 1.



The extent to which the *Mercury* can be described as a source of ‘popular’ opinion, however, remains unclear. Despite the active participation of readers in shaping the content of the *Mercury*, the editors did not simply reflect the opinions of their readers, but sought to influence, exaggerate or frame them in particular ways to maximize profit. John Dunton in particular was renowned for his commercial acumen, and his numerous publications often catered for a more insalubrious readership, designed to titillate rather than to edify. Nonetheless, the commercial success of the *Mercury* suggests that for those willing to pay a shilling on Tuesdays and Saturdays, this periodical offered something worth reading.<sup>71</sup>

As an Anglican minister and co-editor of the journal, Samuel Wesley answered questions relating to religion and much of his time was spent responding to queries about the topography of the afterlife, the future existence of the soul and about ghosts. ‘Do the Deceased walk?’, asked one reader in issue twenty-eight. ‘Where go the Souls of Good Men immediately after Death?’ ‘Where are the souls of men to remain till the last day?’ Was the soul ‘in an active or unactive state’ after its separation from the body?<sup>72</sup> These were just a few of the questions put to the *Mercury* by readers who were clearly unsure what lay in store for them beyond the grave. Protestant teaching on this subject was ambiguous and had failed to satisfy curiosity about the exact nature of life after death and these queries also suggest that the religious scepticism unleashed by the civil war had penetrated through the social ranks.

Queries concerning ghosts and the nature of the afterlife reflected this social diversity with contributors identified as gentlemen, gentlewomen and servants alike. It is clear from their contributions that confusion abounded as to the exact fate of body and soul following death and as a result, considerable slippage was envisaged

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<sup>71</sup> With the exception of the *London Gazette*, the *Athenian Mercury* enjoyed the longest publication run of any periodical of its generation.

<sup>72</sup> *Athenian Mercury*, No. 28 (1691).

between the natural and preternatural worlds. If the souls of the dead could not be definitively placed, then what was to stop them from returning to earth? The links between this world and the next had not been severed and ghosts continued to haunt *Mercury* readers (sometimes quite literally) throughout the six years of its publication. In fact the journal received so many tales of the wandering dead that its editors took the unusual step of devoting an entire issue to reports of their appearances. This issue was fittingly published on All Souls' Night 1691, and according to the editors it served a dual function: first, to reduce 'the many Proselytes of Sadducism and Hobbism amongst us', but also to give 'great satisfaction to all our Querists in general'.<sup>73</sup>

Evidence from the *Athenian Mercury* suggests that ministers like Richard Baxter were in tune with at least some of the religious priorities of the lay people given his emphasis on the relevance of ghost stories to everyday life. The *Mercury's* readers were less concerned with the precise theological status of ghosts than with the messages they brought about their own salvation and the future state of loved ones. In 1691 the *Mercury* reported the appearance of Mr. Lunt's ghost to his brother in Derbyshire. Having led a sinful life, Lunt now wished to provide a better example to his relation and asked that his brother 'woul'd go to one with whom [Lunt] had lived as a Servant, and demand some money which was due to him'. He was to give it to a woman in the same town 'whom he had promised marriage to, and got her with child' before deserting both his service and her. When the ghost offered to reward his brother for his efforts, the man insisted that he 'would ask nothing'.<sup>74</sup> The tale exemplified the moral fortitude of this poor man who prized the duties of Christian charity and familial obligation more than his own personal enrichment. In the style of a parable, ghost stories were promoted as moral exemplars, advancing a

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<sup>73</sup> *Athenian Mercury*, No. 10 (1691).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*



practical moral theology that was favoured both by Latitudinarian theologians and by Richard Baxter as a necessary supplement to an introspective faith.

As Peter Marshall and Frederick Valletta have shown, the upheavals of Reformation and abolition of Purgatory did not stop ghosts from appearing to the living and they continued to be invested with important religious and emotional meanings. Indeed it could be argued that the revised liturgy of post-Reformation England intensified individual preoccupation with the dead body and its future life.<sup>75</sup> By scrapping purgatory and prayers for the dead, Protestantism officially outlawed an extended process of mourning for the dead in which the living could play an active role.<sup>76</sup> Extra-liturgical comfort was sought and ghosts provided one outlet for expressions of loss by grieving relatives. The *Athenian Oracle*, a spin-off from the *Athenian Mercury*, printed a tale from Smithfield in London where the ghost of Mr. Watkinson appeared to his daughter about six months after his death to comfort her during her grieving.<sup>77</sup> This account was also considered a worthy source of reflection by Henry More and William Turner who included the case in their own works.<sup>78</sup> Other *Mercury* readers required similar assurance that the dead still remained connected to the living in some way. In June 1691 one reader asked ‘Whether separated Souls have any knowledge of the Affairs in this World?’ In issue twenty, another wondered if ‘we shall know our Friends in Heaven’ and ‘Whether the Departed have any Knowledge of, or ever concern themselves with the affairs of their Friends in this Life?’ To this last question, Wesley clearly recognised the use to which personal anxieties could be put, replying that ‘either some departed Souls, have particular Commissions... or that all of them have a Cognizance of our

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<sup>75</sup> P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, chapter 6. F. Valletta, *Witchcraft, Magic and Superstition in England 1640-70* (London, 2000), pp.80-81.

<sup>76</sup> Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p.128.

<sup>77</sup> *Athenian Oracle*, Volume IV (London, 1710), p.288.

<sup>78</sup> More, *Saducismus Triumphatus*. Turner, *Compleat History*.

Affairs.’<sup>79</sup> This response marks an important break with orthodox Calvinists of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England who consistently argued that departed souls had no awareness of events on earth in an effort to discourage saint worship.<sup>80</sup> Samuel Wesley judged that such queries did not indicate lingering affection for popery but instead reflected the desire to cling onto the dead by projecting aspects of social life into the next world.<sup>81</sup>

The comfort that family members and friends took from the appearances of departed souls was complemented by theological dilutions of Calvinist predestination. Fear and despair often resulted from what Joseph Mede termed that ‘black doctrine of Absolute Reprobation’.<sup>82</sup> His pupil Henry More ‘suffered terribly from the fear of hell’, as did Lodowick Muggleton and Samuel Hoard, all of which developed alternatives to the prospect of eternal damnation.<sup>83</sup> Over the course of the seventeenth century, a number of prominent divines responded to these anxieties by challenging the uncompromising doctrines of predestination and eternal torment to develop more benevolent ideas of salvation. Archbishop of Canterbury and Latitudinarian, John Tillotson, promoted a God ‘who was not obliged eternally to torment the wicked’. The eccentric William Whiston, Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, claimed that wicked souls would be annihilated rather than suffer hell’s torments in perpetuity<sup>84</sup> and Isaac Barrow backed up this annihilationist theory from scriptural precedent. Eternal torment he claimed represented ‘a severity of justice far above all example of repeated cruelty in the worst of men’.<sup>85</sup> For an increasing number of clergymen, the wrath of God that was so dramatically exercised in the

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<sup>79</sup> *Athenian Mercury*, Nos. 7, 20, 25 (1691).

<sup>80</sup> For detailed account see Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, pp.210-215.

<sup>81</sup> Philip Almond notes increasing images of spousal reunion in heaven in the later seventeenth century, which he ascribes to the growth of companionate marriage. Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.104.

<sup>82</sup> Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.25.

<sup>83</sup> Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.25, 44.

<sup>84</sup> Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.156. D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell, Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Chicago, 1964), p.9, 108.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Almond, *Heaven and Hell*, p.148.



plague visitation of 1665 and the Great Fire of 1666 was gradually tempered by descriptions and examples of his compassion. As a result, returning ghosts achieved greater acceptability as the confessional concerns of the learned intersected with the priorities of the laity.

In October 1691, the *Athenian Mercury* gave a very specific example of how ghosts soothed the anxieties created by an uncertain process of salvation. The journal printed an account from a gentlewoman whose son had taken 'ill courses' during his life. The lady's efforts to reprove her son had made some impact since the young man did eventually reform, but following his untimely death soon afterwards, this pious mother still feared that her son would be denied entrance to heaven as punishment for his sins. Convinced that his repentance had come too late, the lady was 'extreamly afflicted' and 'fear'd he was in Hell'. Her worries were allayed though when just a month later 'the young man's spirit came to his mothers bed' and reassured her that he was at rest.<sup>86</sup> William Turner was impressed by the details of this story, and it featured in his *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences*. Significantly, Turner recognised the devotional potential of certain ghost stories and thus recommended his treatise 'as useful to Ministers in Furnishing Topicks of Reproof and Exhortation' as well as 'to Private Christians for their Closets and Families'.<sup>87</sup> For Turner as for sections of the lay population, the precise ontological status of ghosts was less important than the more intimate spiritual and domestic purposes they served. If a repentant sinner could be welcomed into Abraham's bosom then it gave some hope to ordinary men and women that they might hope for a similar reward. Ghost stories soothed the anxieties of the living that feared for the fate of loved ones as well as providing practical guidance on how to

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<sup>86</sup> *Athenian Mercury*, No.10 (1691).

<sup>87</sup> Turner, *Compleat History*, title page.

avoid the fires of hell. What is more, they were easily overlaid with religious maxims that transformed these potentially frivolous tales into important clerical narratives.

If Richard Baxter and Samuel Wesley were convinced that a colourful spirit world lay on the other side of the grave then they were in good company. Baxter was joined in his attempts to re-enchant Restoration England by a network of clergymen who were similarly keen to promote godliness among the laity. Baxter's treatise printed tales from John Hodder, Minister of Hauke-Church in Dorset who told of 'the actings of Spirits in a House, yea, a Religious House of that Country, of which he was himself an Ear and Eye Witness'.<sup>88</sup> Thomas Tilson, Minister of Aylesworth in Kent told Baxter of an apparition at Rochester and as a postscript to his letter begged 'that God would bless your pious Endeavours for the Conviction of Atheists and Sadducees, and for the promoting of true Religion and Godliness'.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Protestant ministers were active in the marketplace of cheap print; a clergyman from Devon was the most likely author of a ghost story from Spraiton that was published in 1683. The adoption of ghost stories as clerical narratives also continued into the early eighteenth century; in 1709 a two-penny pamphlet describing the ghost or ghosts that appeared to Jan Smagge in Canvy Island was followed by a series of scriptural excerpts warning readers against the ungodly sins of avarice, ambition and pride.<sup>90</sup> In 1712 this was followed by a chapbook detailing the appearance of Edward Ashley's ghost in London, and it was accompanied by 'an excellent sermon preach'd by a Reverend Divine of the Church of England on that Miraculous Occasion'.<sup>91</sup>

So why did ghosts play such a key role in campaigns for godly reformation in the late seventeenth century? The Church of England was increasingly criticised over

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<sup>88</sup> Baxter, *World of Spirits*, p.88.

<sup>89</sup> Baxter, *World of Spirits*, p.147.

<sup>90</sup> *An Exact Narrative of Many Surprizing Matters of Fact Uncontestably Wrought by an Evil Spirit or Spirits, in the House of Master Jan Smagge* (London, 1709).

<sup>91</sup> *A Narrative of the Demon of Spraiton* (London, 1683). *The Wonderful and Strange Apparition and Ghost of Edward Ashley* (London, 1712).



the forms of Anglican worship that ‘failed to move or to satisfy’.<sup>92</sup> Oliver Heywood singled out ‘the ineffectualness’ of the liturgy as one reason for the growing popularity of dissenting congregations and the ‘sermon addiction’ that supposedly characterised the age relied on the unpredictable skills of individual clergymen. One way to engage the lay community and to diversify modes of Anglican worship was to adopt more lively vehicles of religious instruction and ghost stories helped to dramatise the familiar moral exhortations that emanated from the pulpit. When a Cambridge haunting captured local attention in the summer of 1694, the minister of the Round Church seized the opportunity ‘to make a long sermon the next Sunday to his people...and to tell them the whole story of the same.’<sup>93</sup> In 1691 a short chapbook told of the ‘dreadful ghost’ that appeared to John Dyer in Southwark. The ‘affrightful shapes’ assumed by the ghost were described with relish and the visual spectacle of the account was heightened by a crude woodcut of the ghost in its winding sheet. Dyer’s tale was given greater reverence however by the appendix of two prayers with which to combat the actions of malignant spirits. Despite the sensational details of the story, the Southwark ghost was judged a worthy vehicle through which to promote the practice and power that afforded divine protection.<sup>94</sup> As I suggest in the next chapter, ghost stories had the capacity both to entertain and to edify and this flexibility ensured commercial success in the competitive marketplace of print. Indeed the years 1660-1700 saw ghosts make more frequent appearances in ballads and cheap printed pamphlets than ever before or since, reflecting their prominence in the contemporary imagination.

By the final decade of the seventeenth century ghosts had been largely stripped of their popish associations thanks to contemporary fears of the spread of ‘atheism’

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<sup>92</sup> Spurr, in Glassey (ed.), *The Reigns of Charles II and James VII*, p.113.

<sup>93</sup> Spurr, in Glassey (ed.), *The Reigns of Charles II and James VII*, p.112. For ghost story in Cambridge see C. Jackson (ed.), *The Diary of Abraham De La Pryme*, Surtees Society, Volume LIV (Durham, 1870), pp.39-42.

<sup>94</sup> *A true relation of the dreadful ghost appearing to one John Dyer* (London, 1691).

in both its philosophical and practical expressions. This highly polemical context allowed the once ambiguous figure of the ghost to be convincingly re-clothed in a Protestant guise and for ghost stories to be more firmly linked to the political and religious ideologies of the establishment than at any time since before the Reformation. Furthermore, the status of ghost stories also benefited from a process of deconfessionalisation. Richard Baxter's efforts highlight the contribution that nonconformist clerics made to the rehabilitation of ghost stories in this period. Eamon Duffy also argues that ejected Presbyterian ministers like Baxter, were extremely active in the marketplace of cheap print. Ghost stories lent themselves to the objectives of these writers who hoped to evangelise and educate the unlearned in the fundamentals of the Christian faith.<sup>95</sup> The best example of this deconfessionalisation however, is to be found in the story of the Devil of Masçon. At the start of the seventeenth century a troublesome spirit haunted the house of French Protestant Minister François Perrault and went on to terrify the whole neighbourhood. Perrault, stirred ill-feeling in Masçon when he took possession of his house by law from a local woman, whose daughter 'prayed to God that she might return to the house after her death' to gain retribution.<sup>96</sup> Indeed many of the town's inhabitants believed that Perrault's resident ghost had been allowed to appear as punishment from God for his covetousness. The account originally dates from 1612 when the town of Masçon in southeast France was a hotbed of religious conflict between warring Catholic and Protestant factions. The ghost however was indiscriminate in its attacks, which led 'Friends and Enemies, papists and Protestants' to swear the truth of the episode. Robert Boyle was deeply affected by the case and requested that Dr. Peter Du Moulin translate the story into English. Despite his confessed 'diffidence and backwardnesse of assent' towards many ghost

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<sup>95</sup> Duffy, *The Godly and the Multitude*, pp.47-48.

<sup>96</sup> F. Perrault, *The Divell of Mascon* (London, 1669).



stories, Boyle admitted that this narrative ‘did at length overcome in me all my settled indisposednesse to believe strange things’.<sup>97</sup> Having met Perrault during a stay in Geneva, Boyle established the good character of the minister and was satisfied that the ghost had a legitimate and divinely inspired cause for its actions since it ‘pleased God to bring him [Perrault] into many, and some very extraordinary Tryals’ as a test of faith.<sup>98</sup> The divided community of Masçon was united by attempts to dispel the ghost and this salutary tale was recommended by Boyle and recounted by both Richard Baxter and the *Athenian Mercury*, who credited the relation on the basis of this confessional consensus.<sup>99</sup> It is surely significant that the tale was not printed in England until 1659. Here it was pitched into the battle to combat ‘Atheism’ with two further editions published in 1669 and 1679, a publication success which reflected the revived interest in ghosts that marked these years of religious change.

## Conclusion

In terms of the amount of paper consumed by narrators and collectors of ghost stories, the years 1660-1700 stand out as a bumper period of publication. According to contemporary commentators, the political, religious and social ills of these years justified the production of a large body of texts defending the legitimacy of ghost stories and publicising their activities for wide audiences. These texts would be recycled, reinterpreted and reproduced in a variety of forms over the course of the next century but in the immediate term they testified to a vibrant intellectual and religious culture in which ghost stories enjoyed renewed status thanks to contemporary fears about ‘atheism’, immorality and ungodliness as well as religious and political disunity.

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<sup>97</sup> Perrault, *Divell of Mascon*, preface.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Du Moulin’s letter to Robert Boyle’, in Perrault, *Divell of Mascon*, preface.

<sup>99</sup> *Athenian Mercury*, No. 26 (1692).

New philosophical pursuits brought ghosts closer to the physical world than ever before and initially created fresh confidence about the utility of ghost stories and the existence of ghosts themselves. By citing ghosts as empirical proof of God's continued intervention in the world, writers like Henry More and Joseph Glanvill positioned ghost stories at the centre of one of the most important cultural debates of the day; that is, the extent to which reasonable religion could be used to supplement revelation. This debate was hotly contested and the role that ghosts played within it will resurface periodically over the course of this thesis. However, in Restoration England, pious reactions against materialist religious philosophies fostered resurgent interest in ghosts and testified to strong belief in an active providential God who continued to rebuke, punish and reward Christians on earth.

Apparitions of all persuasions - angels, devils and departed souls - were reincorporated into mainstream religious schemas because they served a variety of contemporary uses. Old orthodoxies were increasingly breaking down and ghost stories sat alongside a wide diversity of doctrines, sects and ways of worship that catered for the tastes of a rapidly changing society. The rehabilitation of ghost stories as respectable conduits for religious reformation on the public stage reached its climax in the final decade of the seventeenth century where they coincided with the foundation of the S.P.C.K. and numerous societies for the Reformation of Manners.

Whether it was due to an expanding print industry or reflected real cultural concerns, Restoration England saw ghost stories more firmly tied to the needs and priorities of the living. These narratives were allowed to serve more intimate domestic purposes and this process will be illustrated in the chapter that follows. By teaching that deceased souls might yet appear to the living, the work of pastorally-orientated divines like Richard Baxter and Samuel Wesley illustrates the conscious and sustained reintegration of ghosts into Protestant theology by the close of the



seventeenth century. This process of accommodation reflects the shifting priorities of both conformist and nonconformist clergy who sought to engage more vigorously with persistent themes in popular belief in order to cement the relationship between Protestantism and the people. The adoption of ghost stories as clerical narratives by a cross-section of Protestant divines was therefore a pragmatic response to a changing climate of religious belief and, potentially, a site of confessional and social unity that could help to heal the internal divisions of an increasingly fragmented Protestant Church.

## Chapter Two

### Printing the Preternatural: The Marketplace of Cheap Print in Restoration

#### England

‘What Age ever brought forth more, or bought more Printed Waste Paper?’<sup>1</sup> In 1681 the pamphleteer who posed this question was struck by the extraordinary success of the cheap print trade in Restoration England - and he was not alone. Historians have confirmed his perception that the years 1660-1700 saw an explosion in the levels of production, distribution and consumption of ballads, chapbooks, almanacs, pamphlets and other products of the rich and varied marketplace of cheap print. In the 1660s almanacs sold at an annual rate of between 300,000 and 400,000 copies<sup>2</sup> and an estimated 90,000 chapbooks were purchased in 1664 alone.<sup>3</sup> Gary De Krey pinpointed a ‘communications revolution’ in the reign of Queen Anne, characterised by the sheer volume, variety, distribution and cheapness of print. The nature of De Krey’s ‘revolution’ has not been challenged but the work of Bernard Capp, Mark Knights and Angela McShane Jones suggests that his periodisation should be brought forward to the immediate post-war era - from the 1660s onwards the marketplace of cheap print had never been more sophisticated, nor so accessible to so many people.

Bernard Capp and Margaret Spufford first demonstrated the importance of ballads, chapbooks, almanacs and jestbooks for tracing the evolution of popular belief and these initial insights have been enhanced in recent years by important contributions from Tessa Watt, Alexandra Walsham, Peter Lake and Adam Fox who have outlined the complexity of the cheap print market, its modes of distribution and

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<sup>1</sup> *Tears of the Press* (London, 1681), 7, cited in M. Knights, *Politics and Opinion in Crisis, 1678-81* (Cambridge, 1994), p.184.

<sup>2</sup> A. McShane Jones, ‘Rime and Reason’: The Political World of the English Broadside Ballad, 1640-1689 (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2004), p.10.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Knights calculates that between five and ten million pamphlets were in circulation from 1678 to 1681, Knights, *Politics and Opinion*, p.168.



the level of its impact on wider society.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the Restoration marketplace of cheap print remains relatively unstudied and those historians that have focused on these years have generally utilised these sources to gauge popular political opinion and activity. To date, no work has analysed the relationship between cheap print and ghost beliefs.

In this chapter I will show how ghost stories benefited from this thriving industry and my own statistics suggest that the years 1660-1700 saw the production of forty-two per cent of all original chapbook and ballad accounts featuring ghosts that were published in England between 1660 and 1800.<sup>5</sup> Chapbooks devoted to the life of Guy of Warwick and ballads describing the adventures of Robin Hood were perennial favourites and ghost stories similarly commanded a strong market value, popping up at regular intervals in two of the best-selling genres of cheap print – black-letter ballads (especially those centred on love and courtship) and murder pamphlets or chapbooks. Ghost stories were not a fixed literary genre in this marketplace, but instead the figure of the ghost served as a stock character in these two highly profitable categories of print. I will suggest that the ability of ghosts to cut across these categories had important implications for their longevity in Grub Street publications. Moreover, the association of ghosts with death, love and courtship ensured that these narratives enjoyed an appeal that could transcend chronological and social boundaries, since here were three experiences with which the vast majority of the population could identify.

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<sup>4</sup>T. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550-1640* (Cambridge, 1996); P. Lake, 'Popular Form, Puritan Content? Two Puritan Appropriations of the Murder Pamphlet from Mid-Seventeenth-Century London', in A. Fletcher and P. Roberts (eds), *Religion, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain*, Cambridge, 1994); see also P. Lake with M. Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat, Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (London, 2002). A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>This does not include reprints, which were common throughout this period, nor is it an exhaustive analysis of ballad collections, being based mainly on the Pepys and Douce collections and on the titles featured in the *English Short Title Catalogue*, <<http://eureka.rlg.org/Eureka/zgate2.prod>>; *The Douce Ballads*, <<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/>>; W.G. Day (ed.), *Catalogue of the Pepys Library. The Pepys Ballads*, 5 Volumes (Cambridge, 1987).

This chapter will thus examine the role of ghost stories within this flourishing print industry to examine the availability and appeal of these narratives, the meanings attached to them in and out of print and the ways in which they may have articulated and shaped the beliefs of 'ordinary' people. As such, this chapter complements the arguments of chapter one, placing the views of Restoration elites on ghosts in broader economic and social contexts since the more ephemeral products of cheap print had a wider and potentially more varied readership that extended to those further down the hierarchy of wealth. This chapter is thus devoted to the local context of belief, to the people who actually encountered ghosts in daily life and to the ways in which these experiences were made relevant to wider audiences in print. As such, its characters range from household servants and wage labourers, through to yeomen, merchants, magistrates, ministers and country squires. The ghost stories of Grub Street did not preclude a more educated readership, and the broad social appeal of these narratives will be a major emphasis in the pages that follow. The chapter is therefore based around a tripartite model of production and consumption, beginning with the production of ghost stories in oral communities, moving on to the translation of these narratives into printed form and to issues of physical production, and finally discussing the appeal of these stories and how they may have been received by readers when they flowed back into oral contexts. In line with the work of Adam Fox as well as socio-linguistic theory, this model presupposes a circularity of influences between oral and literate cultures as well as a high degree of social interaction between the lettered and unlettered.

I will thus engage with important debates about the relationship of oral and literate cultures. The popularity and distribution of ghost stories highlight the interdependencies of these forms – the drama of ghost stories worked best when read out loud and performed to an audience. Any attempt to connect the fortunes of ballad



and chapbook ghosts to the preternatural beliefs of early modern men, women and children must also involve some treatment of literacy rates to establish who and how many people were able to access these products. Nonetheless, just because people *could* access these texts does not mean that they did: whoever bought anything just because they could afford it? A quantitative approach establishing the accessibility of ghost stories must then be complemented by a qualitative focus that considers who these tales appealed to and why. Using insights from socio-linguistic theory, I will focus on the material culture of cheap printed ghost stories, on the content, form, size, price, imagery and narrative detail – crucial factors that determined the desirability of these tales in a competitive marketplace. Finally, comparisons will be drawn between ghost stories originating in London and those that began life in provincial areas. This geographical dimension had important implications for the nature of the ghost story itself and for its potential distribution.

## **I The Ballad Ghost**

Ballads were the cheapest items of print available in Restoration England and they were also the most accessible, constituting just a single page of type, produced in a familiar lyrical format and generally priced between a halfpenny and 2d.<sup>6</sup> Based on these estimates, Tessa Watt surmised that cheap print was affordable for most categories of workers in early modern England, from husbandmen upwards. However, even though ballads were cheap, the buoyancy of the trade still relied on high sales and these products were therefore differentiated and commercially focused to appeal to as large a group of readers as possible. As Angela McShane Jones points out, the black-letter ballad was a well-known ‘brand’ and people knew what to expect when purchasing them. Ballads were entertaining, moralistic and generally

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<sup>6</sup> McShane Jones, ‘Rime and Reason’, p.33.

designed to offer something for every taste and pocket. The marketing and sales strategies of leading publishers were highly sophisticated and as Tessa Watt has demonstrated, so were networks of distribution. Black-letter ballads were peddled across the country, hawked at fairs and markets and sold in thousands on the streets of London.<sup>7</sup> The accessibility of black-letter ballads was further augmented by the use of the familiar gothic type that was reproduced in the cheapest versions of the hornbooks, primers and catechisms, which formed the basis of the most rudimentary education.<sup>8</sup> In fact the typeface of black-letter ballads suggests that they may well have been purchased to assist in the early stages of reading – for children and adults alike.

The ability to read was of course, an important factor in assessing how many people were able to engage with ballads and thus with ghost stories, but it was by no means decisive. Estimates of literacy levels in this period give some indication of the potential market for these products and David Cressy has suggested that in 1640, levels of male and female illiteracy approximated at seventy per cent and ninety per cent respectively.<sup>9</sup> More recently Adam Fox has proposed that by 1700 ‘England was a society in which at least half the adult population could read print’.<sup>10</sup> Fox’s optimistic assessment was based on significant expansion in the provision of formal education and on religious change.<sup>11</sup> More significantly however, his calculations are also based on a more inclusive definition of ‘literacy’ or ‘literacies’, in which reading and/or writing skills are differentiated and equally valued. The ability to read is of

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<sup>7</sup> Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp.76-7, 11, 42, 275.

<sup>8</sup> K. Thomas, ‘The Meaning of Literacy’, in G. Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford, 1986). See also I. Michael, *The Teaching of English: From the Sixteenth Century to 1870* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order, Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> A. Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000), p.19.

<sup>11</sup> Fox argues that reading was prioritised in Protestant England, because individual salvation became intrinsically linked with the ability to read scripture for oneself. Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, pp.16-17.



course much more difficult to quantify, but historians are agreed that this skill was probably widely diffused in these years thanks to informal teaching by mothers within the home and by literate members of the local community.<sup>12</sup> Revisionist interpretations have also focused on aspects of elementary and informal education open to the poorer sorts who were much more likely to pick up basic reading skills because they were taught one year before children began paid work.

Even for those who had no skill in reading or writing, ballads remained highly accessible literary products; their lyrical form ensured that they could and would be read or sung aloud either in the local alehouse, in the home, at market or on the street by professional balladeers. Indeed the use of verse and rhyme in balladry provides one of the best examples of the 'societal bilingualism' that characterised Restoration England. This was a society in which both spoken and written modes of communication were used to carry out the business of everyday life.<sup>13</sup> Indeed the ghost stories of cheap print are prime examples of the circularity and interdependency of oral and literate forms identified by Adam Fox. These tales began in oral communities and depended upon the vitality of verbal storytelling and gossip networks that eventually brought them to the notice of printers and publishers. Once issued in textual form, ghost stories included directly reported speech that was reconverted into sound when read out and performed in an oral context.<sup>14</sup> More will be said about these performative aspects, but for now it is important to note the myriad ways in which speech influenced ghost stories, thereby appealing to a broad social readership with different levels of proficiency in reading and writing.

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Spufford argued that 'some sort of teacher was almost always within walking distance for a determined child', *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1981), p.20. See also Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, p.13.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of 'societal bilingualism' is drawn from Dick Leith, *A Social History of English* (London, 1997), p.12.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Ong argues that 'the written text, for all its permanence means nothing, is not even a text, except in relationship to the spoken word'. W.J.Ong, 'Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought', in G. Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word, Literacy in Transition* (Oxford, 1986), p.31.

The technology of print was clearly very important to the way in which ballads and other cheap printed wares were produced. Sophisticated production techniques alongside the use of cheaper paper lowered overheads but production also bore a close relationship to demand. The question of desirability must then be addressed and a less passive role assigned to the poorer sorts who were able to engage with cheap printed ghost stories and to shape the specific forms and detail included in these narratives. With a few pence to spend on printed goods, they were recognised as powerful consumers in a marketplace driven by commercial gain. Crude comparisons of excess incomes and the price of cheap print must then be accompanied by an analysis of the desirability of ballads alongside other products of the cheap print market. Words and images were seductive and encouraged the purchasing of ballads and chapbooks as small treats and gifts that could serve as interior decoration as well as educational instruction for peasant households.<sup>15</sup> It is to this question of desirability that I now turn in sketching some of the contexts in which ghosts appeared in the genre of balladry.

John True was a humble shoemaker from Coventry who won the affection of a local maid named Susan Mease. His love however, proved inconstant and he betrayed Susan by courting another woman. This story was narrated in much more dramatic fashion in a black-letter ballad collected by Samuel Pepys entitled *The Two Unfortunate Lovers, Or, a True Relation of the lamentable end of John True and Susan Mease*.<sup>16</sup> Dismayed by the fickle affections of her intended marriage partner, Susan Mease was, quite literally, 'kil'd with loving him' and after her death, her ghost returned to haunt her betrayer, demanding that 'if e're thou loved'st me dear make hast and come away'. The shock of this appearance proved too much for John who died soon after, the balladeer leaving the audience in no doubt about how this

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<sup>15</sup> For more detail see McShane Jones, 'Rime and Reason', p.11.

<sup>16</sup> *The Two Unfortunate Lovers, Or, A true relation of the lamentable end of John True and Susan Mease* (London, 1670).



tale should be interpreted. The deaths of these two young lovers were moral lessons for the young male and female readership that the author assumed would be attracted by this publication. He thus advised ‘those that have true loves’ to be ‘sure unto your friend,/And if you love...be true unto the end.’ A similar message was encapsulated in another ballad from the Pepys collection, *A Godly Warning to all Maidens*.<sup>17</sup> Here a young man named Bateman fell in love and proposed marriage to a woman from Nottingham. However, the engagement was soon broken off by the woman in favour of a carpenter who was ‘of greater wealth and better in degree’. On the day of his fiancée’s wedding, Bateman ‘hang’d himself in desperate sort before the brides own door’, and his ghost later appeared to spirit her away from her marriage bed whilst she was expecting her first child. Reconciled to her fate for having broken her oath to Bateman, the young woman conceded that ‘Alive or dead I am his right’. This ballad made the moral of the story very clear and directly addressed the reader with the following advice, ‘To him that you have vow’d to love,/by no means do refuse;/For God that hears all secret oaths,/will dreadful vengeance take’. This declaration was reminiscent of the ‘last, dying speeches’ of condemned criminals who confessed the error of their ways in order to uphold values of social justice and moral probity.<sup>18</sup> Indeed the primary function of ghosts in ballad and chapbook accounts was as a relater of wrongdoing. Ghosts assumed the role of supernatural sleuths and although they were often not the central protagonists, ghosts were an important function of the narrative whereby justice could be served on unpunished murderers and inconstant lovers. The ghost’s ability to undertake this role relied on widespread assumptions that ghosts, occupying a liminal position between this world and the next, had access

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<sup>17</sup> *A Godly Warning to All Maiden* (London, 1670). This tale had a long shelf-life both before and after this period, see Walsham, *Providence*, pp.111-112 and chapter six below.

<sup>18</sup> J.A. Sharpe, “‘Last Dying Speeches’: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England’, *Past and Present*, No. 107 (May, 1985). Bateman’s Tragedy was the best-selling ballad of this genre, enjoying a number of reprints throughout the eighteenth century and it was turned into a play named *The Vow Breaker* by William Samson. M. MacDonald and T.R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls, Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), p.47.

to knowledge that the living did not. As we saw in the previous chapter, this understanding authorised readers and listeners in paying attention to the ghost's revelations and allowed balladeers to link important moral messages to the appearance of ghosts.

Taken together, these two ballads suggest an appreciation of the social and economic realities that determined the choice of marriage partner in this period, but they also display an idealistic strain that prioritised true love over material wealth. Margaret Spufford has argued that love was the primary reason why young people from humble backgrounds entered into marriage in this period.<sup>19</sup> The ghost thus interacted with contemporary social mores and had an important role to play in upholding ideals of marital love. Women have been increasingly recognised as important consumers in cheap print and publishers clearly made an effort to tailor accounts to female interests. The ghosts of popular courtship ballads may have appealed to women because they allowed readers to indulge deep emotional feelings. They offered advice on the proper conduct of courtship and marital relations and provided an informal regulation of these fragile affairs with the possibility of public exposure awaiting the inconstant lover. Indeed as I suggest in chapter six, these concerns continued throughout the eighteenth century and ensured the continued relevance and popularity of the courtship ballad.

*The Suffolk Miracle* was another black-letter ballad that offered an idealised vision of early modern courtship. Here a wealthy and ambitious farmer separated his daughter from her chosen marriage partner because he believed that she could aspire to a more prosperous union. The farmer sent his daughter to live with her uncle and as a result her husband-to-be 'mourn'd so much' that 'for love he dyed'. The young woman was ignorant of his death until the ghost of her beloved appeared before her.

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<sup>19</sup> M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (London, 1981).



She was so unsettled by the sight that she 'quickly after dyed'. The ghost was not the central protagonist in this story but it was the representative of social and amatory justice and following its appearance the narrator went on to give the following warning to his readers, 'Part not true love you Rich men then,/but if they be right honest men,/your daughters love give them their way,/for force oft breeds their lives decay'.<sup>20</sup> This kind of ballad may have appealed to contemporary audiences in a number of ways. Although black-letter ballads were an essentially conservative medium that made no direct challenge to the social order, poorer folk liked to indulge in criticisms of the wealthier sections of society and often claimed the moral high ground. In *The Suffolk Miracle* the ghostly narrative represents a romanticised and idealised version of marital relations. The virtues of honesty, loyalty and devotion are here prized above riches and social status. Such a message may well have appealed to a more humble, and possibly male audience, who had little wealth to offer in the marriage market. By shifting the emphasis to the personal qualities of the characters involved, this ballad promoted a scenario in which the poor man could compete on an equal footing with his social superiors.

The ballad ghost can then be seen as a tool of social criticism, sometimes directed against the middling sorts and wealthier sections of society. However, the relevance of these themes was not restricted to the lower tiers of the social hierarchy and this particular meaning of ghosts was recognised further up the social ranks, pointing to a mixed social readership for many courtship ballads. The ideal of true love and distaste for betrayal and oath breaking were just as prominent in ballads featuring characters of middling and upper class background. *The Leicester-shire Tragedy: or, the Fatal Over-throw of two Unfortunate Lovers* neatly illustrates this point when the 'bleeding ghost' of a Yeoman's son appeared after being usurped by

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<sup>20</sup> *The Suffolk Miracle, or, A Relation of a young man who a Month after his death appeared to his sweetheart and carried her behind him Forty miles in two hours time, and was never seen after but in the Grave* (London, 1670).

a young Squire in the affections of his beloved, Susana Lynard.<sup>21</sup> The sight of the ghost so frightened Susana that she fell into a fever and quickly died, justifying the narrator's warning to 'See that you are not false in Love,/for there's a righteous God above'.

Of course just because yeomen and squires featured in these narratives, it does not mean that these were the people to whom they exclusively appealed. Other factors however, suggest that a different kind of audience was targeted as compared with the tales of John True and young Bateman. *The Leicester-shire Tragedy* was a white-letter ballad – a less familiar typeface that was often used in political satire and one that usually signified a more learned audience than black-letter ballads. Moreover this ballad was accompanied by two woodcuts depicting the figures of a gentleman and gentlewoman of fashion. Indeed, as Angela McShane Jones points out in her excellent study of ballads in this period, the ballad market was highly sophisticated and publishers deliberately adapted typography, format, content and imagery to suit the tastes of different consumers.<sup>22</sup> The material form of *The Leicester-shire Tragedy* combined with its content suggests that this ballad may well have attracted wealthier readers. The ghost ballad thus had the potential to cut across social boundaries; this figure was unique in its ability to dish out post-mortem revenge for sins of inconstancy that would otherwise go unpunished and its integration with a topic of near-universal concern ensured its prominence in the contemporary imagination.

The scenarios in which ghosts appeared in courtship ballads were sometimes improbable and even allegorical and the genre of balladry was itself characterised by blurred boundaries between the real and the fictional. Nonetheless, the use of named characters, biographical details and real-life locations all served to bring some kind

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<sup>21</sup> *The Leicester-shire Tragedy: or, the Fatal Over-throw of two Unfortunate Lovers, caus'd by Susanna's Breach of Promise* (London, 1685).

<sup>22</sup> McShane Jones, 'Rime and Reason', p.6.



of social and economic reality to bear on these accounts and to introduce a degree of plausibility to the appearance of ghosts. These were not simply the romances of the chivalric tradition filtering down into popular tradition, but inventive new appropriations of ghosts that were relevant to the experiences of ordinary folk and which were used to articulate a range of contemporary concerns. As Lennard Davis notes in his discussion of the complex relationship between factual and fictional literary representations, the chivalric romance was 'the contrary of the ordinary world, making possible the idealized vision'.<sup>23</sup> Although ghostly ballads displayed idealistic strains, they also corresponded to lived reality, comparable in some ways to a seventeenth-century version of *EastEnders*. Ballads highlighted a range of scenarios with which ordinary men and women could identify and the reader was thus drawn in by 'the actual possibility of being involved in the scene one reads about'.<sup>24</sup> Ghosts appeared in familiar settings, such as the home and garden, and spoke of real-life dilemmas. Ghost stories also featured characters that could be met in daily life: shoemakers, yeomen, carpenters and squires. The crucial importance of context and dense narrative detail in reports of ghosts disabled the separation of logic from rhetoric that is characteristic of more academic or abstract forms of writing. The composition of the ghost narrative and its configuration as a 'factual fiction' suspended disbelief and limited the scope for reader scepticism, thereby extending the social appeal of these narratives.<sup>25</sup> The contention that the second half of the seventeenth century saw the distancing of learned audiences from the cheap print market may then be a little premature; the very fact that most of the ballads described above owe their survival to Samuel Pepys proves that the gentry certainly partook of

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<sup>23</sup> L. Davis, *Factual Fictions, The Origins of the English Novel* (New York, 1983), p.28.

<sup>24</sup> L. Davis, *Factual Fictions*, p.74.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Ong's contention that print was a technology of decontextualisation must then be refined. For a recent challenge to Ong's claims from the field of psycho-linguistics see D.R. Olson, *The World on Paper, The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading* (Cambridge, 1994), p.38.

the cheaper products of the print industry. Ghostly ballads were easily affordable, readily available, and simply one of a range of literary products from which consumers were able to choose.

## **II Murder Discovered**

The connection of ghost stories with themes of mortality was another key context in which ghost stories retained interest for readers of cheap print in Restoration England. The ghosts of Grub Street appeared time and again following death of an untimely or unnatural nature and often to expose the vile crime of murder. Murder was conceived as an infringement of divine authority, for only God had the power to give life and to take it away. The exposure of killers by avenging ghosts thus fitted with contemporary ideas of providential intervention and also satisfied deeply held principles of social justice, expressing feelings of moral outrage engendered by this heinous act.

Black-letter ballads and 'murder pamphlets' or chapbooks recognised and courted widespread fascination with death and particularly murder. As expressions of horror but also of curiosity, ghost stories were again positioned at a crossroads where the paths of learned and unlearned beliefs met. Publishers and printers churned out multiple versions of the same stories with formats and prices to suit every interest and pocket. Although not as cheap as black-letter ballads, chapbooks were highly affordable commodities, usually no more than eight pages in length and often including decorous woodcuts, prices ranged from 2d to 6d. Margaret Spufford has argued that by 1664 chapbook production was already 'more important' than ballad production. If chapbooks were readily available, does it follow that they were desirable? In 1681 Justice Scroggs hinted at the esteem with which these publications were held by suggesting that even the very poor clamoured to get their hands on



them. They would 'deny their children a penny for bread' he claimed, but 'will lay it out for a pamphlet'.<sup>26</sup> In March 1680 a black-letter ballad and a short four-page chapbook appeared for sale with breaking news of murder in Holborn, London. Just two days after the alleged discovery of human remains on March 16, the chapbook came hot off the press and drew in readers with the compelling title, *Great News from Middle-Row in Holbourn, or a True Relation of a Dreadful Ghost*.<sup>27</sup> The chapbook narrated the appearance Mrs. Adkins' ghost, a former midwife who had died six months previously. Her ghost 'with gastly Countenance...belching flames of Fire' suggested her fate in the afterlife, and so it was little surprise when she visited a maidservant in the house she formerly occupied to reveal the concealed bones of children that she had murdered. Her ghost was unable to rest until she had confessed her crime and requested a decent burial for the babes, and so she instructed the maid to search 'under the Tiles in the hearth' and to bury what she found beneath. Human bones were unearthed that were conjectured to be those of 'Children Illegitimate, or Bastards', that is according to local rumour at the Cheshire Cheese, the Holborn inn where these remains were somewhat gruesomely displayed before burial. The opinions of 'divers Chirurgions' backed up the ghost's claims by concluding that the bones had lain undiscovered for many years.

A mixed social audience is suggested by the form and content of this chapbook. The ranks of the labouring poor might be happy to accept the word of a maidservant, but the opinions of 'Chirurgions' may have held more sway with the professional sorts of London. Moreover, the tone and language used by the author placed a heavily moralised and religious spin on events, diluting the sensationalism of the murder and its spectacular discovery. 'The great God', who thought that such a

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Knights, *Politics and Opinion*, p.170.

<sup>27</sup> *Great News from Middle-Row in Holbourn or a True Relation of a Dreadful Ghost which appeared in the shape of one Mrs. Adkins, to several persons but especially to a Maid-Servant at the Adam and Eve, all in a Flame of Fire on Tuesday-night last, being the 17<sup>th</sup> of this instant March, 1680* (London, 1680).

'Monstrous Crime' should be exposed for all to see, justified the appearance of the ghost.<sup>28</sup> At the close of the narrative, the reader is reminded that even in death there was no escape from the consequences of sin. 'Murder bears a lasting stain and clogs the Conscience of the Guilty soul' causing restless spirits to be 'forced about the Earth' and 'to wander up and down until they have made known those Crimes the Party represented in those thin and Airy forms did in their Lifetimes act'. To reinforce the religious portent of the ghost, the narrator finished with a quote from the Psalmist David: 'Great and wonderful art thou O Lord, and dreadful to be feared in Heaven and Earth.' The frontispiece of this chapbook advertised the appearance of a 'GHOST' in the largest typeface, drawing the reader in with gruesome details of murder. The reader was however, both observer and participant in this narrative. The curiosity aroused by elaborate details of the event drew the reader into the scene, permitting the author to establish a broader moralist purpose, warning the reader that worldly sins will not escape divine punishment. The combination of graphic details of murder and the more serious undertones of the story were designed to titillate the audience, whilst simultaneously reinforcing a moral conviction that murder would not go unpunished. This narrative was then a composite text, satisfying an appetite for ribaldry but also for the exemplary punishment of sinners.

The linguistic and interpretive structures used in this chapbook are reminiscent of Richard Baxter's approach to ghost stories in his *Certainty of the World of Spirits*. As I suggested in chapter one, learned men and women were familiar with the products of the cheap print market and they were aware of how these narratives could shape the values of wider society. As Peter Lake has suggested for an earlier period, this awareness lay behind clerical and reformist efforts to overlay cheap printed wares with devotional narratives, and although the emphases

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<sup>28</sup> This ghost was portrayed as a sign of God's providence. Alex Walsham has insightfully described the providentialism as a 'cultural adhesive' between learned and unlearned culture in early modern England, see Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, p.333.



of these messages had changed from the 'hot Protestantism' favoured in the mid-seventeenth-century, the method remained the same.<sup>29</sup> Indeed evidence from the ghost stories of ballad and chapbook fame shows that these endeavours were not misplaced since they highlight an important, if complex, connection between ghost beliefs and popular religious sentiment.

*A Strange, but true RELATION Of the Discovery of a most horrid and bloody MURDER* (1678) expressed this link most explicitly when its author declared that 'the grand Concernments of Religion, and Interests of Mankind, as to their future estate' depended 'upon the belief of Invisible Powers'.<sup>30</sup> God sent the ghost that appeared in this chapbook to expose a usurping executor and the characters involved in the narrative clearly recognised that it was only through religious supplication of some kind that the ghost could be put to rest. They were uncertain however of the most effective method and when some neighbours and local gentlemen heard of this haunting they advised the executor to repent his sins but also 'to take counsel of some Minister what to do to be rid of so great a disturbance'.<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein, a murderer from Lincolnshire who tried to lay the ghost of his victim by employing a conjurer was unable to banish his nemesis because it was sent by divine authority.<sup>32</sup> Ballad accounts similarly acknowledged God's agency in producing and dispelling ghosts. When a poor maidservant from London was confronted with a 'pale and dreadful' ghost, the author of *A True and Perfect Relation from the Faulcon* noted that, 'the maid cry'd out O Lord,/I heartily do pray/That by the power of thy word,/Chase this same fiend away.' When she repeated the words once more and

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<sup>29</sup> P. Lake, 'Popular Form, Puritan Content?', in Fletcher & Roberts, *Religion, Culture and Society*; P. Lake with M. Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat, Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (London, 2002). Angela McShane Jones notes how elites used ballads to influence popular opinion, 'Rime and Reason', p.6.

<sup>30</sup> *A Strange, but True Relation, Of the Discovery of a most horrid and bloody MURDER* (London, 1678), p.2.

<sup>31</sup> *Strange, but True Relation*, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> *Strange and Wonderful News from Lincolnshire* (London, 1679).

lifted her hands towards heaven the ghost 'Quite banisht out of sight'.<sup>33</sup> When a ghost appeared before a farmer in his orchard one night, his automatic reaction was to address the visitor 'In the name of Jesus Christ'.<sup>34</sup> Since the farmer had not made clear the specific religious lesson to be drawn from the text, the ballad author did it for him in the closing lines. 'Therefore lets fear the Lord on high,/That we may be of the flock with Christ/And then we need not fear to dye,/Our souls no doubt will be at rest.' It was here suggested that the practical theology of ghost stories that encouraged moral reformation, repentance, good deeds and prayer might have some beneficial effect on the individual process of salvation. The learned authors encountered in chapter one did not acknowledge the direct effect of godly living on the fate of individual souls but they did suggest that this practice was a step in the right direction. Thus although the emphases were slightly different, there was considerable overlap between the moral theology advanced in high places through the medium of ghost stories and the interpretations put forward in cheap print. As Bernard Capp has suggested, ballad writers 'generally ignored the theological distinction between saving grace and the good works that would accompany it.'<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the writing of learned authors, there was little sense of panic in the ghost stories of cheap print about the spread of atheism, but there was a shared understanding of the particular usefulness of ghost stories in devotional contexts. The ghost narratives of cheap print advance a similar disapproval of licentiousness whilst acknowledging a more organic and fluid connection between the workings of God and the activities of ghosts. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, these

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<sup>33</sup> *A True and Perfect Relation from the Faulcon at the Banke-side* (London, 1661). This devotional strategy had clear affinities to traditional ways of 'conjuring' ghosts and it was repeated in a number of other ballads, including *Strange and Wonderful News from Northampton-shire, Or, The Discontented Spirit* (London, 1674).

<sup>34</sup> *Strange and Wonderful News from Northampton-shire*.

<sup>35</sup> B. Capp in B. Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1985), p.220.



understandings were less politicised and thus the popularity of ghost stories was less restricted to specific time frames.

Learned engagement with the ghosts of ballads and chapbooks can also be demonstrated in less obvious ways. Political satirists revealed sound familiarity with the well-established forms and metaphors of these narratives and often used them for satirical effect.<sup>36</sup> A less irreverent approach was suggested however in a number of white-letter ballads that adopted the trope of the returning ghost as a vehicle to voice political discontent, to make accusations or to express a sense of social injustice. A pamphlet entitled *Mr Ashton's Ghost* was published in 1691 and claimed 'Upon the Word of a Ghost' that Mr. Ashton, otherwise known as the Earl of Essex had been unlawfully murdered.<sup>37</sup> *Bradshaw's Ghost*, a twelve-page chapbook published in 1659 featured the ghost of King Charles I and it was specifically designed as a warning from beyond the grave about the fate of rulers who abused their royal powers and prerogatives.<sup>38</sup> The years of political and religious unrest that accompanied revelations of a Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis also furnished a large number of these 'political ghosts'. *Sir Edmundbury Godfrey's Ghost* was one of a series of pamphlets that used the truth-telling figure of the ghost to accuse Catholic traitors of murdering this prominent Westminster magistrate who was found strangled and stabbed near his home in London on 17 October 1678. Sir Edmundbury Godfrey had met with Titus Oates shortly before he was killed, fuelling rumours of a murderous Catholic conspiracy. A pamphlet entitled *Garnet's Ghost* went even further by specifically identifying the murderers as a private cabal of Jesuits.<sup>39</sup> Of course the ghosts that featured in these pamphlets were not "real", but

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<sup>36</sup> McShane Jones, 'Rime and Reason', p.19.

<sup>37</sup> *Mr. Ashton's Ghost To his late Companion in the Tower* (London, 1691). See also *Murder Will Out: Being a Relation of the Late Earl of Essex's Ghost* (London, 1683).

<sup>38</sup> *Bradshaw's Ghost: Being a Dialogue Between the said Ghost, and an Apparition of the Late King Charles* (London, 1659). *Lilburn's Ghost* (London, 1659) served a very similar purpose.

<sup>39</sup> *Sir Edmundbury Godfreys Ghost* (London, 1682); John Oldham, *Garnets Ghost Addressing to the Jesuits, met in private Caball, just after The Murther of Sir Edmund-Bury Godfrey* (London, 1679).

by appropriating the trope of the righteous ghost they acknowledged the authoritative voice with which these figures spoke in Restoration England.<sup>40</sup> Ghosts were understood as revealers of truth by broad sections of society and parallels can thus be drawn between representations of ghosts at the top and bottom end of the cheap print market.

*A New Ballad of the Midwives Ghost* was a second version of the Holborn tale of murder story encountered earlier, and it also appeared for sale in 1680 from the press of the highly successful printer Thomas Vere.<sup>41</sup> This account was a follow-up to the original ballad of *The Midwives Ghost* that also came from Vere's printing house in the same year, such was its success that a second run was authorised almost immediately. Thomas Vere was a prominent figure in the cheap print industry and in partnership with Francis Coles, John Wright and William Gilbertson he printed a series of ballads featuring ghosts including the top-selling *Lamentation of Dell's Mistris*, *A Godly Warning For All Maidens* (mentioned previously), *A True and Perfect Relation from the Faulcon at the Banke-side* (to be discussed later) as well as *Hubert's Ghost*, a satirical white-letter ballad that catered for a very different audience. Vere's involvement in printing accounts of ballad ghosts is highly significant because this was a man who knew the market inside out, what sold and what did not sell. The decision to print a ballad was not an easy one and represented an important investment for many publishers. Partnerships were sometimes formed to share the costs involved, particularly when expensive woodcuts were included. In the case of *The Midwives Ghost* and *A New Ballad of the Midwives Ghost*, Thomas

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See also *A New Apparition of S. Edmund-bery Godfrey's GHOST to the Earl of Danby in the Tower* (London, 1681). A. Roper, 'Absalom's Issue: Parallel Poems in the Restoration', *Studies in Philology*, Volume 99, No. 3 (2002), pp.276-278.

<sup>40</sup> For parallel argument see A.E. Bakos, 'Images of Hell in the Pamphlets of the Fronde', *Historical Reflections*, No. 26(2) (2000), pp.339-52.

<sup>41</sup> *The Midwives Ghost* (London, 1680); *A New Ballad of The Midwives Ghost*, (London, 1680).



Vere was sufficiently confident of the profit to be gained that he stood the cost of printing on his own.

The form and simple style of this ballad suggest that a less literate audience was aimed at by both author and printer as compared with the chapbook treatment that used more sophisticated language and rhetorical structures. The typeface was black-letter and the page was dominated by the woodcut set out in Figure 1 featuring a female ghost in winding sheet.



**Figure 1:** Woodcut of Female Ghost in Winding Sheet. From *The Midwives Ghost* (London, 1680)

With the action set to the verse of '*When Troy Town, &c.*' and described in rhyming couplets, the ballad catered for those with a rudimentary reading ability, for those who might hear the tale set to music in the street and for those who might hear a group reading in the local alehouse. However the story was received, the essentials of the story remained the same as the chapbook treatment. Revulsion was expressed for the untimely death of the children, for the midwife as an unnatural murderer of the innocents in her charge and for the improper burial of the infants under the hearth. The ballad did however present these details in a

different way, including techniques suited to oral performances as well as private readings.

The ghost of Mrs. Adkins took a speaking role here, declaring her purpose 'to let the World to know my Crime, and that I am most sorry for't', and she was also permitted to address a direct warning to the reader, 'desiring Midwives to take heed,

how they dispose their Bastard-breed'. The ballad devotes more time to sketching the character of the maidservant (with whom an unlettered audience might more readily identify), and directly reported speech is used to establish her honest character and thus the credibility of her story - according to local opinion, she was 'a religious maid'. This highly detailed account combined with the use of dialogue in the text emphasises the suitability of the narrative not only for literate communities, but for oral ones as well, into which the tale would eventually flow back. Both the ballad and chapbook versions of this story give details of the children's remains at the Cheshire-Cheese, and both appeal to the sceptical reader to seek verification of the particulars by speaking to the regulars at the inn, thereby prioritising the truth-value of the spoken word over the written narrative.

Reports of this murderous midwife offer a prime example of how ghosts could migrate across different print categories and between different social audiences. This was also one of the 'cross-over' ballads identified by Angela McShane Jones, ballads which told the same stories but appeared in both black and white-letter form. The white-letter ballad, *The Bloody Minded Midwife* told essentially the same story to that narrated in *The New Ballad of the Midwives Ghost* but the style and sophistication of language was adapted to suit different tastes. This ballad was presented in simple form, without woodcuts, biographical details, or dialogue and was probably destined to appeal to a more restricted social audience. This case study thus suggests that the readership of ghost stories in the marketplace of cheap print was inherently mixed. Readers may have approached these texts for slightly different reasons, but the same ghosts were able to capture the interest of wide sections of society through revelations of secret murder and by confirming the moral virtue of the reader by condemning the sins of murderers and other wrongdoers.



*Strange and Wonderful News from Lincolnshire* (1679) is another example of the widespread appropriation of ghosts as supernatural detectives. From the very beginning of this short four-page chapbook, the author clarified the general purpose of ghosts; they 'Groan out absconded horrors, and are often Instrumental made to the discoveries of Vilianous Exploits'.<sup>42</sup> This account told the story of William Carter, a gentleman who lived near the town of Stamford in Lincolnshire and who arranged for the murder of his younger brother Thomas. His crime was motivated by avarice, one of the seven deadly sins, and he aimed to usurp his brother's portion of the family inheritance, namely his father's estate. Before the gruesome details of the crime were related in full, the villainy of William's crime was established by a description of the fratricidal plotter who was 'by Nature of an extravagant wild temper' and likened by the author to the scriptural figure of Cain who murdered his brother Abel.

Underlining the importance of oral forms of communication and of local opinion, the conspiring William tried to pre-empt the suspicions of his neighbours by telling them of his plan to send his brother to Cambridge University, where he was 'to study Divinity'. Believing he was on his way to Cambridge, Thomas mounted his horse and set off but only got as far as a nearby wood when he was set upon by three ruffians disguised as highwaymen. Thomas was shot from his horse and run through with a sword 'to make a sure dispatch' for which the perpetrators were promised the sum of 'Ten Pounds a piece' by William Carter. Lacking any witnesses to the crime, William seemed home and dry so the discovery was left to 'the dictates of Providence' (perhaps shorthand for local gossip networks) and there followed 'a certain rumor spread about the place, without a known Author, that there had been a dreadful Ghost seen in Mr. Carters Yard'. Carter's household was the most obvious

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<sup>42</sup> *Strange and Wonderful News from Lincolnshire, Or a Dreadful Account of a most Inhumane and Bloody Murther* (London, 1679).

source of this rumour since thereafter 'the Servants had strict charge not to reveal to any of the Neighbours any such disturbance'. With an insider's view of the Carter household, it seems probable that William's crime had been discovered by one of the servants, who, motivated by a sense of social injustice, circulated reports that the ghost of Thomas Carter had appeared to his killer 'with fresh bleeding Wounds' – this detail serving to reinforce existing suspicions that Thomas had met with a sticky end. Further knockings, groanings and laments were heard for two or three nights, after which the neighbourhood again grew suspicious and reports of the ghost 'spread fresh'. William removed to another house but was pursued by the ghost until he finally employed a man 'that pretended to Astroligy' to conjure the ghost down, but all to no avail. The murdered youth again appeared to William, this time on horseback, showing the wounds from which he had died and telling the Conjuror that notwithstanding his own proficiency, he would be unable to lay his spirit until his blood was avenged. The ghost accused William and his three accomplices of murder, finally eliciting a confession from William before a local magistrate whereupon he was committed to the County Gaol.

This ghost therefore upheld the might of heavenly authority, and along with the midwife's ghost, satisfied ideals of social justice by ensuring that the offender was punished, allowing the local community to reaffirm customary ideas of the dignified way to die. Such concerns paid little heed to social difference and the account reinforces a sense of common purpose within the community with the revelation of Thomas Carter's murder assured by curious neighbours, household servants and local officials all working together. Furthermore, the centrality of the spoken word in this narrative again supports the notion of 'societal bilingualism' from which ghost stories profited, with oral reports rapidly translated into print. The suspicions of lowly servants were taken seriously and their reports were endorsed in



‘a Letter to a Gentleman of very good Quality in London’, by which means this account came to be printed in London and to which local men of ‘good Repute and Fame’ were willing to sign their names. Carter’s ghost was plausible thanks to heavy contextualisation of the circumstances that provoked its appearance and due to local knowledge of William Carter’s character. In this account ghosts were conceived as opponents of unlawful killing by different sections of society, pointing to a shared set of meanings surrounding the appearance and purpose of ghosts.

### III Invention and Accusation

The tale from Lincolnshire supports the proposition of both Malcolm Gaskill and Laura Gowing that supernatural evidence was employed by the poorer sorts ‘as a popular strategy deployed in order to influence and engage the authorities’ and as a way for ‘the powerless to expose secrets and misdeeds’ in early modern England.<sup>43</sup> In this section I seek both to reinforce and to elaborate upon these conclusions. I will show how ghost stories were put to creative social and economic uses by the poorer sorts and that this practice extended right through the hierarchy of ranks. Moreover, I will suggest that only a deep-seated and widespread belief in the reality of ghosts made it possible for men, women and children to manipulate ghost stories for such practical ends

A chapbook that unravelled a mysterious murder in Exeter is a prime example of how ghost stories could be fashioned by humble folk to bring accusations of murder against members of the local community and thereby damage the reputation of prominent individuals. *The Wonder of this Age: or, Miraculous Revenge against Murder* was published in 1677 but its story began seven years

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<sup>43</sup> M. Gaskill, ‘Reporting murder: fiction in the archives in early modern England’, *Social History*, Volume 23, No. 3 (1998). See also Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000), p.233. L. Gowing, ‘The Haunting of Susan Lay: Servants and Mistresses in Seventeenth-Century England’, *Gender & History*, Volume 14, No. 2 (August, 2002), p.198.

earlier when the body of a man was discovered in a local inn. Buried under the kitchen floor of this establishment, his demise violated cultural ideals and practical rituals surrounding death and prompted official investigations into this heinous crime.<sup>44</sup> The killing had taken place almost thirty years earlier and although the victim's corpse had by now 'mouldered away to Dust', his linen cap had been fortuitously preserved and bore the distinctive initials of the deceased man. This 'occasioned much Discourse' in the local area 'because the two Letters answered to the Name of a Person that had heretofore kept that House'. Local memory and gossip were crucial factors in reconstructing the pieces of this jigsaw of sin, especially since the victim was not thought to be a local man traceable in town records, but was instead a stranger 'from beyond the Seas' who had taken rest at the Inn. Despite the discovery of the victim's corpse however, there was insufficient evidence to bring any formal accusations of murder and as the chapbook's author explained, the case 'proceeded no further at that time, than certain muttering Surmizes; everyone guessing, as his Fancy led him'.

Seven years later new life was breathed into the case when another stranger took up residence at the Inn and reported having seen 'a Ghost or Apparition, in the Form of a Man, and by his Habit, (being Embroidered Cloaths) resembling a Gentleman'. According to this testimony, the ghost spoke the following words to him, disclosing details of his death, 'Thirty Years ago was I barbarously Murthered in this house for my Money: Part of my Body hath been found, but my Blood is not Revenged; I Charge you to acquaint the Magistrates that the thing may be Examined'. Unsure of how to proceed, the percipient delayed spreading news of his experience until the ghost appeared for a second time, demanding why he had not performed his request. The man protested that his hesitation in engaging a magistrate

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<sup>44</sup> The unceremonious burial of this man meant that his corpse was denied the customary rituals of cleansing and of a seemly burial. For details of these customs see D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997).



was because 'he was poor; and to make out and prosecute the business Effectually, would be Chargeable'. The ghost replied that he need not want for money, for in the kitchen was hidden a sum of eighty pounds. The man continued to protest however by reasoning that 'if he took any persons on suspicion, he had not witnesses to prove it against them; and if he should Charge them, and they were Cleared, they might sue him'. Still insistent on revenge, the ghost promised that 'God will raise up Witnesses: and rather than fail, I will appear, and make the Murderers Confess it'. Neatly illustrated here are the very real concerns that faced those on a meagre wage who wished to action lawsuits in this period. This man was acutely aware of the potential pitfalls involved in initiating legal proceedings and the ghost may well have functioned as a form of insurance or protection to save him from the cost of an unsuccessful prosecution or an ensuing libel suit since he could not be identified as the primary accuser. The ghost was thus a convenient ally in cases where material evidence of a crime was insufficient to secure a conviction.

As we will see in chapter three, rumour and gossip could function in equally effective ways to cast suspicion on those who were thought to have committed crimes punishable by law and condemned by the local community. By framing charges of murder or wrongdoing in a narrative context, ghost stories helped to attract a much wider audience who were perhaps more willing to take seriously the allegations of a poor man or those with little social standing. Such was the case with the Exeter ghost that roused the interest of local officials who interpreted it as a providential sign that an offence had been committed. This was most clearly demonstrated when the poor man fell seriously ill soon after his encounter with the ghost. Near to death, he called on a local minister to whom he related every circumstance and who was so convinced by the story of the ghost that he urged the sick man to report the experience to a magistrate, something he did just a few days

after his recovery. The magistrate was sufficiently persuaded of the truth of his claims to order the examination of two maidservants who worked at the Inn at the time of the murder. One of them recalled the gentleman who wore the embroidered clothes and his mysterious disappearance. This investigation was still in progress at the time of publication but even if it did not result in a conviction, the ghost story was plausible enough to set the wheels of the legal system in motion.

In 1692 the ballad of *The Duke's Daughter's Cruelty* was printed by order of John Deacon at his print works in Guiltspur Street, London.<sup>45</sup> Licensed and registered with the Stationer's Company this ballad displayed similar themes to those presented in the Exeter case, wicked behaviour, unlawful killing and heavenly retribution but it went further by providing a shocking example of the corruption of upper class morality. I have already noted the popularity of ballads that focused on the moral failings of the wealthier social ranks and that clearly enunciated concepts of righteousness and justice. This ballad was a clear illustration of such traits; it told how the young daughter of a Yorkshire Duke had a secret affair with her father's clerk, became pregnant and then murdered her newborn babes (for she had twins). She stabbed her offspring in the heart with a penknife and dug a grave in the forest in which she buried them. However, when she returned to her father's house her victim's ghosts appeared before her, 'as naked as e're they was born'. Taking a speaking role, the children condemned her murderous deed declaring, 'O Mother, O Mother for your sin/Heaven-gates you shall not enter in'. The moral message as well as its intended audience was made clear in the final lines, 'Young Ladies all of beauty bright/Take warning by her last good-night'. The ballad, printed in roman-letter typeface may well have attracted the notice of the better sorts but it is more likely that the presentation and form of *The Duke's Daughter's Cruelty* reflected

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<sup>45</sup> *The Duke's Daughter's Cruelty: Or, The Wonderful Apparition of two Infants whom she Murther'd and Buried in a Forrest, for to hide her Shame* (London, 1692).



changes in the ballad production process. By 1700 black-letter typescript was increasingly supplanted by roman-letter but far from losing touch with their traditional market, publishers retained black-letter headings to establish continuity and to let readers know what kind of ballad this was.<sup>46</sup> The title of John Deacon's ballad was indeed produced in black-letter script and set 'To an excellent new Tune'. Moreover, Deacon's willingness to publish ghost stories was significant because alongside Philip Brooksby, Josiah Blare and John Back, he was one of the group of London men known as 'the Ballad Partners'. Apprentices of Wright, Clarke, Passinger and Thackeray, these men commanded a virtual monopoly of ballad printing in London and indeed across the country until the Licensing Act of 1695 and opened production up to a much wider market.<sup>47</sup> John Deacon also published the ballad of *The True Lover's Ghost* in 1671 and in partnership with Brooksby, Blare and Back he also invested in *An Answer to the Unfortunate Lady* in which an avenging ghost was the star character. Ghost stories were clearly a good investment and in the consumer driven world of balladry this implies that a good return was expected from a vibrant consumer market that devoured these accounts with alacrity.<sup>48</sup>

Ghost stories thus provided a space for the active agency of the more marginalized social groups in early modern England and a means by which the suspicions of less wealthy men and women, and sometimes children, could compete on a stronger footing with their superiors. Ghosts, primarily understood as God's messengers, were emblematic of unspoken truths and were commonly expected to uphold principles of social justice. Narrative structures could thus have important public consequences and allowed local and national concerns to be effectively connected. As will become clear from chapters three, five and six these themes

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<sup>46</sup> For fuller discussion see McShane Jones, 'Rime and Reason', p.13.

<sup>47</sup> For descriptions of the ballad partners see Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, ff.84.

<sup>48</sup> In 1674 Philip Brooksby published the ballad of *The Disturbed Ghost* that featured in chapter one.

resonated throughout the eighteenth century and were deeply woven into the cultural fabric of English society.

Ghost stories were however configured in a variety of different ways and often for less dramatic purposes than to bring accusations of murder. They could operate on a more informal level that did not involve the collusion of local officials. These practical uses were made clear in ballads and chapbooks but were also confirmed in other published and unpublished works that were less noted for presenting an ambiguous mixture of factual and fictional events. In his collection of antiquities and popular superstitions, Royal Society man John Aubrey described how ghost stories were used as a tactic to secure occupancy. 'It is certain' he wrote 'that there are Houses that are haunted, tho not so many as reported, for there are a great many cheates used by Tenants'.<sup>49</sup> The Yorkshire antiquary and Royal Society member Abraham De La Pryme recalled that a great house near his childhood home remained perennially unoccupied 'by reason of the great disturbancys that had been there by spirits...of whome there are many dreadfull long tales'.<sup>50</sup> In his *History and Reality of Apparitions* Daniel Defoe would later remark on 'how many houses have been almost pull'd down' on account of rumours that ghosts inhabited them.<sup>51</sup> The prospect of living in a haunted house was thus an unattractive prospect and might well prove a deterrent to alternative occupants, or help to ward off rent increase by grasping landlords. The invention of the ghost in such scenarios is however less significant than the belief that such tactics could be successful. In a similar vein, the chapbook entitled *A Strange but true Relation of the Discovery of a most horrid and bloody Murder* (1678) also included the story of a ghost that haunted a rich and greedy executor who attempted to usurp the fortune of two young orphans. The

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<sup>49</sup> J. Aubrey, *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, 1686-87, ed. J. Britten (London, 1881), p.104.

<sup>50</sup> C. Jackson (ed.), *The Diary of Abraham De La Pryme, The Yorkshire Antiquary*, Surtees Society, Vol. LIV (Durham, 1870), entry from 1680.

<sup>51</sup> D. Defoe, *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (London, 1727), p.280.



ballad of *The Rich Man's Warning-Piece; or, the Oppressed Infants in Glory* (1683) similarly related how a ghost came to punish a rich farmer from Reading who murdered two young children in his charge in order to claim their inheritance for himself. This ghost was one of many that was explicitly understood to embody values of social justice and equity; the readers of this ballad were clearly identified by the author and issued with the following warning. 'You rich men all that do in London dwell,/Give ear unto this story which I do tell,/And be content with what the Lord has gave,/To wrong the Poor besure you no way Crave.'<sup>52</sup> Restoration ghost stories can thus be understood as part of a policy of popular resistance against social superiors, but also as a weapon to secure social and economic survival more generally. They might therefore be included as a miscellaneous item in the 'economy of makeshifts' in women's lives identified by Olwen Hufton.<sup>53</sup> As Laura Gowing suggests, ghost stories filled 'compelling gaps in public discourse' by shedding light on the otherwise invisible preoccupations, fears and fantasies of the poorer sorts.<sup>54</sup> Ghost stories thus fit with the emphases of 'popular culturalist' historians by showing how language and familiar narrative structures were used by the poor and the marginalized to negotiate power and authority.

This antagonistic trend should not be overstated however since this strategy could also work in the opposite direction. *An Account of a most Horrid and Barborous Murther and Robbery, Committed on the Body of Captain Brown* (1694) is a case in point. The murder of this prosperous gentleman near his hometown of Shrewsbury made for sensational news because his own Tennant and Servant' had killed him.<sup>55</sup> The servant was in debt to Captain Brown for the sum of fifty pounds in

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<sup>52</sup> *A Strange, but true Relation. The Rich Man's Warning-Piece; or, the Oppressed Infants in Glory* (London, 1683 & 1770).

<sup>53</sup> O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe* (London, 1995).

<sup>54</sup> Gowing, 'The Haunting of Susan Lay', *Gender & History*, p.196.

<sup>55</sup> *An Account of a most Horrid and Barborous Murther and Robbery, Committed on the Body of Captain Brown, near Shrewsbury in Shropshire* (London, 1694).

rent and this it seems provided the essential motivation for killing his master whom he seized one night with the assistance of his 'Labouring fellows'. His head was lopt off, thrown in a sack and his body unceremoniously buried in a nearby hop field. Lacking any witnesses to the crime, the Captain's ghost reportedly appeared to two gentlewomen of his acquaintance and to another gentleman from the same village. The ghost again confirmed already existing suspicions that the servant had been complicit in the murder and he was eventually apprehended and sent to Shrewsbury Prison before his victim's body was finally unearthed from its undignified burial place. The characters in this tale along with the scenario itself may well have spoken to the interests of the middling and upper sorts. A second report of the ghost published in 1694 noted that a servant had killed his master for love of money and that 'an apparition made some signs of this murder to some of his friends'.<sup>56</sup> On a more informal level, Daniel Defoe described how a miserly gentleman spread the false rumour of a ghost to con some credulous country folk into completing expensive excavation work on his property; it seems that these makeshift labourers were sustained in their toil by the promise of discovering hidden treasure.<sup>57</sup>

Ghost stories highlight elements of class conflict in Restoration England. However, this was not the primary function of these narratives and if ghost stories had a job description it would be of a more generic kind, to punish dishonesty and sin – values upon which most members of society were agreed. Within this remit, conflicts and accusations could arise between servant and master, landlord and tenant, but also within families and between husbands and wives and these domestic themes will be explored more fully in chapter three. By manipulating the established meanings of ghosts, these narratives could be appropriated for highly specific purposes. The examples described above suggest that a wide range of people were

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<sup>56</sup> *Fifth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, Part I, Series 4* (London, 1876), p.384.

<sup>57</sup> D. Defoe, *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (London, 1727), ff.375.



sufficiently familiar with the meanings commonly attached to ghosts, with the contexts in which they were generally expected to appear and with the narrative frameworks used to frame successful accusations and to cast suspicion. This kind of knowledge was fed by the products of the cheap print trade that was both influenced by and that helped to shape understandings of ghosts in wider society. More creative use of ghost stories was then a notable theme in ballad and chapbook accounts from the later seventeenth-century. As I argued in chapter one, this was partly due to the fact that ghosts were deconfessionalised in Restoration England, publicly legitimating their entry into print and sometimes into legal proceedings. Of course ghost stories were not universally condemned as Catholic forgeries before 1660 but their appearances outside of purely religious contexts proliferated in the final decades of the seventeenth century. This may have been due to the greater volume of stories churned out by the cheap print industry, to the increasing redefinition of ghost stories in terms of their relevance to the trials and tribulations of daily life, and to the more animated role taken by ordinary people as producers and consumers of these stories.

#### **IV The Geography of Ghost Stories**

Evidence from cheap printed accounts has so far revealed no clear-cut pattern in the social distribution of ghost belief. Ghost stories that originated in provincial centres reinforce this conclusion and also highlight deliberate interaction between learned and unlearned folk who shared overlapping interests in ghostly phenomena, though perhaps for different reasons. Provincial accounts position ghost stories as an important site of cultural exchange whilst also highlighting the different contexts in which both characters and readers became involved with these narratives. The first thing to note about regional ghost stories was that the vast majority featured the formal examinations and depositions of local magistrates. This was certainly a more

pronounced feature of regional ghost stories where the very act of printing represented a process of negotiation between lettered and unlettered and between oral and written modes of communication. The physical processes of print production in regional centres (or lack thereof) made this more distinct than in London accounts. With the Licensing Act of 1695, London lost its printing monopoly and permanent presses were established on a wide scale throughout England and Scotland.<sup>58</sup> These changes led to numerous re-prints of older chapbook and ballad accounts that were produced in new forms and distributed to fresh audiences. These years also saw a shift from the production of black-letter ballads to 'slip ballads' which were shorter, usually illustrated and allowed publishers to produce three different ballads on one sheet of paper, thus maximising space and lowering the production costs of cheap print even further.<sup>59</sup>

Prior to 1695 however, regional ghost stories had to pass through London before they could be enshrined in print and peddled in the marketplace. Many regional ghost stories must then have remained in oral communities, but those that did make it into print most often featured revelations of murder, which necessarily engaged the participation of local officials. Magistrates and church officials were often made up of the middling sorts and it makes sense that these people figure more prominently in regional ghost stories, reinforcing recent historical work that identifies these men as important mediators between local and national cultures.<sup>60</sup> These were the people most likely to possess advanced literacy skills and as I will suggest below in the case of Isabel Binnington, they were among the first to hear news of the latest ghost sighting and were well positioned to spread it to friends and acquaintances through networks of correspondence.

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<sup>58</sup> For a fuller description of the spread of regional printing after 1695 see T. Jones, *Street Literature in Birmingham: A History of Broadside and Chapbook* (Oxford, 1970).

<sup>59</sup> McShane Jones, 'Rime and Reason', p.14.

<sup>60</sup> Fox, *Oral and Literate Cultures*.



The case of the Exeter ghost, discussed previously, underlined the circularity of oral and written representations of ghosts that characterised regional reports. News of this particular ghost was 'common discourse' in the town according to the author of *The Wonder of This Age* who claimed that 'many Whole-sale Men' heard of the affair from neighbourhood gossip 'at the last Fair at Exeter'. Nonetheless, the printed version of the story was based on 'Letters to divers worthy Persons in London; as by the Information of several credible People, lately come from the Parts wherein the Thing was transacted'.<sup>61</sup> Another chapbook based on this tale and perhaps directed at a more educated audience also reached the printing presses of London after the story was 'taken from the mouth of a civil person that lived very near the place where this fact was committed, and came to Town on Fryday night last'.<sup>62</sup> The geographical space separating provincial centres from metropolitan printers was thus an important factor in determining whether oral reports of ghosts reached a wider audience. This physical gap could be bridged however by visitors to the capital and through networks of private correspondence which, as we will see, were commonly used to transport ghost stories across the country.

*A Warning Piece for the World, or, a Watch-Word to England* is a case in point. In 1655 the ghost of a gentleman 'in bright and glittering armour' appeared to one William Morgan, a farmer near Hereford, and to his shepherd John Rogers. The pair were so amazed by the event that they immediately told passers by 'what they had seen and heard' and news of the ghost soon spread around the whole village. The author of this chapbook account neatly described how the report came to be published when he assured his readers that

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<sup>61</sup> *The Wonder of This Age: or, God's Miraculous Revenge against MURDER. Being a RELATION of an undoubted Truth out of the WEST* (London, 1677).

<sup>62</sup> *A Strange, but true Relation.*

the certainty of this hath been confirmed by divers Persons about the City, who have read Letters from good hands to justifie the same, which Letters have been said to be signed by the hands of the Church-wardens, and the rest of the Masters of the Parish which came as true and certain Newes to London, to be put in Print, to the end that all Men and Women that hear of it, may repent and amend their sinfull Lives.<sup>63</sup>

The translation of this report into print is significant for a number of reasons. First, it shows that the ghost excited the interest of important sections of the Exeter community; second, it demonstrates that important audiences existed in London for the reception of these narratives and third, it highlights the importance of physical proximity and/or accessibility to the London printing presses.

*The Examination of Isabel Binnington of Great-Driffield* (1662) and *A Strange and wonderfull Discovery of a horrid and cruel Murther* (1662) add further support to this conclusion.<sup>64</sup> Both were short printed chapbooks, approximately eight pages in length and told how a ghost, eager to avenge his murder, visited a young Yorkshire woman named Isabel Binnington in 1662. Isabel was most likely a servant and had only recently moved to the East Riding when the ghost first appeared in her house. It visited a number of times and claimed to be the restless spirit of one Robert Elliott, a Londoner who had been robbed and murdered by three women whilst sleeping in Binnington's house fourteen years earlier. To corroborate the ghost's story, Isabel dug up some loose mould from under the floor and there she discovered a pile of human bones along

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<sup>63</sup> *A Warning Piece for the World, or, A Watch-Word to England* (London, 1655).

<sup>64</sup> *The Examination of Isabel Binnington of Great-Driffield* (York, 1662); *A Strange and wonderfull Discovery of a horrid and cruel Murther committed fourteen years since, upon the Person of Robert Eliot of London, at Great Driffield in the East-Riding of the County of York* (London, 1662).



with a stake that had been driven through the victim's corpse.<sup>65</sup> The ghost revealed an elaborate biography to Isabel, vividly describing the circumstances of his death and details of his killers. Isabel's testimony therefore stuck to the familiar narrative conventions met with in the Exeter report, associating the ghost with sudden death, robbery and murder. Familiarity with this tried and tested narrative formula may well have helped to persuade the magistrates that Isabel's testimony was authentic. Local magistrate Thomas Crompton was sufficiently convinced that he instructed Isabel to address the ghost the next time it appeared and to ask it 'the names of those that murdered it', the details of which are included in the deposition itself. Isabel's evidence led moreover to further excavations after magistrates made inquiries in neighbouring parishes where the ghost claimed his murderers now lived. The legal 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 humble maidservant. Ghost stories thus provided opportunities for knowledge exchange between different social groups.

The production, circulation and reception of ghost stories in London provide a somewhat different picture from the process encountered in regional accounts. As I have proposed, reports of ghosts originating in London were likely to have been privileged in terms of potential circulation at the time of printing and historical survival, and this was largely thanks to physical proximity to a large number of printing presses. This geographical advantage also ensured that a different type of ghost appeared in these stories, one that was less reliant

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<sup>65</sup> This detail supported a verdict of murder since it was a well documented practice that driving a stake through a corpse was believed to physically pin the spirit of the deceased into the ground, thereby preventing their ghost returning to identify the killer. See N. Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past and Present*, No. 151 (August, 1996).

on learned mediation and which suggests a more direct relationship between ghostly gossip on the streets of London and the products of the printing press.

*The Rest-less Ghost: or, Wonderful News from Northamptonshire and Southwark* was a short eight-page chapbook published in London in 1675. It told the story of a ghost that appeared to William Clark, a Maltster from Hennington in Northamptonshire.<sup>66</sup> The ghost claimed to be the spirit of a man murdered ‘two hundred and sixty seven years, nine weeks and two days ago’. Greed was the motive for the killing, the ghost claimed that his head had been chopped off ‘for lucre and covetousness of my Estate’ and although he had once haunted the place where he had formerly lived in Southwark, ‘the Magical Art of a certain Fryer’ had prevented him from appearing on earth for the last two hundred and fifty years. This account decried the sins of murder and avarice according to the conventions of the ghost narrative already set out, but it seems that the story was only printed after William Clark journeyed to London in person at the ghost’s request on 10 January 1675. Since the alleged murder had taken place such a long time before, there was no chance that the perpetrator could be brought to temporal justice and so the relation was of no immediate relevance to the local authorities. This report was therefore based on William Clark’s personal testimony and on the report of the ‘Carryer from that Town’ who ‘told all this of the story at the Castle-Inn without Smithfield-Bars’. William Clark evidently followed him there since the frontispiece advertised that this relation was ‘taken from the said Will. Clarks own Mouth, who came to London on purpose, and will be Attested and Justified by Will. Stubbins, John Charlton, and John Stevens, to be spoken with any day, at the Castle Inn’. This chapbook made no claims to learned authority and Clark’s testimony seems to have spread to the

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<sup>66</sup> *The Rest-less Ghost: or, Wonderful News from Northamptonshire, and Southwark* (London, 1675).



printing press via gossip from the local alehouse. Smithfield-Bars housed a particularly dense concentration of inns and probably enjoyed a vibrant culture of gossip and storytelling in which Clark's story was likely to spread quickly. Clark's ghost also appeared in a ballad named *Strange News from Northampton* which was printed by Richard Burton. This ballad came replete with woodcuts of the ghost and Hyder Rollins judged that this tale was 'based on oral, rather than written, reports'.<sup>67</sup>

Spatial dimensions were key to the way this tale was produced and disseminated since the site of ghost's appearance at Southwark and its narration in the Castle Inn was just a stone's throw from the print-works of Richard Burton in Horseshoe Lane, Smithfield. The chapbook and ballad versions of this story both identified the Castle Inn as an important site of dissemination and strong local interest in the case was presupposed by the author of the chapbook who noted that the story was 'sufficiently known to most on that side of the water', that is to say on the South Bank of the Thames near Southwark. Although Richard Burton's ballad may well have circulated outside of London, the author of this piece also hinted that a local audience would form a strong part of his readership; he thus addressed the account to 'friends and neighbours' and explained where the town of Hinnington was actually located for those unfamiliar with Northamptonshire.

In 1691 Southwark also played host to a 'dreadful ghost' that haunted a sawyer named John Dyer of St. Mary-Ovres and that was narrated in a short chapbook.<sup>68</sup> The author of this account seems to have interviewed Dyer personally, along with his friends and acquaintances and the tale presupposed a

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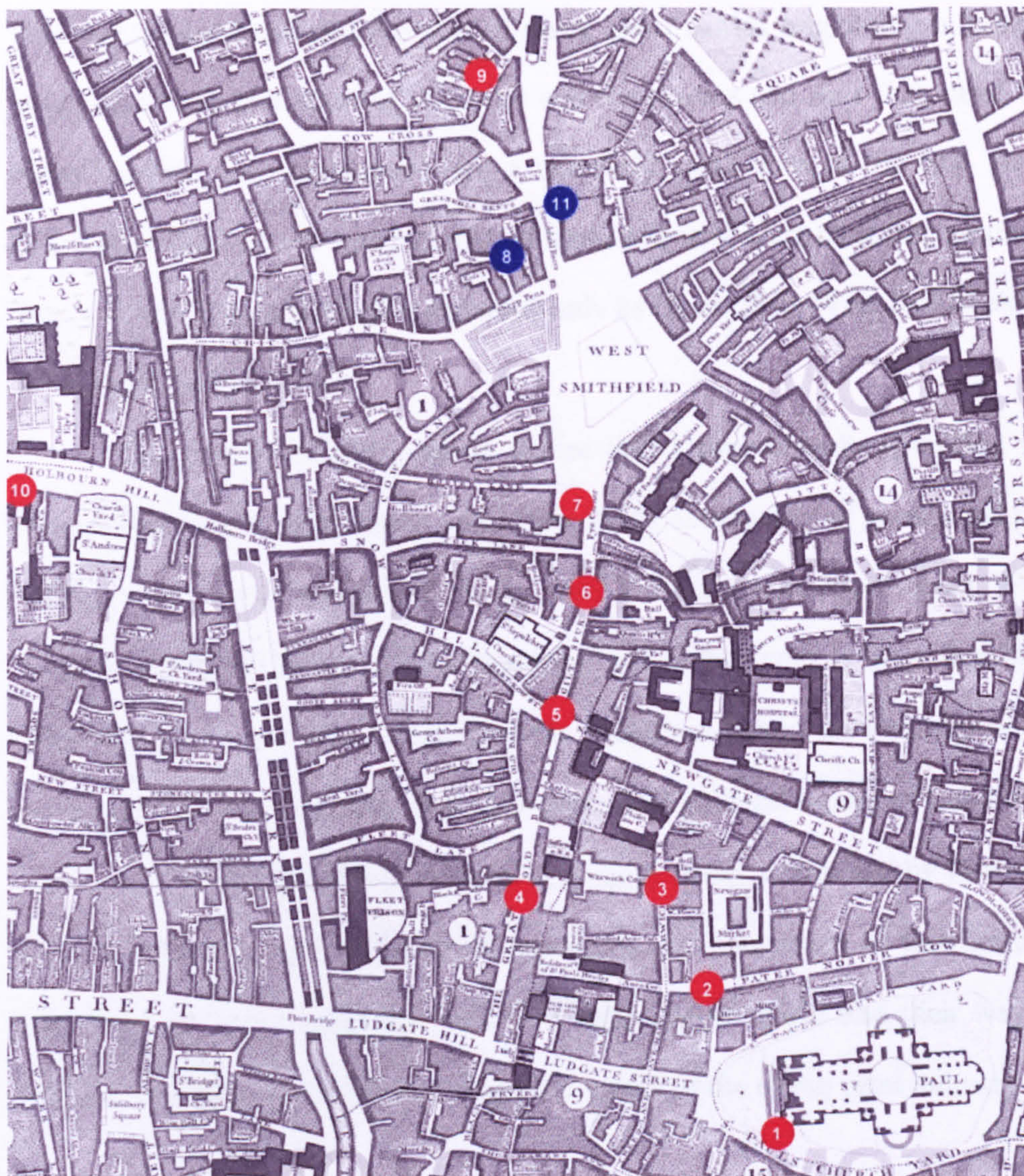
<sup>67</sup> 'Strange News and Wonderful News from Northampton-shire, OR, The Discontented Spirit', in H.E. Rollins (ed.), *The Pack of Autolytus*, No.30, pp.179-184.

<sup>68</sup> *A True Relation of the Dreadful Ghost Appearing to one John Dyer in Winchester Yard, near St. Mary-Ovres in Southwarke* (London, 1691).

good deal of local knowledge, mentioning a series of locations and characters including 'Barnaby-street' and 'Mr. Mealing the Brewer' that would hold little relevance for readers outside the Southwark area. Moreover, the story may have satisfied local curiosity since Dyer was a well-known figure, having lately kept 'a Victualling-House at the Sign of the *Blew-Coat* in *Deadman's place* in *Southwark*'. A ballad of 1661 entitled *A True and Perfect Relation from the Faulcon at the Banke-side* displayed similar characteristics. It described how the ghost of Mr Powell, a baker from Southwark who had died some five months before, appeared to his maidservant Joan and looked 'sometimes like a goat...and sometimes like a Catt'. Again, knowledge of the geography of London lent greater familiarity to the tale since the ghost was spied 'Close by the faulcon' which the author claimed was a familiar local landmark in Southwark. Nonetheless the author clearly intended his song to reach a wider audience declaring his intention to 'To let the nation know' about this peculiar preternatural event and his account included a number of woodcuts as well as lively dialogue. Significantly, this ballad was found among the the collections of famous antiquarian Anthony Wood. Along with the likes of Samuel Pepys and John Aubrey, Wood provides a good example of another context in which the ghost stories of cheap print could reach a more educated audience - through the practice of collecting, a much neglected phenomenon in the current historiography of this period.

If these ghost stories were in some ways targeted at local audiences, they also contained messages that were more widely applicable, namely condemnations of murder, sin and moral laxity. Such accounts do however highlight how ghost stories based on oral reports and local hearsay could more easily find their way into print in London than in regional areas.





**Figure 2:** Map of West Smithfield and St. Paul's Churchyard, London. From *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey* (Rocque's London Map, 1714), [http://hri.shef.ac.uk/db/bailey/rocque.jsp?m\\_id=2722&section\\_x=16&section\\_y=8&tagtype=2](http://hri.shef.ac.uk/db/bailey/rocque.jsp?m_id=2722&section_x=16&section_y=8&tagtype=2) (24 February 2005).

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|--|--|
| <b>1 William Gilbertson – Printworks</b> | <b>6 John Deacon – Printworks</b>  |
| <b>2 Benjamin Bragg – Printworks</b>     | <b>7 Philip Brooksby – Printworks</b>  |
| <b>3 James Roberts – Printworks</b>      | <b>8 Adam and Eve Inn – Featured in Great News from Middle-Row in Holborn (1680)</b>   |
| <b>4 John Wright – Printworks</b>        | <b>9 Richard Burton - Printworks</b>   |
| <b>5 Thomas Vere - Printworks</b>        | <b>10 Ghost sighting of Mrs. Adkins – Featured in Great News from Middle-Row in Holborn (1680) and The Midwives Ghost (1680)</b> |
|  | <b>11 Castle Inn – Featured in The Rest-less Ghost (1675)</b>  |



It is highly significant that the sites of many ghost stories originating in London, the print houses that churned them out and the taverns and inns that aided their dissemination, were condensed into a relatively small area of the city. As the map below sets out, the vast majority of these activities were clustered around St. Paul's Churchyard and usually extended only as far north as West Smithfield and as far south as Southwark.

The printers of cheap ghost stories that I have already identified were almost without exception based within this lively community of gossip and print. William Gilbertson was based in St. Paul's Churchyard itself, John Wright worked out of Old Bailey, Philip Brooksby was to be found at West Smithfield, John Deacon on adjacent Giltspur Street, Benjamin Bragg on Paternoster Row and James Roberts on nearby Warwick Lane. The physical layout of London was thus crucial in determining the character of many ghost stories and by facilitating the role played by ordinary folk as producers and consumers of this literature. The everyday experiences and beliefs of these people could find their way into print more easily in London and shape the output of the cheap print industry.

## **V Production and Performance**

So far I have examined some of the reasons why ghost stories were produced in oral communities, how they were presented in ballads and chapbooks, why they were appealing and some of the ways in which they were distributed. In this section I return to the third part of the tripartite model set out in the introduction to this chapter - to the reception of cheaply printed ghost stories when they flowed back into oral communities. The reception of ghost stories, as with many texts, is notoriously difficult, if not impossible to reconstruct with any precision. However, I want to offer some broad suggestions about how these



texts *might* have been read or how printers, publishers and authors expected them to be read based on material production and aided by socio-linguistic theories. It is clear from the way that most ballads and some chapbooks were produced that they were meant to be performed, to be read out, sung or discussed among friends, family and neighbours.

Those who had not seen a ghost in the flesh (so to speak) could vicariously enjoy the experience at second hand through stories that employed lively narrative detail, dialogue and dense contextualisation to sustain interest. The importance of contextualisation cannot be overstated in this formula since the 'thick description' offered by both percipients and printers of ghost stories established plausibility and allowed testimonies like that of Isabel Binnington to engage the imagination of local officials. As I have already suggested, this kind of 'thick description' was, according to Walter Ong, more reminiscent of speech communities. The ghost stories of cheap print reflected these characteristics to a large extent, influenced by oral forms and often including direct speech and conversation between the main characters involved in the text. By incorporating these aspects, writers, printers and publishers began the process of reconverting the written word into speech, assisting the reintegration of the narrative into oral communities. This practice was vital and suggests that the producers of ghost stories recognised the centrality of oral performance in these narratives, for as Walter Ong has argued, 'the written text, for all its permanence means nothing, is not even a text, except in relationship to the spoken word. For a text to be intelligible, to deliver its message, it must be reconverted into sound'.<sup>69</sup> The oral performance of ghost stories was particularly appropriate because speech contains qualities well suited to dramatic reconstructions of events such as

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<sup>69</sup> W.J. Ong, in Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word*, p.31.

intonation, pitch, stress and tempo, all of which translate badly into print.<sup>70</sup> Socio-linguist Dick Leith acknowledged the persuasiveness of oral performances, characterising conversation as ‘a form of physical behaviour’ and a convincing one at that, making use of the eyes, the head, hand gestures and body language to convey authenticity and meaning.<sup>71</sup>

The aural experience of ghost stories was further augmented by the use of music in balladry and which fitted with broader societal emphases on lyrical forms and song. In contemporary educational practices, children learned their alphabet with a hornbook and usually ‘in a sing-song, forwards and backwards’.<sup>72</sup> Ministers and churchmen also relied on oral performance to communicate important religious messages; the catechism was not just a test of memory requiring the child to learn the written text; he or she had also to perform it, with the minister putting questions to the child who responded verbally. Liturgical practice further emphasised the centrality of orality to elements of contemporary religious culture; Easter communicants and intended marriage partners were expected to ‘say by heart’ the crucial prayers and precepts; they were not required to read them.<sup>73</sup> Faith was also reinforced by regular sermons, which, as noted in the previous chapter, were especially popular in Restoration England and provided a dramatic and performative quality to religious practice.

The Protestant Church also provided textual aids for parishioners through publications of the Bible, Psalters and prayer books, many of which were abridged, simple and illustrated.<sup>74</sup> Parallels can again be drawn with cheap

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<sup>70</sup> David Olson for example, notes that variations of intonation in speech gives rise ‘to radically different interpretations’ among listeners, *World on Paper*, p.8.

<sup>71</sup> Leith, *A Social History of English*, p.89.

<sup>72</sup> K. Thomas, ‘The Meaning of Literacy’, in Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word*, p.98.

<sup>73</sup> Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order*, p.14.

<sup>74</sup> Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*; I. Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003).



printed ghost stories that very often included lively depictions of ghosts in woodcut form. The image featured below was the most common woodcut illustration of a ghost met with in the texts examined here and this stock figure appeared in the ballads of *The Midwives Ghost*, *Strange and wonderful News from Northampton-shire*, *A True and Perfect Relation from the Faulcon*, *A Godly Warning to all Maidens* and *The Lamentation of Dell's Mistris*.



**Figure 3:** Woodcut of Ghost in Winding Sheet. From *The Rest-less Ghost* (London, 1675)

In chapbook publications, similar woodcuts were also reproduced in *The Rest-less Ghost*, *A True Relation of the Dreadful Ghost Appearing to one John Dyer* and notably in *The Lord Stafford's Ghost* – a political commentary that used the execution of the Earl of Strafford as a warning to Catholic conspirators in the highly charged atmosphere of suspicion that followed rumours of a Popish Plot in 1678.<sup>75</sup> Figure 4 below shows a similar but slightly more sophisticated image of a ghost that appeared in *The Wonder of This Age*.

<sup>75</sup> A number of 'ghosts' were employed in this polemical battle, usually being used to claim authority from the words of the dead. Christopher Ness, *The Lord Stafford's GHOST: Or, A Warning to TRAITORS* (London, 1680).



**Figure 4:** Woodcut of Ghost in Winding Sheet. From *The Wonder of This Age* (London, 1677)

These images were directly relevant to the text and added meaning to it. In all of these illustrations the ghost appears in familiar guise, bursting out from its winding sheet and holding a lighted faggot in one hand – that is to say a bundle of sticks or twigs that were tied together and lighted. Before the repeal of the Heresy laws in 1559 as part of the Elizabethan Settlement, convicted heretics were made to carry faggots as a sign of their sin but also to encourage repentance since if they failed to recant, faggots would be used to light the fire at their own public burnings. The depiction of faggots in Restoration woodcuts did not symbolise heresy but may well have represented symbols of justice, both social and divine. Just as the heretic was punished for transgressing the religious laws of the kingdom, the ghost carrying a lighted faggot announced its mission of vengeance and reaffirmed its mandate as the righteous nemesis of murderers, sinners and oath-breakers. In this guise, faggots may well have acted as signifiers of religious legitimacy, connecting with the spirituality of the masses.



Nonetheless, the faggot may also have served a more mundane function - to allow ghosts to see where they were going since it was almost always nighttime when they appeared as suggested by the crescent moon in the top corner of Figure 3. This might seem a strange proposition to the modern reader but as these woodcuts suggest, visual depictions of ghosts from Restoration England show that ghosts were imagined in less abstract terms and were closely related to the state of the physical body at the moment of death. Ghosts were depicted as flesh and bones, with the prominence of the winding sheet serving to associate ghosts with the practical rituals of death and burial and to suggest their closeness to the temporal world.

Furthermore, woodcut depictions of ghosts rarely bore any distinguishing features that identified them as particular individuals. This may have been due to the expense involved in producing woodcuts, which as McShane Jones points out were resources that were shared among many printers and publishers.<sup>76</sup> However, this lack of individuality also points to the broader purpose of these images, as a visual *memento mori* or general reminder of the fragile condition of the human body. Nigel Llewellyn has demonstrated the centrality of print and pictures in the mortuary culture of early modern England and has emphasised the role that these images played in preparing people for physical death by confronting them with vivid images of bodily dissolution.<sup>77</sup> Curiously, woodcuts were missing from Llewellyn's list and the significance of these images has thus far been neglected by those engaged in the social history of death. Cheap printed woodcuts of ghosts could by no means compete with the artistic excellence of Robert Walker, John Souch and Thomas Stothard but they deserve consideration alongside these painters as part of the diverse repertoire of mortuary images

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<sup>76</sup> McShane Jones, 'Rime and Reason', p.28.

<sup>77</sup> N. Llewellyn, *The Art of Death, Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual c.1500-1800* (London, 1997).



designed to inspire thoughts of individual mortality.<sup>78</sup> If only in terms of the sheer scale of their distribution, these crude images of ghosts deserve greater historical attention since they were among the most familiar and accessible images of death that were available in these years – especially for those who pasted ballad and chapbook images on the walls of their homes as domestic decoration. The illustration shown in Figure 5 reinforces the similarity of woodcut depictions of ghosts to the ways in which ghosts were imagined by early modern men and women.



**Figure 5:** Reader's Sketch of Ghost (Artist Unknown). From P. Le Loyer, *A Treatise of Specters or Straunge Sights, Visions and Apparitions appearing sensibly unto men* (London, 1605).

<sup>78</sup> All three painters contributed work related to the context of death, Robert Walker painted a famous oil canvas of John Evelyn in 1648, John Souch produced the portrait entitled *Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife* in 1636 and Thomas Stothard's watercolour, *Burying the Dead* from 1792 evoked similar contemplations of mortality. See Llewellyn, *The Art of Death*, p.6, 48, 82.



A seventeenth-century reader of Pierre Le Loyer's *Treatise of Specters* sketched this ghost next to the title-page of the text and it is strikingly similar to the iconographical images shown above.<sup>79</sup>

The material production of cheap printed ghost stories thus ensured that written accounts of ghosts could be brought to life through lively verbal performances and dramatic visual imagery that were designed to add deeper meaning and lend authenticity to the text. The reminiscences of adult male writers who tended to recall ghost stories from their childhood suggests that these strategies were effective in engaging the attention of readers. A history of memory offers one possible way of explaining the prominence of ghost stories in the contemporary imagination and I will discuss this at greater length in chapter six. For now it is important to recognise that the medium of cheap print was itself crucial in sustaining the popularity and relevance of ghost stories.

## **Conclusion**

Ghost stories were not a fixed literary genre in Restoration England but instead these figures were character actors in different categories of cheap print of which the two most prominent were murder pamphlets and courtship ballads. As I have argued, the compelling association of ghosts with death, love and marriage – rites of passage in which everyone would at some time participate – had its origins in contemporary belief but was considerably elaborated by the products of the cheap print trade. As Adam Fox has argued, 'the written word tended to augment the spoken, reinventing it and making it anew'.<sup>80</sup> Printed ghost stories could lend authority to their oral counterparts as well as spreading them to fresh

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<sup>79</sup> This sketch appeared in a 1605 edition of Pierre Le Loyer's, *A Treatise of Specters or Straunge Sights, Visions and Apparitions appearing sensibly unto men* (London, 1605). This text was reprinted in English in 1658 and 1659.

<sup>80</sup> Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, p.5.

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audiences. This reciprocal process therefore had important implications for the longevity of ghost stories in the marketplace of cheap print and in the contemporary imagination. By drawing on real-life ghost sightings, ballad and chapbook accounts helped both to construct and to propagate established conventions, contexts and narrative frameworks in which the appearance of ghosts was plausible and in which they made sense to readers. Moreover the wide dissemination of these narratives meant that ghost stories could be appropriated and manipulated by different social groups for highly specific purposes, whether to cast suspicion on supposed murderers, to publicly humiliate cheating lovers or to solve housing problems. Thus the products of cheap print highlight the increasing integration of ghost stories with the daily concerns of the living as they were laid open to more creative usages by broad sections of the population.

These flexible configurations of ghost stories found their origin in widespread understandings of ghosts as opponents of wrongdoing and revealers of sinful secrets. The idea that God sanctioned avenging ghosts authorised men and women from a variety of social backgrounds to take their revelations seriously. As we have seen in this chapter, ghosts were thought to have important if somewhat ambiguous connections with popular religious belief and as I argued in chapter one, this was exploited by a number of ministers in Restoration England. Furthermore, the origins of ghost stories in oral communities, the propagation of these events through conversation, letters and formal depositions and the appearance of these tales on the open market, all identify the physical process of *printing the preternatural* as a socially inclusive activity, and one that highlights significant moments of knowledge exchange between different interest groups.



By acknowledging the value of oral testimony the ghost stories of ballad and chapbook fame highlight the role played by the poorer sorts as both producers and consumers of cheap print, especially but not exclusively in the London area. Ghost stories became a vehicle through which ordinary men and women could make their voices heard, utilising familiar narrative structures and received knowledge of ghosts to capitalise on their appearances. The middling and upper sorts could also utilise these narratives in similar ways, but their interest in ghost stories was also motivated by a variety of other reasons including legal obligation, empirical curiosity, religious conviction, antiquarianism and pure entertainment. There was however enough interest among the better-educated sorts to sanction a whole range of more sophisticated print products that featured ghosts in prominent roles.

As well as cutting across social and spatial boundaries, the ghost stories of cheap print could also overcome chronological divides. This chapter has focused on the ghost stories of cheap print from 1660-1700 because of the high volume that were published in these years, the sophistication of production techniques and because of the overlapping interest in ghosts in high and low places, which as chapter one suggests, was especially marked in this period. Nonetheless, despite the claims of some historians that the popularity of cheap print, and particularly balladry was dying out towards the start of the eighteenth century, these narratives continued to be reprinted in large numbers throughout the eighteenth century. In contrast to the 'political ghosts' discussed above, ghosts that appeared in ballads and chapbooks did not rely on political crises to secure an audience but benefited instead from the underlying and long-term interest of readers. As will become clear in chapter six when I examine ballad and chapbook ghosts from the later eighteenth century, many of the tales met

with here were recycled, reprinted and became familiar to new generations of men, women and children. Aside from the immediate interest excited by news of a murder, these stories were not very topical, and in the case of ballads were often undated, ensuring a wider distribution, a longer shelf life and a cheaper price because they were old. The ghost stories of cheap print thus had a timeless appeal largely thanks to the ubiquitous moral message inscribed in many of these texts. As will become clear from the chapters that follow, the ghost stories of cheap print were sufficiently flexible to interact with the new challenges and changing genres of eighteenth-century life and literature.



### Chapter Three

#### A New Canterbury Tale: The Haunting of Margaret Bargrave

There were 2 Persons, intimate Acquaintance, one call'd Mrs Bargrove, the Wife of an Attorney near St. George's Gate in the City of Canterbury, and the other Mrs Veal, who lately lived at Dover, where Mrs Bargrove lived formerly, and contracted their Familiarity.<sup>1</sup>

On Satterday Sept. 8 last Mrs Bargrave being in her little house alone She heard a little kind of a Rustle (It had just struck 12 at noon) & looking towards ye Door in came Mrs V[eal] with a Wrapping Gown & held it together with her hand to across, an handsome suit of Night Cloaths & hood & Silk handkerchief tyed about her neck.<sup>2</sup>

This Gentlewoman was much overjoyed at ye sight of Mrs Veal, and went to salute her, but she rushed by her, and sat herself down in a great armed Chair, and fel into discourse of severall things yt had hapned when they lived together at Dover.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Loyal Post: with Foreign and Inland Intelligence*, Number 14, From Friday 21 December to Monday 24 December 1705.

<sup>2</sup> 'Letter from E.B. at Canterbury to an Unknown Lady', 13 September 1705. This letter survives in manuscript form in correspondence of John Flamsteed, but is believed to be addressed to his wife. It is reproduced in full in M. Schonhorn (ed.) *Accounts of the Apparition of Mrs Veal by Daniel Defoe and Others*, Publication No. 115 (Los Angeles, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> 'Letter from Lucy Lukyn at Canterbury to her Aunt', 9 October 1705, in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.

Mrs Bargrave sat down beside her and told Mrs Veal she had been in a sad Humour just before she came in yes said Mrs V[eal] I perceivd it by your eyes is it noe better with you and your Husband then it used to be to which Mrs B[argrave] Replieing noe Mrs Veal there upon undertook to Comfort her by giving her hope that in a little time it wold be other wais and then fell into some religious Discourses and Exhortations and seeing a book lie in the Window asked Mrs B: what Book it was she said it was a book they two had taken great delight in Reading in at Dover it was Drelincourts Discourse against the fear of Death Mrs Veal Replied it was an exelent Book and full of truth.<sup>4</sup>

After this, She desired Mrs Bargrave to write a Letter to her Brother, and tell him, she wou'd have him give Rings to such and such; and that out of a Purse of Gold that was in her Cabinet, she wou'd have Two Broad-pieces given to her Cousin Watson.<sup>5</sup>

Then she [Mrs Veal] said, she would take her leave of her, and walk'd from Mrs Bargrave in her View, 'till a Turning interrupted the sight of her, which was three quarters after One in the Afternoon.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 'Letter from Stephen Gray at Canterbury to John Flamsteed at the Royal Observatory at Greenwich', 15 November 1705, Royal Greenwich Observatory, *Papers of John Flamsteed*, MS. 37 f 16. Also reproduced in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.

<sup>5</sup> C. Drelincourt, *The Christian's Defence Against the Fears of Death: With Directions how to Dye well, With An Account of Mrs Veal's Apparition to Mrs Bargrave* (London, 1720), xiii.

<sup>6</sup> *A True Relation of the APPARITION OF ONE Mrs Veal, The next Day after her Death, To One Mrs Bargrave, at Canterbury, The 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 1705* (London, 1706), vii.



On Monday morning [Mrs Bargrave] sent to Mr Watson's to enquire after Mrs Veal...They were surprised at her enquiring for Mrs Veal, and said, they were sure by their not seeing her, that she could not have been in Canterbury...In the mean time Capt. Watson came in, and told them of preparations making in town for the funeral of some person of note in Dover. This quickly raised apprehensions in Mrs Bargrave, who flew away directly to the undertakers, and was no sooner informed it was for Mrs Veal, but she fainted away in the street.<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

Mary Veal died following a sudden fit at twelve noon on Friday 7 September 1705 – one day *before* Margaret Bargrave had conversed with her friend in her Canterbury home and seen her with her own eyes. Little had Mrs Bargrave suspected that the familiar face that sat opposite her in the comfortable chair on Saturday afternoon had not been the person of Mary Veal, but her ghost instead. The details given above are snippets from the most famous ghost story of the eighteenth century, pieced together from surviving reports of Mary Veal's ghost that circulated in the first half of the century. They range from private correspondence to newspaper articles and commercialised versions of the story and it is on this rich diversity of sources, the characters involved in them and the people attracted by them, that this chapter is based.

Initially, I examine the local context of the narrative - why this story was produced, how the ghost was understood in the town of Canterbury and why a range of

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<sup>7</sup> Reverend Payne, *An Account of Mrs Veal's Appearance to Mrs Bargrave at Canterbury* (London, 1722), xiv. Also reproduced in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.

local notables took Margaret Bargrave's relation seriously. In its original domestic setting Margaret Bargrave's ghost story had very particular meanings, as a vehicle through which to publicise her marital problems and her mistreatment at the hands of her husband. The directions given by Mary Veal's ghost for the disposal of her modest estate also provoked tensions within the Veal family. Extending out from the milieu of the parish, I will also focus on how and why this Canterbury tale transcended its original domestic context to achieve national fame over a longer period of time. By focusing on the broader meanings of the story, the channels through which it circulated and the ways in which it was adapted for multiple audiences, the chapter will trace the complex evolution of both private and public reactions to this tale and to ghost stories in general over the first half of the eighteenth century. Key questions address how the ghost was interpreted across social and chronological boundaries, what means were employed to test the veracity of the relation, and how and by whom it was discredited by the middle of the eighteenth century.

During this process of reconstruction a wide variety of characters will be allowed to speak, from the maidservant who lived next door to Margaret Bargrave in Canterbury, to prominent Royal Society figures through to Queen Anne herself. The chapter will thus position ghost stories as facilitators of social interaction that also emphasise the fluid, if complex, connections between local and national cultures. Indeed public and private narratives have all too often been separated in the historiography of eighteenth-century England and particularly those narratives begun and propagated by women. By examining the central female protagonist in this tale, namely Margaret Bargrave, I will show how ghost stories could lend authority to female voices, allowing their domestic troubles to be aired in public spaces and in print to expose the misdeeds of men and to rally support for their cause.



Although this ghost story has been relatively well documented, most treatments have centred on the contribution of Daniel Defoe who penned the most famous rendition of the tale in 1706, entitled *A True Relation of the APPARITION of one Mrs Veal, The next Day after Her Death to one Mrs Bargrave at Canterbury*. Academic interest in the story has been largely confined to literary scholars, interested in the story for what it reveals about the elusive character of Defoe and the significance of his early work.<sup>8</sup> His literary renown has tended to overshadow the intrinsic historical merit of the story itself and no work has yet examined this tale for what it says about changing perceptions of ghosts in these years. Nonetheless, the association of Defoe with the ghost of Mary Veal and his propagation of ghost stories more generally in *The History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727) raises important questions for this study. Firstly, Defoe was acutely aware of his audience and he catered for a broad middle ground of educated opinion that wished to preserve the authenticity of *some* ghost stories whilst disassociating themselves from more vulgar accounts. Secondly, experts on Defoe have usefully pointed out the intricate mix of 'fact' and 'fiction' that he employed in his work. I want to suggest that Defoe's account of Mary Veal's ghost, though purporting to be a true and authentic relation of the event and being corroborated by a number of other accounts, helped to partially redefine the ghost story as a fictional entity. In an age that was beginning to enforce the ideological and practical separation of 'fact' from 'fiction', Defoe's work transgressed these not yet very firm boundaries and the controversies that surrounded his publication foreshadowed and perhaps eased the subsequent incorporation of ghost stories into novels and Gothic fictions of the later eighteenth century. Accounts of Mary Veal's ghost are thus invaluable for the level of insight they offer into the local context of ghost stories and the particular meanings attached to them;

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<sup>8</sup> See R.M. Baine, *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural* (Athens, GA, 1968), pp.80-81.

for identifying a broad range of interest groups that were willing to countenance the appearance of ghosts; for highlighting the interaction of local and national cultures and for showing how the genre of ghost stories itself developed and changed over the course of the period.

## I Breaking News

News travelled fast in Canterbury: the first extant report of Mary Veal's ghost was penned just five days after Mrs Bargrave encountered it. The account appeared in a letter from 'E.B.' at Canterbury to 'an unknown lady' and was dated 13 September 1705. E.B. had chosen this occasion to write because there had occurred 'such an extr. Thing in ys town, that I can't omit giving ye relation'.<sup>9</sup> The report itself adhered to the well-established pattern of ghost stories identified in the previous chapter whereby the spirit of someone lately deceased appeared to loved ones to reveal wrongdoing and to settle worldly affairs, in this case to detail the abuse of Mr Bargrave towards his wife and to publicise details of Mary Veal's personal bequests. The novelty of the relation for E.B. almost certainly arose from the physical proximity of the author to the scene of this wondrous event, and the letter prioritises the knowledge of the local parish about the central characters involved.<sup>10</sup>

E.B. gave an impressive account of Margaret Bargrave's life and circumstances and of her acquaintance with Mary Veal. Margaret Bargrave was an attorney's wife who had formerly lived in Dover and it was there that she had first met Mary Veal and the two had become childhood friends. Mary's father had taken little care of his children and she sometimes turned to Margaret Bargrave for want of food and clothing. Mary and her

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<sup>9</sup> 'Letter from E.B. at Canterbury', in Schonhorn (ed.) *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.

<sup>10</sup> The same excitement can be detected in the 'Letter from Lucy Lukyn to her Aunt', in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.



brother had also lodged with the Bargraves for a time before he was appointed to the Customhouse at Dover whereupon Mary, who kept her brother's house, was forced to move away from the neighbourhood. In contrast to the improvement in the fortunes of her friend, Margaret Bargrave's comfortable circumstances in Dover deteriorated shortly afterwards when her husband was removed from his job because 'he behav'd himself so ill in it, being Sottish & careless'. The Bargraves were forced to move to Canterbury to a much smaller house and with a significantly reduced income. The mistreatment of Margaret Bargrave at the hands of her husband Richard was common knowledge in the parish of St. Mary Bredin's and in the neighbouring parish of St. Margaret's, which was separated from Mrs Bargrave's by just a few houses.<sup>11</sup> On the day that Margaret Bargrave claimed to have seen Mary's ghost, her husband had returned home drunk and shut his wife out of doors. As E.B. wrote, the virtuous Mrs Bargrave 'not being willing to expose him & disturb ye neighbourhood walk'd & Sate on ye steps all Night.' When she was let back into the house the next morning 'She was so cold and had the Tooth-ach She went to bed & lay all day' whereupon she contracted a fever. The honest character of this 'good & discreet Woman' stood in stark relief to that of her drunken and abusive husband and served to support her testimony that she really had seen a ghost.

E.B.'s description of Mary Veal hinted at her incorporeal nature: she 'look'd very pale', refused to eat or drink anything and asked Margaret to write her list of bequests and send it to her brother. Nonetheless, E.B. never questioned the essential nature of the spirit that appeared. Was it for example an angel or a demon? Such metaphysical detail apparently held little relevance for the author or for the recipient of

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<sup>11</sup> For in-depth discussion of parish boundaries see D. Gardiner, 'What Canterbury Knew of Mrs Veal and Her Friends', *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 26 (April, 1931), p.191.

the letter. Instead E.B. identified the ghost as the true spirit of Mrs Veal by the familiar nature of her demands: by its concern for the welfare of Margaret Bargrave and by the desire to document the personal bequests of Mrs Veal's property. The ghost also articulated an anxiety about improper burial, since Veal's parents reportedly had 'no stone over their grave'. This detail appears exclusively in E.B.'s letter and firmly cements the understanding of this ghost in terms of the worldly concerns of Mary Veal and the customary practices and preparations carried out before death.

This correspondent was probably a close neighbour of Mrs Bargrave, and the truth of the ghost was clearly to be found in the personal credit ratings of Mrs Bargrave and in oral reports of the event that circulated in the parish. E.B. did not have the relation first hand, but heard it instead 'from every body that comes in' and particularly from one who 'had it from Mrs B's own mouth'. Furthermore, E.B. was not alone in crediting the authority of local opinion since significant sections of Canterbury society similarly prioritised the good reputation of Mrs Bargrave. All 'speak well of her' noted E.B. '& my Lady Coventry's Chaplain & other of ye clergy have been wth her and I don't find any disbelieve here.'<sup>12</sup>

A letter sent from Canterbury on 9 October 1705 presented a similarly gossipy account of Mary Veal's ghost and its author, Lucy Lukyn, claimed that she had it 'from Mrs Bargrove herself'.<sup>13</sup> The letter briefly touched on the spiritual discussions of the two women, who had taken to reading 'somebodys consolations agt ye fears of death' (Charles Drelincourt's *The Christian's Defence Against the Fear of Death*). This led Mary's ghost to reflect, from a position of privileged knowledge, that 'ye things of the other World are not as we here think them' and her ghostly status was further suggested

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<sup>12</sup> 'Letter from E.B. at Canterbury', in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.

<sup>13</sup> 'Letter from Lucy Lukyn', in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.



by her physical appearance – ‘Mrs B[argrave] sayes she had ye strangest Blackness about her Eyes she ever saw.’ Nonetheless, details of the ‘heavenly conversation’ enjoyed by the two women were not nearly as prominent as in later accounts and Lukyn was mainly concerned to establish the purpose of the ghost along with the good character of Mrs Bargrave as the surest proofs of the ghost’s authenticity. The letter was written to Lukyn’s aunt who lived outside of Canterbury and, as with E.B.’s letter, the ghost sighting proved a spur for this correspondent to re-establish contact with her relation to whom she had neglected to write for some time. The tone of the letter was familiar and showed a close acquaintance with Margaret Bargrave’s affairs. Lukyn described Margaret Bargrave’s marital trials and her long-term acquaintance with Mary Veal. Mary’s personal bequests to her immediate kin were also prioritised. Veal’s cousin, Mrs Margaret Watson, was to have ‘a suit of mourning, if not her best gown and petticoat and severall other things she had in a Cabinett.’ Lukyn’s letter personalised the ghost to fit in with local knowledge of Mrs Bargrave and her affairs in a similar way to the letter from E.B. Lukyn however can be more easily identified than E.B. She was a prominent figure in Canterbury and the eldest daughter of Paul Lukyn, a the local Notary who was well known in the town. At the time of writing she was around twenty-five years old and lived in the same parish as Mrs Bargrave. It seems that her acquaintance with Margaret Bargrave was personal but it was probably cemented by the Lukyns’ friendship with the Oughtons, another local family of note.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, although Margaret Bargrave had lately been reduced in circumstances she came from good stock. Her father was a respected minister in Dover and she enjoyed the friendship of influential

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Oughton, an Apothecary, was landlord of Mrs Bargrave’s house. In 1687 he became a Freeman of Canterbury and went on to serve as Common Councillor (1690) Sheriff (1697), Alderman (1700), Chamberlain (1706) and as Mayor in both 1702 and 1730. Gardiner, ‘What Canterbury knew’, p.188, 195, 196.

families following her removal to Canterbury. Mary Veal also had impressive family connections, her brother William Veal was Comptroller of the Customs at Dover and she had formed a close acquaintance with Robert Breton, a wealthy man from Dover who gave her an annuity of £10. These connections may well explain how details of the ghost reached Lady Coventry's Chaplain, Dr. Stanhope, Dean of Canterbury and other prominent figures. Moreover, the fact that Lucy Lukyn took reports of the ghost seriously, and supposed that her kin might share her interest, highlights the socially diverse nature of ghost belief and allowed the tale to spread beyond the parish boundaries of St. Mary Bredin's, Canterbury.

## II Astronomical Connections

Fluid correspondence networks were vital in maintaining links between local and national cultures, and reports of ghost sightings flowed easily through these channels. 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, founder of the Greenwich Observatory, and the first Astronomer Royal of England.<sup>15</sup>

Appointed to his post by Charles II in 1676, Flamsteed had impressive credentials. Having previously studied at Cambridge University, he was ordained a clergyman in 1675 and became a fellow of the Royal Society in 1677, being a member of its Council from 1681-4 and again in 1698-1700. Flamsteed enjoyed the favour and patronage of high-ranking aristocrats and government officials including Sir Jonas

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<sup>15</sup> The letter is also reproduced in D.H. Clark and S.P.H. Clark, *Newton's Tyranny, The Suppressed Scientific Discoveries of Stephen Gray and John Flamsteed* (New York, 2001), p.123.



Moore, Master of the Royal Ordnance. Flamsteed's scholarly interests included meteorology and optics, which as chapter four will make clear, often inspired fascination with ghost stories in these years.<sup>16</sup>

Flamsteed may have become involved with the ghost of Mary Veal to satisfy his own intellectual curiosity, but his interest was initially prompted by his wife, who assisted him in his observations, and who was most likely 'the unknown lady' to whom 'E.B.' had written in September 1705. Flamsteed spread news of the affair among his learned acquaintance, but took no action until he received the following letter, dated 31 October 1705, prompting him to make further enquiries.

Sir,

I was asked the other day by a very great person if I had heard anything of the story you showed us in your letters about the apparition at Canterbury. I said I had, and mentioned the letters that you had. I also added that I believe I could procure a copy of them, which I beg you would do me the favour to send me by the penny post (direct for me at my house in St. James Place), with what you know of the credit of the persons concerned. I shall not give copies to any person, but them I mention; nor shall it be published by my allowance. In doing this you will extremely oblige.

Sir, your most humble servant.

Ja Arbuthnot<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Flamsteed was also known for his disagreements with Sir Isaac Newton, President of the Royal Society. This culminated in a battle to prevent the forced publication of Flamsteed's Star Catalogue by Newton in 1712, with royal backing Newton prevailed. See Clark and Clark, *Newton's Tyranny*, pp.48-49, 102.

<sup>17</sup> Clark and Clark, *Newton's Tyranny*, p.123.

The letter was penned by Dr. John Arbuthnot, Scottish mathematician, author and physician to Queen Anne at the time of writing.<sup>18</sup> Arbuthnot was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in November 1704, and his royal appointment, combined with his literary and scientific interests, ensured that he moved in highly privileged circles. Chief among his acquaintance were Tory statesman and first Earl of Oxford, Robert Harley, writers Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, and famous natural philosopher Sir Isaac Newton. Moreover, it seems that Arbuthnot enjoyed a particularly close relationship with his royal patient. In a letter to his beloved 'Stella', Jonathan Swift referred to Arbuthnot as 'the Queen's physician and favourite';<sup>19</sup> Peter Wentworth told Lord Raby that Arbuthnot was 'a very cunning man, and not much talk't of, but I believe what he says is as much heard [by the queen] as any that give advise now'.<sup>20</sup> The scheming Duchess of Marlborough went even further by suggesting that Arbuthnot and the Queen were conducting an adulterous sexual relationship. She claimed that 'Her Majesty was met going to his [Arbuthnot's] chamber alone by a boy of the kitchen, at Kinsington'.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the speculation about Arbuthnot's relationship with the Queen, it is clear that they had formed a bond more significant than that of merely employer and employee.<sup>22</sup> Anne was said to engage Arbuthnot in regular conversation and so it is likely that he was familiar with the personal interests of the Queen; it seemed that Mary Veal's ghost formed one subject of these discussions in the autumn of 1705. The 'very great person'

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<sup>18</sup> John Arbuthnot held the title of 'Physician Extraordinary' from 1705 to 1709 and of 'Physician in Ordinary' from 1709 to 1714.

<sup>19</sup> R.C. Steensma, *Dr. John Arbuthnot* (Utah, 1979), p.19.

<sup>20</sup> Wentworth Papers, Peter Wentworth to Lord Raby, 25 August 1710, reproduced in E. Gregg, *Queen Anne* (London, 1980), p.234.

<sup>21</sup> E. Gregg, *Queen Anne*, p.246.

<sup>22</sup> Further proof of the favour Arbuthnot enjoyed is underlined by his attendance to Queen Anne during her final illness in 1714.



to whom Arbuthnot referred in his letter to Flamsteed and who had expressly requested more information about the Canterbury ghost was Queen Anne herself.<sup>23</sup>

Following this royal request Flamsteed set out to investigate the ghost story in earnest and on 3 November 1705 he wrote to his trusted friend the amateur scientist Stephen Gray, who lived and worked in Canterbury and with whom he had collaborated on a number of astronomical observations.<sup>24</sup> Gray was best known for his work on electricity but until he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1732, John Flamsteed provided his link to legitimate scientific enquiry. Gray was not part of the scientific elite in 1705 and despite brief employment at an observatory at Trinity College, Cambridge (backed by Isaac Newton), he was forced to supplement his income by painstaking work as a dyer in Canterbury's thriving silk manufacturing industry.<sup>25</sup> Familiar with the conventions of empirical enquiry and based in the town where the ghost appeared, Stephen Gray was in an ideal position to fulfil Flamsteed's request to investigate the truth of Margaret Bargrave's ghost story.

### III Canterbury Revisited

Flamsteed's original letter to Gray no longer exists but the bones of it can be reconstructed from Gray's response, sent from Canterbury on November 15, 1705. Gray's task was to verify the authenticity of the ghost by making enquiries 'into Mrs Bargroves Character from Persons which were most likely to give a just account of her'.

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<sup>23</sup> Queen Anne is identified as the 'very great person' by the authors of *Newton's Tyranny*, and this is further reinforced by Arbuthnot's reference to the Queen as 'the great person' in a letter to Jonathan Swift. See G.A. Aitken, *The Life and Works of John Arbuthnot* (Oxford, 1892), pp.74-75. Clarke also identifies Queen Anne as 'the great person' in *Newton's Tyranny*, p.123.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Gray is best remembered for his experiments into the conduct of electricity, for full description see Clark and Clark, *Newton's Tyranny*, p.159.

<sup>25</sup> Canterbury became a major silk centre in the later seventeenth-century after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685 led to an influx of French Protestants skilled in this trade, Clark and Clark, *Newton's Tyranny*, p.17.

As with the letters of E.B. and Lucy Lukyn, John Flamsteed recognised that the truth of the affair lay within the parish of St. Mary Bredin's and in the character of the chief witness herself. Specifically, Flamsteed wanted to know if Margaret Bargrave was a religious person; if she was 'a serious Person not given to any thing of levety'; and whether she was 'affable open and free or Close and Cunning in her Conversation'. To complete his task Gray conducted an interview with Mrs Bargrave and gathered information from people who knew 'her Conversation both when she lived at Dover and here in Canterbury as well of the Clergie as others'.<sup>26</sup> All confirmed that Mrs Bargrave was 'a Religious Discreet Witty and well accomplished Gentlewoman'. Gray also judged her to be 'Generally open Affable and free in her Conversation'. Having passed this first test, Mrs Bargrave's credibility was also subject to the respectability of her family. Gray noted his approval when he discovered she was the daughter of one Reverend John Lodowick, Minister of St. Mary the Virgin in Dover c.1670-1698 and that she was 'seen often to frequent the Divine Servise of the Church'.<sup>27</sup>

In Stephen Gray's report, Mrs Bargrave's religious devotion testified to her honesty and stood in stark contrast to that of her violent husband who had once beaten her 'for being soe silly' as to receive the Sacrament. The irreligious, immoral and drunken conduct of Mr Bargrave further helped to strengthen the testimony of his downtrodden and virtuous wife and this domestic knowledge motivated Stephen Gray to regard Mrs Bargrave's detractors with a degree of suspicion. Her husband was chief among a group of people in Canterbury who scorned reports of Mary Veal's ghost.

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<sup>26</sup> RGO MS. 37 f 16.

<sup>27</sup> Reverend John Lodowick was embroiled in a contentious pew dispute between parishioners, local magistrates and councilmen the latter of which tried to override customary pew distribution by altering the layout of the seating. Lodowick led the parish opposition, threatening to libel jurors in the Consistory Court at Canterbury for removing the communion table. Reverend J. Lyon, *The History of the Town and Port of Dover, and of Dover Castle; with a short account of the Cinque Ports*, Volume I (London, 1813), pp.98-115.



William Veal claimed that the ghost was a fake because when he opened the cabinet that was mentioned by his sister's ghost, there were no gold pieces to be found inside as had been claimed. However, the fact that William Veal opened the cabinet 'in the Preasance of several persons whom he called as Wittnesses' emphasised that his personal reputation was at stake if his sister's ghost was believed to be authentic. After all, the ghost had accused her brother of neglecting his mother's tombstone and the fact that the ghost asked Mrs Bargrave to write down a list of her personal bequests, suggested that William Veal was not to be trusted to distribute her goods as she wished. William Veal and his friends thus went on the offensive, endeavouring to quash reports of the ghost and to discredit Mrs Bargrave. He spread reports that nobody had seen Mrs Bargrave in the street at the time that she was said to have bid farewell to Mrs Veal and that she was also 'wont to Report the Houses wherein she has lived to be Haunted'. William Veal's connections ensured that these rumours spread beyond Canterbury and John Flamsteed got wind of them, demanding that Stephen Gray discover whether Mrs Bargrave had 'Reported the houses wherein she has formerly lived to be Haunted and on what occation she did it'.

Gray however dismissed these reports after Mrs Bargrave explained that the first of these alleged indiscretions was simply a bad joke that had been taken out of context, and the second was a misunderstanding provoked by the adulterous exploits of her sinful husband. One evening when she and Mr Bargrave had been walking in the Garden, they had seen a woman climbing over the wall 'upon which she said she thought it to be an Apparition, but they afterwards found it to be an ill Woman that was want to use that house'. Her 'Modesty' had however prevented her relating the more salacious details of the episode to Gray who nonetheless discovered them from another source. It seems that Mr Bargrave had gone out hunting and then to a public house with some friends 'where

he Got Drunk and lay there not only that night but some days after'. Mrs Bargrave went to discover him and when she arrived her husband 'was in the Companie of a Hore' who upon seeing Mrs Bargrave and 'for fear of being Discovered' made her escape over the garden wall. Mrs Bargrave then told her husband 'that she had seen some[one] getting over the wall which she thought was an Apparition which he seemd willing to belive being Glad of the opertunety of soe Pretty a Delution to Conceal his Rogery.'

Mr Bargrave was no doubt anxious to salvage some respectability following the exposure of his scandalous treatment of his wife and so he joined William Veal in trying to discredit his wife's testimony. He declared that she had never met with the ghost of Mary Veal, but had instead been 'discoursing with ye Devil'.<sup>28</sup> Mr Bargrave's opinion was however unlikely to carry much weight because, as Bernard Capp suggests, the kind of abuse to which he had subjected his wife was increasingly condemned in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Wife beating in particular came to be seen as 'barbaric' especially among the middling sorts who subscribed 'to novel values of civility' and who formed a good proportion of Margaret Bargrave's acquaintance in Canterbury and Dover.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Richard Bargrave was guilty of more than just wife beating, he had committed all three of the primary abuses of marriage identified by Capp in early modern England – violence, adultery and failure to provide for his spouse.<sup>30</sup> In addition to cavorting with prostitutes, his reckless and drunken behaviour at Dover had reduced the Bargraves' economic circumstances and forced their removal to Canterbury. Margaret Bargrave was clearly resentful of her situation and she referred to her Canterbury home as 'that old hole' on a number of occasions.<sup>31</sup> The ghost story that

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<sup>28</sup> 'Letter from E.B. at Canterbury', in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.

<sup>29</sup> B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), p.377.

<sup>30</sup> Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, p.85.

<sup>31</sup> RGO MS. 37 f 16.



Margaret Bargrave told thus allowed her to broadcast her sufferings and to condemn her husband.

In 1700 the ghost story recorded in the journal of Cassandra Willoughby served a similar condemnatory purpose. The narrative described a woman whose husband 'beat her lamentably' as she lay critically ill of a fever. Seeing that his wife was at death's door, the husband's fit of violence was motivated by a fancy that 'she had hid some money which he should never find after her Death'. The woman died soon afterwards but before she passed beyond the grave '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'. Accordingly on the third night after she died, her ghost appeared and 'beat him 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 fatal injuries.<sup>32</sup> 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 by law from marital violence and neglect by law, it was a common response to formulate a narrative strategy to expose spousal misdeeds. Ghost stories could form part of this repertoire and these preternatural tales were often effective in securing the condemnation of abusive men among friends and neighbours who could intervene to express disapproval. As Capp and Gowing have shown, this task often fell to other local women and it is notable that both E.B. (probably

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<sup>32</sup> 'An Account of the Journeys I have Taken & Where I have Been since March 1695', The Travel Journal of Cassandra Willoughby, cited in E. Haggund, *Tourists and Travellers: Women's Non-Fictional Writing about Scotland, 1770-1830* (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2000). See also C. Brydges, *Extracts from the Collection of Cassandra Willoughby, 1702* (London, 1911).

a woman) and Lucy Lukyn expressed sympathy with the plight of Margaret Bargrave. The next section also describes the testimony of the next-door neighbour's maidservant who verified Mr Bargrave's unacceptable behaviour and authenticated Mrs Bargrave's claims that she had seen and spoken with the ghost of Mary Veal. Indeed, the common expectation that female friends would step in to publicise male abuse may well have lent a more general credibility to Mrs Bargrave's testimony. Mary Veal was after all Margaret Bargrave's closest friend and her ghost appeared just as she was 'weeping and bewailing her self upon the account of her afflicted Condition'. Mary's ghost spent a long time consoling her friend and offering assurances 'giveing her hope that in a little time it wold be other wais'.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, when Margaret Bargrave was interviewed years later in 1714 she interpreted the ghost's promise of 'deliverance' in reference to her husband's death in 1707.<sup>34</sup> Mary Veal's appearance thus conformed to a set of familiar social practices, whereby women rallied together to expose marital abuse and to regulate spousal relations.

It is significant then that Stephen Gray chose to credit Mrs Bargrave's story based on her good reputation within Canterbury and on the opinions of 'sober men of our City' who affirmed that they believed her testimony. In the final lines of his letter to John Flamsteed, Gray reflected that 'upon the whole Consideration of all Circumstances I Cannot say those that doe not believe Mrs Bargraves Relation to be true are altogether without Reason yet I think the Arguments for the truth of it are of much Greater validity then those against it and am Inclined to believe that Mrs Bargrave did Realy Converse with the Apparition of her Deceased friend'. Richard Bargrave's objections were dismissed as the ramblings of a disreputable rogue, confirming Martin Ingram's

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<sup>33</sup> RGO MS. 37 f 16.

<sup>34</sup> Reverend Payne, *An Account of Mrs Veal's Appearance*.



depiction of women 'as brokers of gossip, makers and breakers of reputation'.<sup>35</sup> Ghost stories must then be added to Bernard Capp's list of female strategies to negotiate power and authority within the early modern household.

#### IV Certifying Mary

Stephen Gray's report represented an emphatic endorsement of an aging woman's ghost story from an educated man interested in natural philosophy.<sup>36</sup> As I will suggest in the following chapter, learned opinion in the first half of the eighteenth century was not uniformly opposed to the authenticity of ghost stories. Indeed the networks of natural philosophy could work to authenticate such episodes as well as to dismiss them. In fact, what stands out in the Canterbury case was the way that Gray's empirical criteria helped substantiate the reality of Mary Veal's ghost for wider audiences. This mission revealed his engagement with a common set of assumptions and expectations regarding the appearance of ghosts that closely mirrored the interpretations attached to the ghost by Mrs Bargrave's friends and neighbours.

Although Gray's report was to be digested by the *crème de la crème* of educated society, his reasoning and detailing of Mary Veal's ghost did not conflict in any significant ways from the account given by E.B. Gray's philosophical interpretations were limited and he was similarly unconcerned about the metaphysical status of the ghost, considering that it really was the ghost of the recently deceased Mary Veal. The physical state of the ghost was for Stephen Gray, a further sign that Mrs Bargrave had truly met with her friend's ghost. She was unable to carry out simple human tasks such as drinking tea and reading and she 'indeavourd to Cover her face with her hand' to

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<sup>35</sup> M. Ingram cited in Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, p.267.

<sup>36</sup> Estimates suggest that Mrs Bargrave was aged around forty-five years when she narrated her ghostly encounter, Gardiner, *Review of English Studies*, p.192

disguise her 'weary' appearance from her friend. The materiality of the ghost was a well-established component of traditional ghost lore at this time and this clearly resonated with Stephen Gray's understanding of ghosts and perhaps with his learned acquaintance. By including the ghost's demands about the right distribution of her property, Gray again highlights the cross-over of empirical and folkloric understandings of ghost stories by acknowledging the customary role of ghosts to remind the living of their duties towards the dead.<sup>37</sup>

Gray's conclusions were further substantiated by the purposes for which Mary's ghost appeared and by the religious conversation that took place between Mary and Margaret. Gray placed particular emphasis on the spiritual and consoling message of the ghost, which played much less of a role in the letters of E.B. and Lucy Lukyn. Mrs Bargrave and the ghost discussed Norris's 'Discourse on friendship' and 'Drelincourts Discourse against the fear of Death', which was, claimed the ghost, 'an exelent Book and full of truth' giving sound notions of 'death and Eternety'. Gray clearly understood the ghost in a religious context and John Flamsteed had expressly requested that Gray investigate the ghost on these terms.

The pious message brought by Mary Veal's ghost may well have leant a more respectable gloss to Mrs Bargrave's relation and her personal devoutness confirmed her respectability in the eyes of Stephen Gray. Nevertheless, for the majority of his account, Stephen Gray relied on a brand of 'popular empiricism' centred on oral report and systems of credit within Canterbury itself. This method required no test tubes or laboratories but relied instead upon local assessments of the character, family background, and piety of Mrs Bargrave as the most faithful guide to the truth of the case.

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<sup>37</sup> For an earlier period see J.C. Schmidt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (London, 1998); P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002).



Gray's report implicitly recognised that the power to credit or discredit Bargrave's story rested with the local community; with the churchmen who flocked to hear her testimony; with the 'sober men' of the town and also with 'the next neighbours maid' whose testimony he invoked. At work in the yard on the day of the alleged appearance, this maidservant testified that she 'heard Somebody talking very Pleasantly with Mrs Bargrave'. The maid was permitted to add that the voice she heard could not have been that of Mr Bargrave since he was 'not use to be soe pleasant with her'.

Just as the ghost was strengthened by the opinions of the local community, so the ghost in turn testified to the strength of that community as a source of authority and a powerful repository of knowledge. This ghost provided Canterbury with a voice, and one that resonated as far as Queen Anne herself. Richard Bargrave's sinful conduct was exposed for all to see and William Veal's dishonesty was uncovered for the benefit of Mary Veal's inheritors. Yet these voices were not unmediated, indeed the very nature of Gray's commission suggests a refusal to accept the ghost story based solely on the second-hand reports of Mrs Bargrave and her cohorts. Reflected in Gray's task then was the epistemological shift that was taking place in eighteenth-century society and which privileged first-hand knowledge over accepted tradition. The attempt to test the accuracy of E.B.'s letter, therefore identify John Flamsteed and Stephen Gray as men of their time attempting to apply new philosophical methodologies to establish the authenticity of ghost stories.

The evidence of the neighbours' maidservant was materially significant in confirming the reality of Mrs Veal's appearance but her evidence only gained wider authority through the endorsement of Stephen Gray's report along with the rest of the Canterbury witnesses. If ghost stories offered a vehicle for ordinary folk to broadcast wrongdoing to wider audiences, this practice was increasingly subjected to a process of

social differentiation. This theme is explored in greater depth in the chapter that follows but the Canterbury ghost story is a prime example of how the second-hand opinion of Stephen Gray carried more weight in educated circles than any of the acquaintances he made at Canterbury thanks to his intellectual pursuits and his impressive social connections. Although the chain of correspondence linking 'E.B.', Lucy Lukyn, Mrs Flamsteed, John Flamsteed, Stephen Gray, John Arbuthnot and Queen Anne was based on a shared fascination with Mary Veal's ghost, it also reflected a sense of social hierarchy. Ghost stories clearly had the potential to link local, national and courtly cultures but such instances often relied on the endorsement of these narratives by men and women from prominent social and economic backgrounds.

## V Public Responses

So far attention has centred on responses to the Canterbury ghost through networks of private correspondence. This evidence denotes fairly positive belief in the reality of Mary Veal's ghost, or at least concedes the possibility that she may have appeared as Mrs Bargrave described. But what is to be made of those accounts that were intended for a wider audience? The first published account of the episode appeared in *The Loyal Post* on Christmas Eve 1705.<sup>38</sup> It told a similar story to those accounts already described, albeit in abbreviated form. Noteworthy however, were the introductory and concluding sections of the article that were expressly constructed to verify the truth of the story. The author articulated a need to distinguish this particular ghost story from less reputable tales and claimed from the very start that this relation was 'better attested than things of this Nature generally are' and so 'we hope it will not be unacceptable'. This cautious

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<sup>38</sup> *The Loyal Post*, No. 14, Friday 21 December to Monday 24 December 1705. Also reproduced in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.



opening is suggestive because it anticipated a potentially negative response from readers of the *Loyal Post* who were accustomed to receiving news about 'foreign and inland intelligence' from this publication. To include a ghost story in the pages of this sober newspaper seemed a potentially hazardous move and by claiming credibility for the story in the public domain, this journalist was aware that he might risk his own reputation and that of the *Loyal Post*.

This caution highlights a key problematic in perceptions of ghost stories that came into play at the start of the eighteenth century, that is the contested epistemological status of these narratives as 'fact' or 'fiction' or in Lennard Davis' terminology, as 'news' or 'novel'.<sup>39</sup> As I argued in the previous chapter, elements of both reality and fantasy coexisted in the ghost stories of Restoration ballads and chapbooks. This interaction was characteristic of both genres and rather than proving an unworkable tension, this fusion often added to the drama and appeal of these publications. However, growing emphasis on empirical knowledge was gradually spreading outwards from the field of natural philosophy into the arts and combined with the introduction of the Stamp Acts of 1712 and 1724, the way in which ghost stories were conceived and the publications in which they featured changed dramatically. The Act of 1712 was a tax on news and resulted in printers separating the factual, i.e. 'news' from the fictional – defined as history and literature – in an attempt to save money. Ghost stories fell between these two stools and as I will argue in the next section, the concern to drive a wedge between these two categories had a significant impact on reactions to the Canterbury ghost, especially in the version produced by Daniel Defoe, and would have long-term implications for the status of ghost stories in the later eighteenth century.

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<sup>39</sup> L.J. Davis, *Factual Fictions, The Origins of the English Novel* (New York, 1983).

Aware of these shifting definitions, the journalist at the *Loyal Post* seized every opportunity to establish the respectability of Mary Veal's ghost, of the chief witness and other interested parties. 'There are many Persons in Town', he insisted, 'that have Letters giving an account of a remarkable Passage that happned lately in the City of Canterbury, Several Letters thereof from Persons of Good Credit have reached our hands, besides Relations we have had by Word of Mouth'. The concluding paragraph further reinforced the trustworthy nature of the relation where Mrs Bargrave and Mrs Veal were described as 'Persons of Reputation, and Many Juditious Persons have taken the Pains to inform themselves particularly of the Matter. More especially, Mr Paris the Minister of St Andrews. Dr Boyce and other Eminent Persons, both Clergy and Layety: To all whom Mrs Bargrove gives the same Relation, not varying in a Tittle.' No mention was made of the maidservant, or of suspicions that Mrs Bargrave had a tendency to see ghosts. For readers of the *Loyal Post*, authority lay with the interpretations of eminent supporters of Mrs Bargrave and it was only through their eyes that Mary Veal's ghost could function as a legitimate item of news. This journalist trod a fine line between figuring Mary Veal's ghost as a 'newsworthy' item and preserving the credibility of the tale, leading him to apologise for the lack of 'Scruple or Caption' that would have further safeguarded the reputation of the newspaper. A fundamental tension was thus revealed; the construction of the article acknowledged strong currents of scepticism among readers of the *Loyal Post* and a desire for 'fact', whilst simultaneously catering for persistent fascination with ghosts. The flood of oral and written reports received by the *Loyal Post* clearly showed that ghost stories continued to attract public interest, but governmental pressure on 'factual' publications increasingly limited the appearance of these narratives in such genres. As a result and as the following chapter suggests, ghost stories were increasingly relocated to periodicals, novels and eighteenth-century verse.



The ghost of Mary Veal played an important part in this gradual migration, and the version of this Canterbury tale that most clearly epitomised the tension between the factual or fictional status of this ghost story was also the most celebrated. Printed in Paternoster-Row, London, this account first appeared on 6 July 1706 and flowed from the pen of proto-novelist and literary chameleon Daniel Defoe.<sup>40</sup> Defoe's chronicle, entitled *A True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs Veal* was by far the most meticulous account of the ghost's appearance and Defoe borrowed from the ghost stories of chapbook and ballad fame by using a wealth of circumstantial detail and lively dialogue to engage his readers. Nonetheless, his account added something new to the ghost story genre as it stood before 1706 – suspense, detail and length. As Rodney Baine's research demonstrates, the average ghost story at this time was relatively short. Most chapbooks devoted just eight pages to these stories; Joseph Glanvill's tales in his *Saducismus Triumphatus* were around two pages in length; in ballads ghost stories ran to just a single folio sheet and in John Aubrey's *Miscellanies* they were little more than a paragraph long.<sup>41</sup> By contrast Defoe's account of Mary Veal's ghost ran to fourteen pages and the ghost stories he recounted in his *History and Reality of Apparitions* averaged about six pages in length.<sup>42</sup> The extra word count in Defoe's version was taken up by his careful setting of the scene and by his minute description of the ghost's physical appearance. Defoe employed dialogue, verisimilitude and described physical actions to add depth to his characterisation and he assumed an active editorial role, interjecting at points in the story to comment on the wider significance of various passages and on the credibility of the story in general.

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<sup>40</sup> Defoe, *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs Veal* (London, 1706). Also reproduced in Schonhorn (ed.), *Apparition of Mrs Veal*.

<sup>41</sup> J. Aubrey, *Miscellanies* (London, 1696).

<sup>42</sup> Baine, *Defoe and the Supernatural*, pp.80-81.

These techniques were particularly effective in Defoe's lengthy description of the spiritual conversations between Mrs Bargrave and the ghost. He included discussions of death, immortality and the afterlife and lingered over the reference to '*Drelincourt's Book of Death*' which the ghost declared to be 'the best...on that Subject was ever Wrote'. The work of '*Dr Sherlock*' was also mentioned along with 'two *Dutch Books*' on death but Mary Veal's ghost confirmed that Drelincourt 'had the clearest Notions of Death, and of the Future State, of any who have handled that Subject.' In this important passage Defoe also established the wider significance of Mary's ghost, namely as a spiritual comforter to her afflicted friend. Speaking in a 'Pathetical and Heavenly manner' the ghost assured Mrs Bargrave that the afflictions she suffered at the hands of her husband were 'Marks of Gods Favour' and that her virtue and religious devotion would be recognised in heaven.

One Minute of future Happiness will infinitely reward you for all your Sufferings. For I can never believe, (and claps her Hand upon her Knee, with a great deal of Earnestness, which indeed ran through all her Discourse) that ever God will suffer you to spend all your Days in this Afflicted State: But be assured, that your Afflictions shall leave you, or you them in a short time.

In the skilful hands of Defoe, Mary Veal's ghost articulated a hope of salvation, personal immortality and heavenly reward as well as undying friendship all of which had relevance for a wider readership as well as for Mrs Bargrave herself. Moreover, Defoe's ghost was a friendly ghost and came with a message of divine benevolence, which as chapter one suggested, fitted with the emphases of prominent theologians in these years.



‘If the Eyes of our Faith were as open as the Eyes of our Body’ declared the ghost ‘we should see numbers of Angels about us for our Guard’. Indeed, Defoe’s *History and Reality of Apparitions* further reflected his optimistic conviction that angels were the most common type of spirit, ‘almost all real Apparitions’ he claimed, ‘are of friendly and assisting Angels, and come of a kind and beneficent Errand to us’.<sup>43</sup> Defoe clearly numbered Mary Veal’s ghost among these protecting angels and his preface reinforced the universality of the account even more clearly. It was intended to confirm that ‘there is a Life to come after this’ and to inspire reflection

upon our Past course of Life we have led in the World, That our Time is Short and Uncertain, and that if we would escape the Punishment of the Ungodly, and receive the Reward of the Righteous, which is the laying hold of Eternal Life, we ought for the time to come, to turn to God by a speedy Repentance, ceasing to do Evil and Learning to do Well.

On the open market Defoe’s *True Relation* went on to become by far the best selling version of the affair and the best selling ghost story of the eighteenth century. It was probably widely affordable being relatively short and lacking illustration. The typeface was simple and accessible, with dialogue highlighted in italics and raw publication statistics suggest that the narrative enjoyed a wide and long-lasting appeal. By 1719 it had reached its ninth edition and had already been published around the kingdom in London, Edinburgh and Coventry.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Defoe, *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (London, 1727), p.2.

<sup>44</sup> For publication details see *The English Short Title Catalogue* (London, 1992). Interest in this story extended into the nineteenth-century: G.A. Aitken (ed.), *A True Relation of The Apparition of one Mrs Veal* (London, 1895); D. Defoe, *A True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs Veal* (London, 1883); *A*

Nonetheless, by 1720 Defoe's text was thought to serve a more sinister purpose when it was prefixed to Charles Drelincourt's *The Christian's Defence Against the Fears of Death* - the same text that was given a post-mortem recommendation by Mary Veal's ghost. Drelincourt was a French Protestant minister from Paris who first wrote this text as a devotional aid in his native tongue in the mid-seventeenth century. Marius D'Assigny believed that Drelincourt's advice on 'how to prepare ourselves to die' and the accompanying prayers that he attached to comfort the individual in times of loss would prove popular across the Channel, he translated the text into English and it was first published in 1675. This lengthy book (nearly four hundred pages in total) had already run through seven English editions before 1705 - a disappointing return according to one bookseller, before it was given a boost from the famous ghost of Mary Veal. After all, who better to comment on the accuracy of Drelincourt's otherworldly reflections than one who had experienced them first-hand. The revised text, with Defoe's relation acting as a preface, subsequently ran through an impressive twenty-two editions before the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup> The preface claimed that Mary Veal's ghost was 'of Universal Use' and was intended to be 'an easie Purchase' to reach the widest possible audience.<sup>46</sup> It seemed to many that Defoe's true purpose had now been revealed, namely to promote the sale of his own work and of Charles Drelincourt's devotional text by exploiting and perhaps even fabricating the Canterbury ghost.

Doubtless there was money to be made from this venture and Defoe was usually in need of it, but advertisements of Drelincourt's text at the opening and closing of Defoe's original relation only served to intensify suspicion of his motives. Critical

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*True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs Veal* (Newcastle, 1855); G. Chalmers (ed.), *The Novels and Miscellaneous Works of Daniel De Foe* (Oxford, 1841).

<sup>45</sup> The twenty-second edition was printed in 1797, see *The English Short Title Catalogue* for details.

<sup>46</sup> C. Drelincourt, *The Christian's Defence Against the Fears of Death*, preface.



responses to this publication strategy were often damning: in 1732 *The Universal Spectator* accused Defoe of fabricating the story for his own 'temporal interest and advantage' and in 1734 the same publication reinforced this sceptical stance with the following commentary.

There is scarce a little Town in all England but has one of these old Female Spirits appertaining to it, who, in her High-Crown Hat, might clean Linnen and a red Petticoat, has been view'd by half the Parish. This Article of Dress is of mighty Concern among some Ghosts; wherefore a skilful and learned Apparition-Writer, in the Preface to Drelincourt on Death, makes a very pious Ghost talk to a Lady upon the important Subject of scowring a Mantua.<sup>47</sup>

The *Penny London Post* added to this chorus of disapproval in 1726 when it parodied the association of Mary Veal's ghost with Drelincourt's text.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that both Stephen Gray and Lucy Lukyn had mentioned Drelincourt in their reports of the ghost, and that Mrs Bargrave had herself had confirmed her positive opinion of it, Defoe's blunt advertisement led to suspicions about the truth of the ghost itself. Mary Veal's ghost, given its most public expression by Defoe, now appeared to some as little more than a fiction, a 'fabulous legend' created for profit by the money-motivated turncoat who prostituted his pen to the highest bidder.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *The Universal Spectator*, No. CCIX, 7 October 1732, p.1. *The Universal Spectator*, No. CCCXX, 23 November 1734.

<sup>48</sup> *The Penny London Post*, No. 171, 3 May 1726, p.4.

<sup>49</sup> Augustus M. Toplady, *Works*, Vol. IV (London, 1825), p.234; reproduced in Baine, *Defoe and the Supernatural*, p.94.

Moreover, the construction of Defoe's text also played an important part in this condemnation. His account proved divisive partly because it claimed so convincingly to be an absolute and incontrovertible fact, thereby duping a wide public audience who purchased the narrative with alacrity. The title page advertised the relation as 'True' and the preface confirmed that it was 'Matter of Fact, and attended with such Circumstances as may induce any Reasonable Man to believe it'. What is more, the chief witness could hardly be faulted since she was 'a Woman of much Honesty and Virtue, and her whole Life a Course as it were of Piety'. In contrast to Stephen Gray's account, Defoe left out any evidence that undermined the credibility of Mrs Bargrave's testimony. He ignored the night she spent locked in the cold washhouse, the fever she contracted and he made no mention of her previous encounters with ghosts nor of the contradictory 'stories raised by her Husband and the Beans his companions'.<sup>50</sup>

If these omissions were intended to reinforce the impact of Defoe's text, they conflicted with increasing demands for the separation of the factual from the fictional that I have already described. For a number of educated commentators, Defoe's ghost story blurred these boundaries to an unacceptable degree both in terms of content but also in form since the length, detail and literary techniques used in his account gave it the air of a short fictional tale rather than a news report. Indeed both the timing and the construction of Defoe's account figure his *True Relation* as an important bridge between his career as a journalist and political commentator and his transformation into a novelist. This was in fact no great leap since, as I suggest in chapter four, the relationship between fact and fiction in the eighteenth-century novel was deliberately ambiguous and left spaces for ghosts to appear. Moreover, Lennard Davis has argued that a piece of writing is only fictional 'if there is no resemblance between literature and

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<sup>50</sup> RGO MS. 37 f 16.



life'.<sup>51</sup> The very essence of the eighteenth-century novel was to present fiction in the most realistic way and Defoe negotiated a place for ghosts within this new literary form. J. Paul Hunter has demonstrated how the supernatural was used to inform the pattern of many of Defoe's novels and in *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* the central character confirmed the ambiguity with which ghosts were conceived in these years.<sup>52</sup> 'I know not to this hour whether there are any such things as real Apparitions, Spectres, or Walking of People after they are dead, or whether there is any Thing in the Stories they tell us of that Kind'.<sup>53</sup> I want to suggest then that Defoe's *True Relation* marked a watershed, the form of this narrative and the responses it received helped to shift the genre of ghost stories more decisively into fictional spheres and eased the assimilation of these narratives into the novelistic genre and into works of gothic fiction towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Nonetheless, if Defoe's work helped to sustain the long-term prominence of ghost stories by relocating them into fictional spaces, this process was gradual and uneven. In the immediate term his *True Relation* was advertised as and primarily understood as a true history – this was explicitly recognised by the correspondence of John Flamsteed, Stephen Gray and John Arbuthnot and by public commentaries that protested at Defoe's perversion of the story through his realistic pretence. Many of these reactions make sense if the criticism levelled at Defoe's narrative is understood as a series of personal attacks on the author's sales strategy, rather than on the legitimacy of the Canterbury tale itself.

In 1722 the bookseller Thomas Luckman declared that Defoe's *True Relation* was penned only 'to answer a lucrative purpose' but his comments were in fact designed

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<sup>51</sup> Davis, *Factual Fictions*, p.87.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Baine, *Defoe and the Supernatural*, p.5.

<sup>53</sup> D. Defoe, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (Hertfordshire, 1993), p.202.

to promote a different version of this tale that he was publishing himself and that he wished to dissociate from that which had gone before.<sup>54</sup> Luckman's publication was written by one Reverend Payne and first appeared for sale in 1722; this narrative again demonstrated the value of this ghost story as an acceptable vehicle for religious instruction.<sup>55</sup> This version was published following a personal interview between Payne and Mrs Bargrave that took place seventeen years after the ghost had appeared and in spite of Luckman's protestations, it implicitly recognised the quality of Defoe's rendition by borrowing heavily from the themes and style of his text. The prefatory comment provided by the publisher established the purpose of the text, namely to appropriate Mary Veal's ghost as evidence of God's providential activity – a familiar reason for clergymen to adopt and promote ghost stories. To establish the credibility of Payne's account, Luckman included a thorough condemnation of Defoe's work, insisting that 'The story as prefixed to a former edition of Drelincourt's Treatise on Death, was a very imperfect, confused, and mutilated one, which the Bookseller had picked up without consulting Mrs Bargrave'. This version, he claimed had 'made the fact itself to be entirely disbelieved by some, and done no honour to the excellent piece to which it is joined'.<sup>56</sup>

It was true that Defoe had not received his account directly from Mrs Bargrave but when she was asked in 1714 'whether the matters contained in this [Defoe's] narrative are true', she replied that despite one or two circumstances relating to the affair that 'were not described with perfect accuracy', she was generally satisfied that 'all

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<sup>54</sup> T. Luckman in Reverend Payne, *An Account of Mrs Veal's Appearance to Mrs Bargrave, at Canterbury*, preface.

<sup>55</sup> Payne, *Account of Mrs Veal's Appearance*.

<sup>56</sup> Payne, *Account of Mrs Veal's Appearance*, preface.



things contained in it...were true as regards the event itself or matters of importance'.<sup>57</sup> This evidence combined with the fact that Payne's account differed only in emphasis rather than detail, must suggest that the credibility of Daniel Defoe was under suspicion rather than the ghost of Mary Veal. Indeed, in a similar vein to Defoe, Payne's account focused attention on the religious message of the ghost who assured Mrs Bargrave that her afflictions were part of God's plan 'to try and perfect you; for God does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men'.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Reverend Payne was not the only clergyman to retain support for this ghost story in the 1720s: he was joined by Dr. Stanhope, Dean of Canterbury. Dr. Stanhope's conviction was so great that William Veal failed in his attempt 'to make the Doctor disbelieve the story'. Veal was 'was so piqued with the Doctor, that when he came to Canterbury to be married by him, that he was married by another'.<sup>59</sup>

Payne's account also showed that the devotional context of ghost stories identified by Restoration theologians still had relevance for an eighteenth-century audience and his narrative was itself prefaced to a new translation of Drelincourt's work in 1766. Indeed the association with Drelincourt may in some ways have provided a respectable and acceptable context for this ghost story. Drelincourt's pious text aimed 'to promote the Salvation of Souls' by taking the reader through the three stages of death 'the natural, the spiritual, and the eternal'.<sup>60</sup> A series of reassuring passages instructed the reader how to prepare for physical death by leading a righteous life, by regularly contemplating death, and by assenting belief in God's providence. The pastoral concern

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<sup>57</sup> The author of these comments remains anonymous, but they appeared in manuscript notes in Latin in the fourth edition of Defoe's *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs Veal*. The recorded date of the interview with Mrs Bargrave was May 21, 1714.

<sup>58</sup> Payne, *Account of Mrs Veal's Appearance*, ix.

<sup>59</sup> Payne, *Account of Mrs Veal's Appearance*, xv.

<sup>60</sup> Drelincourt, *The Christian's Defence*, p.16.

of this devout Protestant Minister was also manifested by the series of prayers concluding each chapter and that offered practical guidance on dealing with the 'Death of a Beloved Person' as well as contemplating individual mortality.<sup>61</sup>

The explicit link between Mary Veal's ghost and discourses of death and immortality was further witnessed in the preface to the fifth edition of *The Christian's Defence*. In this version, Marius D'Assigny recommended Drelincourt's book as an aid 'to Divines in Funeral Sermons, in Visiting the Sick, the Poor, and Afflicted' and he declared it fit 'to be left as Legacies to surviving Friends at Funerals'.<sup>62</sup> Justifying the attachment of Defoe's ghost story, D'Assigny insisted that 'God may condescend that a departing Soul, or its good Angel in its stead, may appear' to 'witness the Happiness of Heaven, the Torments of Hell, and the Immortality of the Soul'.<sup>63</sup> This was exactly how Mary Veal's ghost was configured and this serious and contemplative accent, emphasised by Defoe, Payne and Drelincourt gave philosophical validity to this ghost story and allowed it to function as an important aspect of eighteenth-century mortuary culture.

## VI The Ghosts of Defoe

The broader philosophical contexts in which ghosts were legitimated became increasingly important as the spread of empirical thought presented new challenges to the legitimacy of ghost stories in public discourse. Chapter four explores these themes in greater detail but Daniel Defoe's *History and Reality of Apparitions*, written twenty-one years after the *True Relation*, both recognised and catered for these changing cultural preferences. Defoe gave over two thirds of this text to simply telling ghost stories, but he

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<sup>61</sup> Drelincourt, *The Christian's Defence*, p.95.

<sup>62</sup> Drelincourt, *Christian's Defence*, preface.

<sup>63</sup> Drelincourt, *Christian's Defence*, preface.



was now forced to preface these narratives by paying lip service to metaphysical debates on the nature of ghosts that surfaced in the heated debate of 1720s England. In a slight variation on conventional Protestant definitions that configured 'ghosts' as angels or demons, Defoe elaborated a third possibility. Ghosts, or apparitions as he preferred to term them were a 'middle-class of spirit' or a body of 'detach'd angels' that were 'allow'd to act and appear here, under express and greatly strain'd Limitations'.<sup>64</sup> Defoe's linguistic differentiation between 'ghost' and 'apparition' was highly significant and testified to the process of social differentiation from which many 'vulgar' ghost stories had suffered in the opinions of polite society during the early years of the eighteenth century. Defoe insisted that his apparitions were 'not such as are vulgarly called Ghosts that is to say, departed souls returning again and appearing visibly on earth', nor were they what 'our Northern People' called 'a Ghest' but were rather 'spirits of a superior and angelick nature.'

Defoe's *History and Reality of Apparitions* was thus an attempt to re-clothe 'ghosts' in a more legitimate guise, and in a more distinguished language to render them acceptable to fashionable opinion and satisfy the attendant desire for social distinction. Indeed, the book was almost four hundred pages long, hardbound and included a number of expensive illustrations. It gave time and space to complicated, philosophical definitions of ghosts that were noticeably absent from Defoe's earlier publication and it is not unreasonable to assume therefore that his target market was likely to have been educated to a decent standard, with the purchasing power to splash out on luxury items of literature. Defoe was right to think that a significant audience existed for the consumption of ghost stories since this text was reprinted in 1735, 1752, 1770 and 1791

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<sup>64</sup> Defoe, *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*, p.44.

and individual ghost stories from the text were incorporated into collections well into the nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup>

By following the tenets of Defoe's more formal, less sensational text, respectable readers could lay claim to a complex metaphysical conception of apparitions. Yet aside from this philosophical change, Defoe's apparitions were almost indistinguishable from the 'ghosts' or 'ghests' of the vulgar. They could after all 'take up the shape of a living or a dead person' and were even allowed to assume 'the very cloaths, countenances, and even voices of dead persons.' Moreover, Defoe's 'apparitions' appeared to uphold moral values and to expose wrongdoing – themes that were remarkably consistent with the ghosts of ballad and chapbook fame as well as the story of Mary Veal's ghost. He recounted the story of an alleged murderer who was forced to confess his crime in court when 'he saw the murther'd person standing upon the step as a witness'.<sup>66</sup> Also included was the apparition of a clergyman who appeared to prevent an illicit sexual liaison between a young gentlewoman and a wealthy suitor.<sup>67</sup> This apparition was sent to prevent the young lady from prostituting her virtue and at the close of the narrative Defoe remarked that 'Be it a parable or a history, the moral is the same'.<sup>68</sup>

Rather than insisting on the veracity of this episode as he had in his *True Relation*, Defoe now regarded the authenticity of the ghost narrative as immaterial, reinforcing the importance of his work for easing the transition of ghost stories into new fictional genres in the eighteenth century. According to Defoe, the wider moral and allegorical meaning of ghost stories justified their narration and at the close of the *History and Reality of Apparitions*, he insisted, 'upon the moral of every story, whatever

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<sup>65</sup> See for example H. Welby, *Signs Before Death, and Authenticated Apparitions* (London, 1825).

<sup>66</sup> Defoe, *History and Reality of Apparitions*, p.103.

<sup>67</sup> Defoe, *History and Reality of Apparitions*, pp.132-150.

<sup>68</sup> Defoe, *History and Reality of Apparitions*, p.150.



the fact may be, and to enforce the inference, supposing the story to be real, or whether it be really so or not, which is not much material'.<sup>69</sup> Defoe went on to conclude that it was 'conscience' that made ghosts walk and having captured the attention of his learned readers, he interspersed his colourful ghost stories with forceful commentaries on the evils of social injustice. On page ninety-nine of the text, Defoe condemned corrupt landlords, cheating tradesmen and wealthy oppressors and lamented that

tis not a thing of the least concern to us to have the cry of the poor against us, or to have the widows and orphans, who we have injur'd and oppress'd, look up to heaven for relief against us, when they, perhaps have not money to go to law, or to obtain or seek remedy against us in the ordinary way of justice. I had much rather have an unjust Enemy draw his Sword upon me, than an injur'd poor Widow to cry to Heaven for Justice against me; and I think I should have much more Reason to be afraid of the Last than the First, the Effect is most likely to be fatal.<sup>70</sup>

This embittered outburst was reinforced by the words of Job who declared 'Ye shall not afflict any Widow or Fatherless Child: If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their Cry'.<sup>71</sup> At the end of this diatribe Defoe apologised for his 'Digression', promised not to do it again and continued with his 'respectable' explications. This passage clearly identified Defoe's intended audience as landlords, employers and the wealthier sorts who Defoe believed, were neglecting their duty of social responsibility to those less fortunate than themselves. Ghost stories were thus

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<sup>69</sup> Defoe, *History and Reality of Apparitions*, p.337.

<sup>70</sup> Defoe, *History and Reality of Apparitions*, pp.99-100.

<sup>71</sup> Defoe, *History and Reality of Apparitions*, p.100; Job. XXXIV. 28.

timely reminders of the results of moral corruption and Defoe clearly approved of the way they were used to regulate social abuses.

By positioning moral virtue at the centre of his preternatural narratives, Defoe's work foreshadowed the commentaries of men like Joseph Addison and Richard Steele who preserved the legitimacy of ghost stories by linking them to the ethical standards of civil society and to gentlemanly values. The work of these men will be examined in the chapter that follows but Defoe's *History and Reality of Apparitions* is a valuable example of how ghost stories could retain relevance for educated audiences if packaged in the right way. The publication success of this text testified to the continuing appeal of ghosts or apparitions to the learned imagination whilst also identifying the increasing division between the acceptable and unacceptable face of ghost stories that was largely defined by the social location of knowledge about the preternatural world.

### **Conclusion**

Responses to the ghost of Mary Veal highlighted the relevance that ghost stories retained in local contexts and in wider public discourse in the first half of the eighteenth century. This Canterbury tale underlined the fact that the most reliable source of knowledge about ghost stories existed at grass roots level, with those who were acquainted with the main protagonists, and for whom the purpose and timing of the ghost made sense. For John Flamsteed and Stephen Gray the local community held the key to authenticity of the ghost, they knew the ins and outs of Mrs Bargrave's affairs, of her character, and were thus able to determine the credibility of her testimony. This Canterbury tale implicitly affirmed the authority of traditional ghost lore and oral report, although they had to be mediated by learned supporters to gain wider acceptance. The narrative also complements recent historical work showing how female voices could take part in



public debate, figuring ghost stories as important narrative strategies whereby women could assert power and authority. The fascination provoked by Mary Veal's ghost had the potential to link up local and national cultures and it is only by acknowledging widespread belief in the existence of ghosts that we can understand how the domestic trials of a Canterbury wife came to attract such wide audiences and how her narrative was able to participate in key cultural debates surrounding the reality and nature of ghosts and the configuration of ghost stories as true histories or fictional narratives.

Nonetheless, the interpenetration of private and public narratives surrounding ghosts became increasingly problematic over time and this is shown most clearly in the example of John Arbuthnot, whom we encountered earlier. John Arbuthnot's private letter to John Flamsteed admitted the possibility that Mrs Bargrave really did meet with the ghost of Mary Veal, and established his and Queen Anne's interest in the matter. Furthermore, the sale catalogue of his personal library that was printed some time after his death in 1779 provides further evidence that Arbuthnot may have been motivated in his enquiries by a private fascination with ghosts. The catalogue included the 1605 translation of Pierre Le Loyer's *Treatise of Spectres* that featured in chapter two, Lyttleton's *Dialogues of the Dead* and Sherlock *On a Future State*.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as the following chapter details, Arbuthnot's interest in ghost stories may also have been motivated by his pursuits in natural philosophy and particularly by his interest in environmental pathogens.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, evidence suggests that Arbuthnot did not wish to broadcast his views to a wide audience. He promised not to give copies of Flamsteed's letters to any person, nor he declared 'shall it be published by my allowance', signifying a desire to keep their communication strictly behind closed doors.

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<sup>72</sup> For further details of Arbuthnot's collection see P. Koster (ed.) *Arbuthnotiana*, Augustan Reprint Society. No. 154 (Los Angeles, 1972).

<sup>73</sup> J. Arbuthnot, *An Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies* (London, 1702).

Moreover, Arbuthnot's private curiosity about ghost stories was difficult to spot since it contrasted quite markedly with his satirical appropriation of ghost stories in a political squib of 1712 entitled *The Story of the St. Albans Ghost, or the Apparition of Mother Haggy*.<sup>74</sup> The ghost story could thus be configured both as a satirical joke and as objective reality, even from the same pen. Arbuthnot's example thus suggests that the apparent scepticism surrounding ghost stories that abounded in the world of letters did not necessarily reflect the true nature of individual belief.

This disjuncture between public discourse and private conviction helps to explain the seeming paradox that Daniel Defoe's *True Relation* and his *History and Reality of Apparitions* proved to be commercial successes in spite of the publication of increasingly scornful commentaries about the preternatural world. What is clearly documented by his work is the fact that between the extremes of intense credulity and utter denial of the credibility of ghost stories lay a middle ground that has been largely overlooked. By downplaying the factuality of ghost stories and instead emphasising the moral and philosophical value of these narratives, Defoe's ghostly writing retained appeal for respectable audiences. Defoe's work was crucial for shifting the genre of ghost stories more firmly into fictional spaces, which had important implications for the ways in which ghost stories were perceived and the forms in which they were presented. However, this process of fictionalisation was slow and patchy. As the following chapter suggests, ghost stories refused to be easily defined in the first half of the eighteenth century and debates surrounding the nature of ghosts and the meanings of their appearances formed a key problematic for natural philosophers, social commentators, poets and novelists alike.

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<sup>74</sup> J. Arbuthnot, *The Story of the St. Albans Ghost, or the Apparition of Mother Haggy* (London, 1712). The authorship of this tract is somewhat contested but has been attributed to Arbuthnot in Koster (ed.), *Arbuthnotiana*.



## Chapter Four

### Politeness, Poetry and the Pleasures of the Imagination: Representations of Ghosts in the Periodical Press

Broadening out from the local-level haunting at Canterbury, this chapter examines representations of ghosts in public discourse that helped to shape wider opinions and beliefs in the first half of the eighteenth century. My focus rests on the burgeoning periodical genre that reached maturity in the early decades of the eighteenth century and became one of the best selling printed media of the day. Priced cheaply at one penny and available at regular intervals, these publications offer a contrast to the theological treatises, ballads and chapbooks looked at so far. Periodicals differed in content and style and combined discussion of news items with essays, reviews, gossip and poetry. Different types of periodical took different formats and appealed to varied audiences but they were united by their topicality and were more directly influenced by new trends in economic, social and cultural life. The 'essay periodical' and 'general periodical' in particular, kept readers up-to-date with the latest advances in natural philosophy and literature, whilst usefully suggesting how readers should respond to them. Periodicals thus provide an important if complex link between public discourse and private belief, engaging with the views of their readers whilst actively seeking to shape and refine them.

Periodicals like the *Tatler*, the *Spectator* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* were tools of social and educational reform as well as sources of entertainment. They helped to define acceptable forms of behaviour, lifestyle and attitude that influenced 'polite' society in these years – that is to say, those people who found the money and the time to keep abreast of new intellectual trends and fashionable literature. Whilst there must always be some disjuncture between public discourse and private

conviction, periodicals had the *potential* to shape ideas about ghosts in both positive and negative ways. It therefore makes sense to examine the ways in which ghost stories were represented in these publications and to discover the ways in which ghost stories fitted or didn't fit with the new cultural sensibilities outlined there. As Joel Mokyr has recently observed, eighteenth-century knowledge was increasingly divided into types; useful or *prescriptive* learning was divided from *propositional* knowledge that spoke of underlying structures of ideas or beliefs about natural phenomena. Although the two were interdependent, the *prescriptive* was often prioritised over the *propositional* or intangible.<sup>1</sup> Readers were presented for example, with new challenges to the authenticity of ghost stories by reports of the latest advances in optical research and medicine. Furthermore, periodicals like the *Spectator* created what John Brewer has termed 'communities of interest' that allowed those who were familiar with such publications to engage in debate about politics, art or theatre for example.<sup>2</sup> Readers could thus congratulate themselves on their superior *taste* and *politeness*, and they were given the tools with which to distinguish themselves from the coarse opinions of the vulgar as never before. The ghost stories of Grub Street were increasingly rejected thanks to this drive for social distinction and these narratives began to be slowly displaced into the realms of fiction and the imagination.

This is however a story of endurance and adaptation as well as erosion. Periodicals subjected ghost stories and ghost beliefs to a process of refinement but not to outright rejection. Ghost stories appeared in periodicals with relative frequency in these years because they fed into a number of important cultural debates

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<sup>1</sup> The *propositional* referred to underlying structures of ideas and beliefs about natural phenomena (including the existence of ghosts) whilst *prescriptional* knowledge, offered a practical methodology for applying these ideas to new inventions and technologies. See J. Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena, Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton, 2002), ff.4.

<sup>2</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination, English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 1997).



– the nature of the soul and its post-mortem location; the survival of individual personality in the afterlife; epistemological contests between ancient philosophy and modern empiricism, and the continuing debate about how far human reason could supplant revelation as the guiding principle of religious and moral life. Periodicals emphasised the patchy acceptance of purely naturalistic explanations of the world by printing and often promoting intellectual counter currents. I will also revise the simplistic correlation of ‘enlightenment’ with the ‘anti-marvellous’ offered by Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park by showing the complex ways in which ghost stories were conceived in these years and the very real contribution that they made to philosophical and medical advances.<sup>3</sup> As James Carson suggests, the concept of ‘enlightenment’ itself must be expanded to incorporate those urges to illuminate phenomena that sat on the margins of human knowledge and included such topics as ‘ventriloquism, somnambulism...and reanimation of the dead.’<sup>4</sup> I will also explore the prominence of ghosts in more pessimistic reflections on the fragility of human life and the decay of the natural world. Periodicals thus offered a varied menu of conceptual models and epistemological frameworks that allowed for both the authentication and rejection of ghost stories.

The chapter is divided into three main sections, examining interactive periodicals, essay periodicals and general periodicals to reflect the evolving format of the genre and to incorporate chronological change. I will reflect on the wide circulation of periodical literature in these years and the practical challenges that faced the print industry and shaped the content of its products. The final section compares regional publications with periodicals from the metropolis to highlight the uneven spread of intellectual change and the importance of local considerations in shaping reactions to ghost stories.

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<sup>3</sup> L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York, 1998), ff.329.

<sup>4</sup> James P. Carson, ‘Enlightenment, popular culture, and Gothic fiction’, in John Richetti (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth Century Novel* (Cambridge, 2002), p.268.

## I The Interactive Periodical

As we saw in chapter one, John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* was one of the most successful early periodicals and the first to introduce a question and answer format to address the interests and resolve the anxieties of its readers. Although the *Mercury's* content was based around the contributions of its audience, it was also shaped by important processes of editorial selection no doubt dictated by the commercial marketplace of print. A chief editor who was renowned for producing titillating and sometimes salacious material may well have prioritised sensational or entertaining topics over more mundane queries.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the interactive style of the *Mercury* still promoted more dynamic participation from its audience than any of the other periodical 'types' that feature in this chapter since little or no space was given over for example to editorials, essays, poetry or financial news. In fact the interactive voice of the *Mercury* was less tied to the 'news' content of the publication than most periodicals and magazines up to the present day. As Janice Winship points out, although women's magazines of the twentieth century encourage the mutual exchange of ideas and interests, the terms of this communication are shaped to a much greater extent by the magazines themselves and by the dictates of genre. The eighteenth-century periodical genre only became formalised following the introduction of the Stamp Acts in 1712 and 1724 – long after the *Athenian Mercury* had ceased publication.<sup>6</sup> The *Mercury* thus had a high level of reader input and these readers enjoyed greater freedom to pose metaphysical questions about the existence and nature of God and the properties of the universe. It is little surprise then that ghost stories and queries about the preternatural world were more prominent here than elsewhere. Indeed, as we have seen, one whole issue was dedicated to this subject in October 1691. Ghost stories also featured heavily in spin-off publications

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, John Dunton, *The Night-Walker, Or, Evening Rambles in Search after Lewd Women* (London, 1696).

<sup>6</sup> J. Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London 1987), pp.66-67.



such as the *Athenian Oracle*, which ran through four volumes in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Readers of the *British Apollo*, another interactive style periodical, were similarly confused about the precise nature of the afterlife, which as we know from chapter one, was increasingly questioned by both divines and educated laymen. Diverse topographies of the afterlife and conflicting accounts of the fate and properties of the soul were presented in sermons, and other published treatises and clearly made an impact in wider society, leading both to debate and confusion. Indeed as Roy Porter has pointed out, the ambiguous relationship between body and soul was one of the 'burning debates' of this period.<sup>7</sup>

In January 1709 the *British Apollo* printed a question from a gentleman who identified himself only as 'E.G.' and wanted to know 'if 'tis Possible for a Soul once Imparadis'd in Heaven to Return again to it's Body, and dwell again on this Earth'?<sup>8</sup> It is not clear from this query whether 'E.G.' wanted the *Apollo* to approve a theory of an animated spirit world and the response he received was similarly non-committal, admitting the possibility that souls might return to earth but cautiously setting out the reasons why this might not take place. In May 1708 one correspondent who wrote, 'concerning the Souls of Good Men departed, whom you fix immediately in Heaven', more rigorously interrogated the editors of the *Apollo*. The periodical had denied any agency to departed souls, which the correspondent claimed was a direct contradiction of 'the Ancient Fathers, Origen, St. Hilarie-Victorinus Martyr, Novatianus and St. Augustin' to name just a few.<sup>9</sup> In line with developing epistemological trends that rejected all that was not demonstrable, the *Apollo* dismissed this correspondent's reliance on ancient authorities, which they claimed, were far from infallible. The contest between the authorities of the ancients and

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<sup>7</sup> Roy Porter, *Enlightenment* (London, 2000), p.108.

<sup>8</sup> *The British Apollo, or, Curious Amusements for the Ingenious*, No. 96, Friday 7 January to Wednesday 12 January 1709.

<sup>9</sup> *The British Apollo*, No. 85, Wednesday 1 December to Friday 2 December 1708.

moderns was a recurrent debate running throughout the periodical literature of the early eighteenth century and the outcome of this clash would have serious implications for the credibility of ghost stories that were so often credited because of scriptural and classical precedents for the reappearance of departed souls.

If the *British Apollo* was sceptical of ancient authorities then the *Review* offered a more optimistic perspective. The *Review* borrowed from the successful format of the *Athenian Mercury* by introducing a question and answer section for correspondents to express opinion. This proved so successful that a regular supplement, the *Little Review or Advice from the Scandalous Club* was founded to respond to the enthusiastic influx of letters in greater length and detail. Issue three of the *Little Review* published in November 1704, dealt with the following question. 'Sir, If it be not too much trouble, I would desire your Opinion to the following...Whether there be any other Beings besides matter'? This query was among a number of similar questions received by the *Little Review* concerning the distinction between body and soul, the nature and location of the spirit world, and the existence or location of heaven, hell or some other 'middle place'.<sup>10</sup> The *Review's* response came perhaps from Daniel Defoe who was chief editor at this time and who, as we know from chapter three, maintained a healthy interest in ghosts throughout his career. 'Our Converse with the World of Spirits' declared the editor 'is a thing in our Opinion very certain and if farther search'd into, might serve very much to illuminate this Affair'. The doctrine of spirits he claimed 'demonstrated much of a future Existence, and perhaps might discover a great many Niceties we are not yet Masters of'. The encouragement to study the workings of the spirit world echoed the endeavours of those natural philosophers and intellectuals discussed in chapter one, who saw the work of the Almighty inscribed in such ghostly appearances. The reality

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<sup>10</sup> 'Advice from the Scandalous Club', in *The Little Review*, No. 2, October 1704.



of a world of spirits did moreover provide comfort to a number of *The Little Review*'s readers who displayed anxiety and doubt about the immortality of the soul. 'If there is a World of Spirits' argued the editor, 'if there are Discoveries made of a Conversation between Spirit Embodied, and Spirit Uncas'd; if there are Appearances from that Enlightned State, then the Spirit lives after the Prison is broke; and the Case of Flesh and Blood being laid down, the Soul is yet a Being'. The questioning of an immortal state, and the confused status of body and soul emphasised by readers of the *Little Review* were persistent themes in the intellectual debates of the first half of the eighteenth century. The editor of the *Little Review* clearly thought these reflections were symptomatic of growing currents of scepticism about preternatural phenomena and in contrast to the *British Apollo* he railed against those who 'are for putting by all reveal'd Knowledge', refusing to believe anything that they could not verify for themselves. Turning the tables on the doubters, the editor threw down a challenge to those who wished to prove his philosophy wrong. If there was no immortal state, if there were no such things as ghosts then let the sceptics resolve 'what is the meaning of Visions, Foresight, Forebodings of Evil or Good, and whence such things come; if not from some Sympathetick Influence of Spirit unembodied'?

## **II Illusions and Delusions**

The eighteenth century witnessed a whole series of responses to this challenge. In natural philosophy, medicine and the fine arts, the term 'enlightenment' had both metaphorical and literal meaning. In its metaphorical sense, 'enlightenment' referred to any number of attempts to shed light on previously unknown qualities of the natural and spiritual worlds, to categorise ambiguous or shadowy substances, to make visible the invisible and thereby dispel the darkness of human ignorance. The

uncertain status of ghosts was thus a problem to be solved. Robert Boyle and Joseph Glanvill began the empirical drive to gain greater knowledge of ghosts in Restoration England and enquiries into the essence of preternatural phenomena continued apace in the early eighteenth century with the aid of important new technologies that significantly enhanced the physical act of seeing. The publication of Newton's *Opticks* in 1704 began the prioritisation of visual knowledge among natural philosophers that described the eye as a 'noble organ' whose workings were to be revered.<sup>11</sup> Newton's work was groundbreaking and for the first time laid bare the mechanical workings of the inner eye, describing how myriad images were produced by reflections and refractions of light. This new optical technology spawned a host of inventions and specialist equipment from reflecting and refracting telescopes to microscopes and 'Multiplying Glasses'. Astronomers made particularly effective use of these new instruments and in 1738, Professor of Astronomy Robert Smith published his *Compleat System of Opticks* which included experiments with glasses, light and shadow, and gave a technical explanation for double vision.<sup>12</sup> As we have seen, Astronomer Royal John Flamsteed headed investigations into the apparition of Mrs. Veal and his interest may have been strengthened by the new optical instruments installed in the new Royal Observatory at Greenwich that effectively reduced the cognitive gap between the celestial and the terrestrial.

Greater awareness of the properties of vision also highlighted its distortions and defects, which had a significant and largely negative impact on the credibility of ghost stories. For many empiricists, substance and bodies had acquired a new transparency; they were less an organic entity in flux between the natural and supernatural worlds than an 'abstract arrangement of light and colors'.<sup>13</sup> In his *Sketch*

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<sup>11</sup> J. Donovan, *A Sketch of Opticks: Displaying the Wonders of Sight and Manner of Vision* (Cork, 1795).

<sup>12</sup> R. Smith, *A Compleat System of Opticks* (Cambridge, 1738).

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism, Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Massachusetts, 1994), p.11.



of *Opticks* the topographer John Donovan noted the 'uncertain information' given by his eyes and marvelled at the 'astonishing appearances' that could be produced by looking glasses and strategically placed mirrors.<sup>14</sup> As Robert Smith described for his readers, bodies could be distorted and made to appear transparent 'by applying any substance to a hole, through which some light is immitted into a dark room'.<sup>15</sup> This experiment was refined over the course of the eighteenth century and had important implications for the 'faking' of ghostly appearances that will be discussed later in this chapter. Ghosts could now be dismissed as optical illusions or tricks of the eye, and as Barbara Maria Stafford has argued, the eighteenth-century obsession with vision meant that this sense was increasingly associated 'with falsification' and with creating 'fraudulent apparitions'.<sup>16</sup> Philosophers could now look under the skin, inside the body and the mind and by so doing they discovered a new set of reasons and indeed a new vocabulary with which to deny or at least complicate the appearances of ghosts.

### III The Essay Periodical

The visualization of knowledge outlined above was not restricted to the laboratory or observatory and a wide range of publications transmitted information about optics to a wider audience. Some of these texts were more accessible than others; John Donovan's *Sketch of Opticks* for example was published in a series of short parts approximately sixteen pages long, priced at one sixpence and available from circulating libraries. The *Young Gentleman's Opticks* (1713) written by Edward Wells was also modestly sized and contained 'the more useful and easy elements of opticks'. Both texts discussed 'the several Defects of the Sight', introducing readers to theories of double vision, transparency and illusion and also to instruments of

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<sup>14</sup> Donovan, *Sketch of Opticks*, p.8.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Compleat System of Opticks*, p.96.

<sup>16</sup> Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p.5, 11.

correction - microscopes, telescopes and spectacles. Spectacles could now be purchased from specialist shops such as 'The Archimedes and one Pair of Golden Spectacles', run by George Sterrop in St. Paul's Church-Yard, London and in the eighteenth century they became more technically sophisticated, more widely available and more affordable than ever before.<sup>17</sup>

The title of Edward Wells' text, the *Young Gentleman's Opticks*, suggested that the principles of optics were now an important component in the educational repertoire of every educated young man and Joseph Addison reinforced this sentiment in 1721, by discussing 'the discoveries they have made by glasses'.<sup>18</sup> For those who could afford it, there was now no excuse to be deceived by optical illusions. Given the link between optical knowledge and the credibility of ghost stories, Addison's views were particularly important because he was chief editor of the *Spectator* – one of the most successful periodicals of the century. Three thousand copies were published in 1712, and by 1767 the copyright value of the *Spectator* was estimated at a prodigious sum of £1,300, leading Addison's biographer Peter Smithers to conclude that this publication enjoyed 'a fame and popularity unknown to any former periodical publication'.<sup>19</sup> The *Spectator* along with other 'essay periodicals' like the *Tatler* was concerned to mould the manners, morals and tastes of its readers. In so doing, it continued the reforming tendency of earlier publications like the *Athenian Mercury* but aimed at a more exclusive audience, including features on opera, theatre, contemporary literature and book reviews which mainly appealed to the leisured classes who had the time and resources to keep up with these pursuits. Elements of direct reader participation were more limited here as the editorial essay came to supplant the question and answer format that had proved so successful in the

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<sup>17</sup> *Observations on the Use of Spectacles* (London, 1753).

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p.348.

<sup>19</sup> Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.135. W. Graham, *The Beginnings of English Literary Periodicals, A Study of Periodical Literature 1665-1715* (New York, 1972), p.69. P. Smithers, *The Life of Joseph Addison* (Oxford, 1968), p.250.



*Athenian Mercury*. Joseph Addison thus had considerable authority to shape the content of this serial publication and the opinions of his audience. Samuel Johnson recommended that 'Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar, but not coarse, and elegant, but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison'<sup>20</sup> and Dudley Ryder openly confessed that he read the *Spectator* 'to improve my style and manner of thinking'<sup>21</sup>. The *Spectator* was thus credited with creating 'an aura of superior sense' and communities of taste whose familiarity with the *Spectator* served as a tool of social distinction.<sup>22</sup>

On Thursday 8 March 1711, the *Spectator* ran the story of an 'Antiquated Sybil' who was 'always seeing Apparitions, and hearing Death-watches'. She gained an audience, claimed Joseph Addison, by playing on 'the Horrour with which we entertain the Thoughts of Death (or indeed of any future Evil) and the Uncertainty of its Approach'.<sup>23</sup> Drawing on the language of lunacy Addison condemned this idle talk, arguing that an 'old Maid, that is troubled with the Vapours', was particularly wont to indulge this dangerous habit of storytelling. In so doing she very often damaged the nerves of people with a sensitive disposition or 'melancholy Mind' who were distressed by tales of returning ghosts. The link between ghost stories and melancholy had a long rhetorical history but the discovery of the nervous system in the eighteenth century gave medical legitimacy to this stereotype for the first time. Thomas Willis coined the term 'neurology' in the late seventeenth century when he also formulated 'a doctrine of weak or unhealthy nerves'.<sup>24</sup> In the eighteenth century Willis was succeeded by Scottish physicians Robert Whytt and George Cheyne who specialised in 'internal medicine' that is to say with psychological disorders and

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<sup>20</sup> Smithers, *Life of Joseph Addison*, p.463.

<sup>21</sup> J. Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646-1689* (London, 1991), p.392.

<sup>22</sup> Smithers, *Life of Joseph Addison*, p.212.

<sup>23</sup> D.F. Bond (ed.), *The Spectator* (Oxford, 1965), Vol. I, No. 7, Thursday 8 March 1711, p.34.

<sup>24</sup> Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p.405.

delusions caused by frayed nerves.<sup>25</sup> The tendency for children to believe wholeheartedly in ghosts could also be explained in neurological terms because their 'tender nerves and fibers' were easily excited; making them more impressionable to terrifying stories and images. Here then was the medical corollary of John Locke's theory of social conditioning that decried the practice of nursemaids telling ghost stories to their young charges on the grounds that children were unable to distinguish truth from fiction at such a young age and would thus be susceptible to credulous beliefs in adulthood.<sup>26</sup>

The idea that females, especially old ones, were particularly susceptible to belief in ghosts was reinforced by the physician Sticotti. The fantastical and the imaginary, argued Sticotti, governed women because 'they are not occupied with anything solid'.<sup>27</sup> The Parisian physician Tissot underlined these conclusions still further when he argued that women 'were plagued by a hypersensibility' and suffered from 'the vapors' that led their minds to imagine 'chimeras at every instant'.<sup>28</sup> Newton's work on optics reported that 'the Humours of the Eye decay by Age' so that the object in view would almost certainly 'appear confused' and in 1753 the author of *Observations On the Use of Spectacles* wondered 'how forlorn' the latter part of life might prove 'unless Spectacles were at Hand to help our Eyes'.<sup>29</sup> It is little wonder then that the credibility and testimony of old women was frequently regarded with suspicion and disbelief. In many ways then, the leading lights of enlightened philosophy reified traditional stereotypes of credulous people and provided a new vocabulary to marginalize them and to attack ghost stories. In 1711 Joseph Addison reinforced these tropes when his fictional character, Sir Roger de

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<sup>25</sup> Stafford, *Body Criticism*, pp.404-405.

<sup>26</sup> A.C. Woolley (ed.), *John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1976), p.252.

<sup>27</sup> Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p.432.

<sup>28</sup> Stafford, *Body Criticism*, pp.431-432.

<sup>29</sup> *Observations on the Use of Spectacles*, p.8.



Coverley was amused by his servants and aged mother who believed that his country estate was haunted. Sir Roger represented the ideal of gentility recommended by the *Spectator* and it was he who finally 'dissipated the Fears which had so long reigned in the Family' by employing his chaplain to exorcise the supposed ghost.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to Joseph Addison, readers of the *Spectator* were familiar with advances in natural philosophy and medicine, and furnished with the means to distinguish their ideas about ghosts from the 'vulgar' expressions and crude beliefs of the multitude.

#### **IV The Pleasures of the Imagination**

Despite vocalising distaste for certain kinds of ghost stories, the *Spectator* did not dismiss them out of hand. In fact Joseph Addison confessed that 'we are sure, in general there are many Intellectual Beings in the World besides our selves, and several Species of Spirits'. To prove his point he called on the 'general Testimony of mankind' and 'Philosophers of Antiquity' such as Lucretius who 'make no Doubt of the Reality of Apparitions' and expressed certainty that 'Men have often appeared after their Death'.<sup>31</sup> Reference to ancient texts was a well-established method of defending ghost stories but at the time of writing, it usefully illustrates the mixture of epistemological authorities that were credited in polite society. Historians have often underestimated the reverence with which classical and scriptural texts were held in the eighteenth century and which continued to form the core of gentlemanly learning and pedagogy in general, preferring instead to focus on new empirical research.<sup>32</sup> Joseph Addison held the classics in great admiration and recommended them to his readers, mediating between old and new orders of thought.

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<sup>30</sup> Bond, *The Spectator*, Vol. I, No. 110, Friday 6 July 1711, pp.453-456.

<sup>31</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 419, Tuesday 1 July 1712, Vol. III, p.571.

<sup>32</sup> Carolyn Steedman argues that classical and godly learning were still the focus of pedagogy in West Riding schools in the late eighteenth century. See C.K.Steedman, *Pregnant Phoebe. Love and Labour in West Yorkshire, 1785-1806* (forthcoming), especially chapters entitled 'Teaching' and 'God'.

It was partly due to this reverence that Addison constructed moral scaffolding to legitimate the circulation of ghost stories in polite discourse. On Wednesday 13 June 1711, an essay by Addison warned readers against ‘a continued Course of Voluptuousness’ or an indulgence of worldly passions. Such traits did not fit with the gentlemanly ideal constructed by the *Spectator* and they also had negative long-term consequences. When ‘obscene passions’ are indulged by the mortal body wrote Addison, ‘they cleave to her inseparably, and remain in her for ever after the Body is cast off and thrown aside’. ‘It is for this Reason’ he continued citing Plato, ‘that the Souls of the Dead appear frequently in Coemiteries, and hover about the Places where their Bodies are buried, as still hankering after their old brutal Pleasures, and desiring again to enter the Body that gave them an Opportunity of fulfilling them.’<sup>33</sup> Addison believed that the prospect of a restless soul unable to find peace after death was the most effectual vision ‘to extinguish inordinate Desires in the Soul of Man’. Fear of ghosts was thus invoked to assist in the shaping of polite moral conduct. The *Tatler* appropriated ghost stories in a similar way. The *Tatler* was published by Addison’s great friend and collaborator Richard Steele and in Issue 152, published on 30 March 1710; Steele described the voyage of Ulysses to ‘the Regions of the Dead’ where he encountered ‘a prodigious Assembly of Ghosts of all Ages and Conditions’. The physical and moral deformities of these ghosts were described in detail by Steele ‘for the Amendment of the Living’. One ghost for example told how he had broken his neck ‘in a Debauch of Wine’; Steele aimed ‘to inspire the Reader with a Detestation of Drunkenness’ and to deter his audience from indulging in similar social evils.<sup>34</sup> Although Steele was not telling a ghost story comparable to that of Defoe’s Mrs Veal, he recognised that belief in ghosts could intersect with the priorities of polite literature when firmly allied to the concerns of daily life and

<sup>33</sup> *The Spectator*, Vol. I, No. 90, Wednesday 13 June 1711, pp.380-384.

<sup>34</sup> D.F. Bond (ed.), *The Tatler*, No. 152, Thursday, March 30, 1710, Volume II (Oxford, 1987).



supported by a respected authority. The encouragement of human morality was necessary for the smooth functioning of social life and a principle to which both Richard Steele and Joseph Addison were particularly attached. Censuring the sceptics, Addison declared that 'If any Man think these Facts incredible let him enjoy his Opinion to himself, but let him not endeavour to disturb the Belief of others, who by Instances of this Nature are excited to the Study of Virtue.' Both Addison and Steele believed that it was for the public and personal good that ghost stories were preserved as moral exemplars. With this in mind, Addison believed that 'a Person who is thus terrify'd with the Imagination of Ghosts and Spectres' was 'much more reasonable, than one who contrary to the Reports of all Historians sacred and prophane, ancient and modern, and to the Traditions of all Nations, thinks the Appearance of Spirits fabulous and groundless'. Addison's arguments are a useful reminder of the moderate path between extreme credulity and extreme scepticism recommended by the *Spectator*. Accusations of atheism and vain frivolity were just as damaging as those of 'enthusiasm' and the sensible reader should seek to avoid both by a sensible engagement with ghost stories. The syncretism of empirical and customary paths to truth was moreover, part of a wider social vision shared by groups like the 'Scriblerians'. According to William Cowper, this group included the 'most celebrated collection of clever fellows this country ever saw', namely John Arbuthnot, Jonathan Swift, Robert Harley and Alexander Pope, and they took it upon themselves to condemn the kind of narrow mentality that took the application of *reason* to *unreasonable* lengths by converting 'every trifle into a serious thing' and reducing all to system.<sup>35</sup> In 1722 *The Universal Library: or compleat summary of science* similarly deplored the 'Misbelief' and 'Vanity' that had served to 'put out the

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<sup>35</sup> Christopher Fox, *Locke and the Scriblerians: Identity and Consciousness in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1988), p.81.

inward Eyes' of the intellect and went on to describe the physical causes that lay behind the appearance of departed souls on earth.<sup>36</sup>

## V Preternatural Poetry

The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* used ghost stories to check the extremes of natural philosophy, atheism and deism and to support proper moral conduct but they also placed them at the centre of new aesthetic and imaginative pleasures. Medical explorations inside the cavities of the human body and brain were mirrored in the fine arts and literature by the discovery of interiority and growing awareness of the unconscious mind. The brain was increasingly identified as the seat of human knowledge, behaviour and feeling and artists, poets and prose writers now sought to stimulate the passions not through coarse bodily pleasures but by stirring 'the pleasures of the imagination'. The bloody and sensational ghosts of chapbook fame were thus dismissed by essay periodicals and ghosts were instead relocated to the internal space of the imagination.

In March 1710 Richard Steele began the thrice weekly issue of the *Tatler* by reflecting that 'A Man who confines his Speculations to the Time present, has but a very narrow Province to employ his Thoughts in.'<sup>37</sup> 'For my own Part' he continued 'I have been always very much delighted with meditating on the Soul's Immortality, and in reading the several Notions which the wisest of Men, both ancient and modern, have entertained on that Subject'.<sup>38</sup> Steele's essay included classical accounts of returning ghosts and he also cited the following verse from John Dryden to confirm the aesthetic value of the spirit world.

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<sup>36</sup> H. Curzon, *The universal Library: or, compleat summary of science*, Volume II (London, 1722), p.360.

<sup>37</sup> The *Tatler* was published thrice weekly from 12 April 1709 to 2 January 1711 and cost 1d. For details see I. Italia, 'The Tatler (1709)', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=7889>> (23 February 2005). *The Tatler*, Vol. II, No.152, Thursday 30 March 1710, p.352.

<sup>38</sup> *The Tatler*, No. 152, 30 March 1710.



Ye Realms, yet unreveal'd to human sight,  
Ye Gods, who rule the Regions of the Night,  
Ye gliding Ghosts, permit me to relate  
The mystick Wonders of your silent State.<sup>39</sup>

For Steele, contemplation of 'that Half of Eternity which is still to come' did not characterise a fantastical or unruly mindset, but was instead the mark of an 'elevated Imagination'. Joseph Addison was impressed by the drama produced by ghost stories and regarded them as invaluable tools for the poet because they raised 'a pleasing kind of Horrour in the Mind of the Reader'. John Locke's model of the human memory also explained why ghosts tended to fix in the imagination - because they were associated with the basic human emotions of 'pleasure or pain'.<sup>40</sup> The comments of Addison and Locke anticipated Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which recommended the mind was regularly exercised with apprehensions of danger and terrifying images. The representations of ghosts in poetry, drama and fiction that will be discussed here clearly display elements of the *sublime* as defined by Emma Clery and Robert Miles. The *sublime* was 'an apprehension of danger in nature or art without the immediate risk of destruction'<sup>41</sup> or a 'state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror'.<sup>42</sup> The awe, reverence and fear that dramatists and poets aimed to incite from their audiences only worked because the precise ontological status of ghosts was uncertain, because ghost stories hovered

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<sup>39</sup> As Henry Fielding noted in his *History of Tom Jones*, John Dryden defended the use of ghosts in heroic poetry in the preface to *The Conquest of Granada* (1672). See J. Dryden, *Three Plays*, edited with an introduction by G. Saintsbury (New York, 1957).

<sup>40</sup> A.C. Wozzley (ed.), *John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1976), p.124.

<sup>41</sup> E.J. Clery & R. Miles, *Gothic Documents: a sourcebook, 1700-1820* (Manchester, 2000), p.113.

<sup>42</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757), p.53.

on the boundary between fact and fiction. If an audience could not entertain at least the possibility that the dead *might* be able to return from the grave, to indulge some deep-seated inner fear, then the dramatic impact of the fictional ghost would be lost.

The high quality of verse produced on this topic certainly aimed to provoke such *sublime* ideas, which were at once pleasurable and painful. Joseph Addison argued that English poets were best suited to producing this kind of verse because ‘the English are naturally fanciful, and very often disposed by that gloominess and melancholy of temper, which is so frequent in our nation, to many wild notions and visions’.<sup>43</sup> Indeed ‘it is impossible’ he continued ‘for a Poet to succeed in this who has not a particular Cast of Fancy, and an Imagination naturally fruitful and superstitious’. Addison here identified a strong native tradition of ghostly fictional writing that owed a debt both to individual belief in the existence of ghosts but also to a rich cultural tradition of narratives stretching back through the ages. ‘Our forefathers’ he wrote, produced an infinite number of these tales, so much so that in former times ‘there was not a village in England that had not a ghost in it, the churchyards were all haunted...and there was scarce a shepherd to be met with who had not seen a spirit.’

Eighteenth-century readers would be familiar with these narrative traditions because they were kept alive ‘in legends and fables, antiquated romances’ and in ‘the traditions of nurses and old women’. What is more, familiarity with Shakespearean drama was the epitome of good taste and literary sophistication in these years and Shakespeare’s ghosts came highly commended by Addison. ‘There is something so wild and yet so solemn in the speeches of his ghosts’ noted Addison ‘that we cannot forbear thinking them natural...if there are such beings in the world, it looks highly probable they should talk and act as he has represented them.’ Addison noted

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<sup>43</sup>*The Spectator*, No. 419 (1712).



Shakespeare's ability to engage the 'weak superstitious part of his reader's imagination' but rather than condemning it, he instead praised the 'noble extravagance of fancy' that conjured up such convincing apparitions. There was clearly an element of national pride in Addison's admiration for spectral fiction and it was perhaps partly due to his public endorsement of this 'fairy way of writing' that ghosts became increasingly prominent in poetry during the course of the eighteenth century.

The solemnity of ghostly soliloquy admired by Addison clearly influenced the work of the so-called Graveyard School that rose to prominence in the mid-eighteenth century and included the likes of Thomas Gray, Edward Young, Robert Blair, James Hervey and Thomas Parnell. Collectively, their work aestheticized the fear of death and of ghosts, urging readers to embrace the theme of human mortality and to confront the vulnerability of the human condition. *A Night Piece On Death* (1721) by Thomas Parnell invoked the image of a ghost rising from the grave to voice the central message of his poem. 'Think, Mortal, what it is to dye' cried the ghost as it burst out from its shallow grave. Parnell was aware of the dramatic impact that this device would have on the imagination of his readers, 'How great a King of Fears am I!' continued the ghost, 'They view me like the last of Things:/They make, and then they dread, my Stings.' In line with the sentiments of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* Parnell used this iconic figure to discourage attachment to material wealth and social status, emphasising a traditional view of death as a social leveller. Parnell however, clearly disapproved of the emotional attachment with which people regarded ghosts and he forced his revenant into an act of self-denial, reprimanding the reader for conjuring up spirits of the dead.

Fools! If you less provok'd your Fears  
No more my Spectre-Form appears  
Death's but a Path that must be trod  
If man wou'd ever pass to God.<sup>44</sup>

If Parnell wished to dilute contemporary fear of returning ghosts then James Hervey's *Meditations Among the Tombs* (1756) deliberately nurtured them. Hervey's work presented the vision of a 'haggard Skeleton' bursting out from its confining grave to deliver the following warning. 'The Lord shall deliver Thee also into the Hands of Death; yet a little while, and Thou shalt be with me'. Hervey deliberately echoed the words of Samuel's apparition in I Samuel 28, which was the most oft-cited example of a departed spirit returning to earth and the only biblically attested case. In so doing he allowed his audience to indulge the possibility that ghosts might be real and to draw links with the work of Joseph Glanvill and A.L. Moreton (alias Daniel Defoe) who had recounted this example in great detail and whose work remained in print. Hervey's preface declared that his purpose was simply 'to remind my Readers of their Latter End' and to invite them 'to set, not their Houses only, but, which is inexpressibly more needful, their Souls, in Order'. It is significant that Hervey chose to sting his readers into action by conjuring the vision of a ghost and this literary device was clearly well considered. The ghost's 'solemn warning, delivered in so striking a Manner must strongly impress my Imagination' claimed Hervey, 'A message in Thunder would scarce sink deeper.'<sup>45</sup>

Warnings to set one's house in order, renounce the sins of the soul and give up attachment to the material world were by no means new and echoed the tradition of *Ars Moriendi* literature which taught early modern men and women how to

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Parnell, *A Night Piece on Death* (London, 1721).

<sup>45</sup> James Hervey, *Meditations Among the Tombs* (London, 1756), p.63.



prepare themselves for death and how to die well.<sup>46</sup> Similar themes were prominent in contemporary theological works such as Isaac Barrow's *Practical Discourses upon the Consideration of Our Latter End* (1712) and Josiah Woodward's *Fair Warnings to a Careless World* (1707). Ghost stories played an important role in Woodward's cosmology, providing tangible evidence of 'the Future State of Men' whilst also emphasising the subordination of the natural world to divine power. Writers of the Graveyard School similarly emphasised the brevity of human life through the medium of ghosts, but promoted a more secular and aesthetic narrative by neglecting to connect ghosts to specific devotional practices. Robert Blair's evocative poem *The Grave* (1743) was littered with descriptions of the wandering dead. 'Light-heel'd ghosts' and 'grisly spectres' were 'Rous'd from their slumbers' to frighten those that passed through Blair's graveyard. The poet's descriptions of ghosts are horrifying; he is revolted by both the vision and the putrid smell of the corpse, leading him to mourn the separation from life and 'joys departed' that death entailed. In contrast to religious appropriations of ghosts, Blair emphasised emotional attachment to life on earth and rather than welcoming death as a passage to heavenly joy, he considered instead that it must 'be an awful thing to die'. Nonetheless, Blair's ghosts also offered psychological comfort by refuting the prospect that there existed 'nought after death'. The poet's anxiety about the extirpation of individual personality sustained a terrified fascination with ghosts and led him to describe how bodies would be restored to their rightful owners in the afterlife. Blair's poem thus fits with the 'cult of individualism' identified by Clare Gittings for the eighteenth century, which was characterised by an emotional affection for the earthly body and revulsion of death. Lucia Dacome has also identified similar themes in medical and theological debates over re-embodiment that

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<sup>46</sup> N.L. Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England* (London, 1970).

appeared in the *Spectator* in the early eighteenth century.<sup>47</sup> More significantly however, the recurring figure of the ghost among the Graveyard poets underlines a more fundamental argument put forward by Gittings; that in spite of growing knowledge of the natural world and advances in medical wisdom, there was little evidence to suggest that anxiety about death was diminishing.<sup>48</sup>

The aestheticisation of ghosts in fact suggests that a process of *abjection* may have been underway in these years. Abjection means literally to reject or cast out, but Julia Kristeva's elaboration of this concept identifies the abject as something that elicits negative human reaction, in this case horror, because it reminds people of a sickening or unthinkable reality.<sup>49</sup> Rejection or displacement of the human corpse or ghost is a prime example of abjection because images of decay and dissolution represent traumatic reminders of individual mortality. The treatment of ghosts in the Graveyard School and in Gothic fictions reminded readers of this inevitability whilst diluting the harsh reality of death by projecting ghosts into a fictional or imaginative space. The abjection of ghosts was further supported by the epidemiological theories of eighteenth-century environmentalists that were similarly characterised by fear and revulsion of the corpse. John Arbuthnot and Robert Boyle were among the first to develop the idea that putrefying dead bodies transmitted dangerous pathogens in the air and were a major cause of disease.<sup>50</sup> The dead were believed to harm the living both physically and psychologically and environmentalists put forward plans for the physical separation of the dead through the relocation of burial grounds and the construction of extramural cemeteries. Despite Philippe Ariès' work on the mortuary

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<sup>47</sup> L. Dacome, *Resurrecting by Numbers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Unpublished Paper, University College London, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (Kent, 1984), p.59.

<sup>49</sup> J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982).

<sup>50</sup> J. Arbuthnot, *An Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies* (London, 1702). Robert Boyle, 'New Pneumatical Experiments about Respiration' contributed to *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (London, 1666).



culture of the eighteenth century, it is unlikely that this 'medicine of avoidance' was brought about by a change in popular attitudes. Ruth Richardson has documented the often-violent resistance to the relocation and re-interment of the dead in these years.<sup>51</sup> More convincing is James Riley's conclusion that public health arguments lay behind initiatives to separate the dead from the living.<sup>52</sup> However these ideas came about, they suggest that the physical process of death still incited fear and revulsion on both the conscious and unconscious mind. Theories of miasma along with the Graveyard School of poetry thus provide an important counterweight to the general optimism about the human condition associated with enlightenment philosophy. These themes have been largely neglected in the historiography of the eighteenth century or marginalized as the 'dark side' of enlightenment philosophies. They must however, be embraced more fully if we are to gain a more rounded understanding of the cultural influences and beliefs that remained current in this period. Certainly the genre of poetry cannot be neglected because as John Brewer suggests, 'Poetry was far and away the most frequently published type of literature, accounting for 47 per cent of all titles'.<sup>53</sup> As such, this genre was second only to sermons in terms of distribution and consumption and was far more widely available than learned treatises on natural philosophy that more often dismissed the reality of ghosts.

## VI Theatrical Ghosts

On the stage the appearance of ghosts was limited by a growing preference for domestic or natural theatre in the first half of the eighteenth century. David Garrick achieved fame by perfecting 'a more natural style of acting' before assuming

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<sup>51</sup> R. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> P. Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, translated by H. Weaver (London, 1987), p.351. James C. Riley, *The Eighteenth-Century Campaign to Avoid Disease* (Hampshire, 1987), p.109.

<sup>53</sup> J. Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.172.

management of the Drury Lane theatre in 1747 and he was one of many voices advocating the theatrical depiction of 'humane Life'. The impulse to limit man's contemplation to the tangible physical world and spread realistic representations of the world was characterized by 'a kind of dogged attention to the cumulative details' and this also culminated in a new literary genre. The novel set out to dramatize the mundane episodes of domestic life; thereby reducing the cognitive space in which man's imagination could and should usefully function.<sup>54</sup> Exemplified by the work of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, the success of this literary genre is often attributed by historians and literary scholars to its appeal among a growing middle class readership that appeared to have little time to indulge fascination with the supernatural world.<sup>55</sup>

Once again however, this process of naturalization was incomplete and it sat alongside a number of artistic counter-currents that sought to restrain the narrow rationalism that was steadily creeping into fictional productions. It was in this context that ghosts retained support from dramatists and novelists and from the polite periodical. In April 1711, the *Spectator* noted the unique impact that ghosts had on a theatre-going audience, 'A Spectre has very often saved a Play, though he has done nothing but stalked across the Stage, or rose through a Cleft of it, and sunk again without speaking one Word'.<sup>56</sup> The effect created by the theatrical ghost was similar to that outlined in the previous discussion of the Graveyard School. Ghosts prompted deep-seated emotional reactions, making 'the Hearts of the whole Audience quake' whilst also conveying 'a stronger Terrour to the Mind than it is possible for Words to do.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> L.J. Davis, *Factual Fictions, The Origins of the English Novel* (New York, 1983), p.155. I.P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London, 1957).

<sup>55</sup> Watt, *Rise of the Novel*.

<sup>56</sup> Addison in *The Spectator*, Volume I, No.44, Friday 20 April 1711, p.185.

<sup>57</sup> Addison in *The Spectator*, Volume I, No.44, p.185.



Joseph Addison put his faith in the dramatic potential of ghosts to practical use in 1715 when his play *The Drummer; or, the Haunted-House* was first published. The play was based on a real-life haunting - the case of the Drummer of Tedworth that was famously investigated by Joseph Glanvill in the 1660s and was eventually exposed as a fraud. Addison chose this episode carefully since it allowed him to raise the possibility of spirit activity for his audience without admitting to the reality. As Richard Steele pointed out in 1712, this distinction was an important one since the theatre-going public was made up of two kinds of people, 'those who know no Pleasure but of the Body, and those who improve or command corporeal Pleasures by the Addition of fine Sentiments of the Mind'.<sup>58</sup> Here again is an example of the process of abjection outlined above, an art based on suggestion where ghosts were projected into safer fictional spaces and specifically linked to aesthetic values, the enjoyment of which acted as a badge of social distinction. In Addison's opinion depictions of ghosts on the stage did not merit opposition especially 'when they are introduced with Skill, and accompanied by proportionable Sentiments and Expressions in the Writing.'<sup>59</sup> *The Drummer* enjoyed a successful run at the Drury Lane theatre and the script was reprinted eighteen times before the close of the century. Joseph Addison further acknowledged the warm reception given to fleshy and gratuitous figures since, 'there is nothing which delights and terrifies our English Theatre so much as a Ghost, especially when he appears in a bloody Shirt'.<sup>60</sup>

Henry Fielding voiced similar reasons for including ghosts in his novel writing. In book VII, chapter XIV of *The History of Tom Jones* (1749), the eponymous hero seeks revenge against Ensign Northerton who assaulted Tom with a glass bottle. Tom is left half-dead with streams of blood pouring from his head and

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<sup>58</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 502, Monday 6 October 1712, p.282.

<sup>59</sup> Addison in *The Spectator*, Volume I, No.44, Friday 20 April 1711, p.185.

<sup>60</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 44, Friday 20 April 1711, p.185.

when he ventures out after the clock struck twelve, Fielding gave his hero the following description.

He had on, as we have said, a light-coloured Coat, covered with Streams of Blood. His Face, which missed that very Blood, as well as twenty Ounces more drawn from him by the Surgeon, was pallid. Round his Head was a Quantity of Bandage, not unlike a Turban. In the right Hand he carried a Sword, and in the left a Candle. So that the Bloody *Banquo* was not worthy to be compared to him. In Fact, I believe a more dreadful Apparition was never raised in a Church-yard, nor in the Imagination of any good People met in a Winter Evening over a Christmas Fire in *Somersetshire*.<sup>61</sup>

Fielding drew on the images and vocabulary used to depict those fleshy ghosts of chapbook fame and he sent Tom's 'ghost' on a familiar mission of revenge. An unfortunate Centinel who was confronted with the sight of *Jones* was brought to his knees and Fielding noted, perhaps with a wry smile that 'his Hair began gently to lift up his Grenadier Cap'.<sup>62</sup> The Centinel was convinced that Ensign Northerton had murdered Tom and now his ghost had returned to demand vengeance – at least that is the story he told to a gathering of men and women who roused him after he fainted. 'All the Women presently believed it' wrote Fielding and although some of the men 'had Faith in the Story', others 'turned it into Derision and Ridicule'. Fielding's ghost was not real; his description indulged the same bloodthirsty fascination with ghosts associated with chapbook accounts and yet by employing the distancing

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<sup>61</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding, Volume I, With an introduction and commentary by Martin C. Battestin, the text edited by Fredson Bowers (Oxford, 1974), p.387.

<sup>62</sup> Fielding, *History of Tom Jones*, p.388.



techniques of comedy and stereotyping, Fielding separated Tom's ghost from those 'real' ghosts that proved so controversial in polite discourse. In this respect Fielding's work prefigured the technique of the 'explained supernatural' that literary critics generally associate with the work of gothic novelist Anne Radcliffe.<sup>63</sup>

Fielding's indulgence was reinforced in the following chapter of the novel, which contained an explanation of the art of novel writing and Fielding's own views about the acceptable role of 'the marvellous' within this genre. If unchecked, the marvellous was simply 'the stuff of romance' but if mixed with a dose of the probable and mundane then it became convincing, even poetic. Fielding endorsed the views of Alexander Pope who believed that 'the great Art of all Poetry is to mix Truth with Fiction; in order to join the Credible with the Surprising.'<sup>64</sup> The category of the marvellous itself however required greater refinement before it could be safely absorbed into the novel. 'Elves and Fairies' were dismissed as mere 'Mummery' and Fielding declared that 'The only supernatural Agents which can in any Manner be allowed to us Moderns are Ghosts'.<sup>65</sup> In Fielding's opinion, Dryden had successfully defended the use of 'Spirits, or Spectres' in heroic poetry and to those who objected that ghosts should be exorcised from poetry because they were 'unnatural', Fielding replied 'tis enough that, for ought we know, they may be in Nature: and what ever is or may be, is not, properly, unnatural'.<sup>66</sup> Henry Fielding thus defended the literary use of ghosts on the grounds that the status of these figures was ambiguous, almost unknowable and because they excited the interest of readers. His comments echoed those of Joseph Addison who believed there was enough probability in the idea of

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<sup>63</sup> Emma Clery credits Radcliffe with introducing 'the devised of the "explained supernatural" in order to reconcile Protestant incredulity and the taste for ghostly terror', E.J. Clery, 'The Genesis of "Gothic" Fiction, in J.E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge, 2002), pp.26-27. A. Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, edited by B. Dobree, with an Introduction and Notes by Terry Castle (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>64</sup> Fielding, *History of Tom Jones*, p.406.

<sup>65</sup> Fielding, *History of Tom Jones*, p.399.

<sup>66</sup> Fielding, *History of Tom Jones*, p.399.

returning ghosts to make them credible: it was impossible therefore to 'look upon the representation as altogether impossible.'<sup>67</sup>

Ghosts appeared less frequently in the essay periodical than in the pages of interactive publications like the *Athenian Mercury* but from the evidence on offer it seems that learned readers of these publications still found reasons to pay attention to ghost stories. Indeed the simplistic correlation of ghosts with 'anti-enlightenment' is too simplistic because it was considered morally, religiously and socially justifiable, perhaps even necessary, to place limitations on the potential of human wisdom to supersede or dismiss the unknown. Ghost stories provided an important means to achieve this by highlighting the vulnerability of the human body to death and decay – inevitable processes that were beyond the control of natural philosophy. The *Tatler* and *Spectator* functioned as tools of social criticism and they clearly objected to a narrow rationalism that marginalized ghosts as vulgar nonsense. These periodicals refined the contexts in which ghosts could appear as well as the meanings that could be safely attached to them. This said, ghosts continued to instruct and to entertain educated men and women; they were made key to campaigns for the independence of the individual imagination and fed into ideas of the sublime that flourished in the Romantic writings of the late eighteenth century.

## VII The General Periodical

By the mid-eighteenth century ghosts still haunted the periodical press, albeit less frequently. Since the very existence of these publications relied on their ability to keep abreast of current opinion and controversy, the continued appearances of ghosts suggests that they had yet to be successfully exorcised from private reflection, and so continued to incite public comment. The *Gentleman's Magazine: Or, Monthly*

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<sup>67</sup> Addison in *The Spectator*, Volume I, No.419, Tuesday 1 July 1712.



*Intelligencer*, founded by Edward Cave in 1731, was the first periodical to adopt the name 'magazine'. This title gave expression to the distinctiveness of this monthly publication which was the first 'general' periodical of its type in England and which included a series of articles and essays assembled from books, pamphlets and other sources. This eclectic composition reflected the persistent demand for variety by the eighteenth-century reader and the editors of the *Gentleman's Magazine* took pains to ensure that its audience was satisfied. In 1732, October's issue offered 'Prices of Goods; Grain; Stocks, in London', 'Monthly Bills of Mortality' and a list of 'Births; Deaths; Marriages; Promotions; &c.' More in-depth features included weekly essays 'Of Apparitions; Coffee-houses; Fortune-telling; Ambition; Dress; Flattery; Virtue and Nobility'.<sup>68</sup> Far from revealing a progressive distaste for tales of the wandering dead, this month's essay 'Of Apparitions' seemed to be grappling with the same issues that its predecessors struggled with at the turn of the century. Did ghosts really exist and should they retain relevance for an eighteenth-century audience?

In 1731 the *Gentleman's Magazine* tempted its readers with the story of William Sutor, a farmer from Craighal in Scotland about thirty-seven years of age. The report had lately been published in Edinburgh but found its way south of the border thanks to 'a Gentleman of unexceptionable Honour and Veracity'.<sup>69</sup> In December 1728 Sutor was working in the fields with his servants when he heard 'an uncommon skrecking and noise' but after investigating the disturbance the workers fancied they saw only 'a dark grey-coloured Dog; but as it was dark night, they concluded it was for a Fox'. Being often in the same spot where he had first seen the animal, Sutor was visited by the dog several times over the next two years. He thought little of these episodes until one Monday in November 1730 when he was returning home at sunset. The dog passed by him as usual but before he disappeared

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<sup>68</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine, Or, Monthly Intelligencer*, No. X, October 1732. Graham, *English Literary Periodicals*, p.55.

<sup>69</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1731, p.31.

the dog spoke the following words, 'Within eight or ten days do or die'. The next Saturday evening as William was at his sheepfold the dog again appeared and this time asked Sutor to meet him at a certain spot of ground within half an hour.

Sutor resolved to investigate further and so visited the appointed spot, taking a sword and staff along for protection. When the dog appeared before him, Sutor encircled himself with 'a line of circumvallation' and concluding that this was some evil spirit demanded 'In the name of God, who are you?' The voice replied 'I am David Sutor, George Sutor's Brother: I killed a Man, more than 35 years ago, at a bush by East the road as you go into the Isle.' William Sutor was startled by this revelation and wondered how it could be true since 'David Sutor was a Man, and you appear as a Dog'. The animal then explained, 'I killed him with a Dog, and am made to speak out of the mouth of a Dog: and I tell you to go bury these bones.' This request was no doubt familiar to William Sutor (and to readers of the magazine) since discoveries of secret murders and requests for decent burial were well-established motifs of the folk ghost story. Sutor did as he was asked and returned the next day to dig up the ground, whereupon he discovered a number of human bones. It was not long before news of this episode reached other members of the community and Sutor was soon joined in his task by 'the Minister of Blair', 'the Lairds of Glasdoon and Rychalzie' and 'about 40 or 50 people who had convened out of curiosity'. In place of a winding sheet, the remains of the dead man were wrapped in fresh linen and 'put in a coffin with a mort-cloth over it' before being interred that same evening in the churchyard of Blair. The account concludes with a postscript from members of the local community who listed their names in support of the tale and who recalled that the alleged murderer, David Sutor had 'listed for a Soldier, and went abroad about 34 or 35 years ago.'



With revelations of concealed murder, buried bones, circumvallation and anthropomorphism, this tale was full of popular folkloric themes that had been associated with ghosts since time immemorial. Its publication in the mid-eighteenth century testified to the resilience of traditional conceptions of ghosts but its inclusion in the *Gentleman's Magazine* may have had a more complex subtext. This narrative, unlike other discussions of ghost stories that appeared in this periodical, showed no signs of the rigorous scrutiny or empirical tests that were increasingly applied to verify the authenticity of these narratives. Although it had an impressive list of witnesses, it was unrefined and therefore unreliable. Moreover, there may well have been an element of abjection involved in recounting this tale, that is geographical abjection, since the story originated from a backwater of the British Isles, far removed from the taste and sophistication of the metropolis. As we will see in the case of the Cock Lane ghost in chapter five, this tale may well have attracted greater opposition had it originated in London.

More characteristic of the suspicion with which ghost stories were publicly viewed by contributors to the *Gentleman's Magazine* was the essay 'Of Ghosts, Daemons, and Spectres' printed in October 1732. This essay was printed anonymously but the reforming agenda of the author was clear from the outset; here was an attempt to denigrate ghost stories as amusements of the vulgar. The essay set out the reasons why polite readers should be mistrustful of ghost stories and in so doing the author borrowed heavily from the rhetoric of enlightened philosophers, physicians and fashionable wits. 'Some Spirits or Ghosts' claimed the author 'owe their Existence only to a distemper'd Imagination'; others could be blamed on the 'early Errors of Infancy' – again echoing the work of John Locke on the conditioning of human ideas. The rest could be ascribed to 'a motley Mixture of the low and vulgar Education'. The author here reveals a general antipathy towards the lower

classes that seemed clearly to blame for implanting 'traditional Accounts of *local Ghosts*' in the minds of the general population. On this point the author went further still by elaborating different classes of ghost. Along with the apparitions at 'Verulam, Silchester, Reculver and Rochester', the 'Daemon of Tidworth' was labelled a vulgar ghost even though Joseph Glanvill, a respected Anglican churchman most famously sponsored this ghost at the time of its alleged appearance. The 'Story of Madam Veal' was similarly relegated despite the fact that people from all sections of society had credited the truth of this episode. It seems likely then that this author's attempts to deny the legitimacy of ghost stories comprised a frustrated attempt to reform the errors and credulity of his peers who were still captivated at some level, by the possibility of wandering spirits. Indeed, the author recognised that he faced an uphill struggle.

If our Reason sets us above these low and vulgar Appearances, yet when we read of the Ghost of Sir George Villiers, or the Piper of Hammell, the Daemon of Moscow, or the German Colonel, mentioned by Ponti, and see the Names of Clarendon, Boyle &c. to these Accounts, we find Reasons for our Credulity, 'till at last we are convinc'd by a whole Conclave of Ghosts met in the works of Glanvil and Moreton.<sup>70</sup>

According to this judgment, it was less the idea of ghosts that was problematic than the authority with which they were presented. The ghost of Sir George Villiers enjoyed the patronage of Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon who first presented the story in his *True Historical Narrative of the Rebellion and Civil Wars*

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<sup>70</sup> The ghost of George Villiers was a popular ghost narrative published in a number of formats, notably by Clarendon, Aubrey and Defoe, and in a separate pamphlet account entitled *A full, true and particular Account of the ghost or apparition of the late Duke of Buckingham's father* (London, 1700).



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*in England*, reprinted in 1702. Daniel Defoe's inclusion of the same tale in *The History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727) suggested that the story retained contemporary interest for the fashionable and polite audience at which his book was pitched. Robert Boyle had vouched for the authenticity of the *Devil of Masçon* and consumer demand ensured that Joseph Glanvill's *Sadducismus Triumphatus* was reprinted in 1700 and 1726. The healthy publication statistics of these texts underline the continued importance of patronage and credit networks in shaping personal opinion about ghosts.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to neglect the role played by medical, scientific and astronomical learning in reshaping responses to ghost stories and it is in the *Gentleman's Magazine* that these influences were most striking. In November 1747 an essay in the magazine offered a natural explanation for the strange visions seen in Cumbria by Win Lancaster's servant on Midsummer Eve, 1735. The servant reported that he saw 'the East side of Souter-fell, towards the top, covered with a regular marching army for above an hour together'. However, there was no other witness present to corroborate the sighting and when the servant relayed his experience to friends and acquaintances 'he was discredited and laugh'd at'. That is until two years later, again on Midsummer Eve, when his master Win Lancaster saw several gentlemen 'following their horses at a distance' in exactly the same spot. At first he assumed they had been out hunting and 'pay'd no regard to it' but after ten minutes he looked again and noticed that the gentlemen now 'appeared to be mounted, and a vast army following, five in rank, crowding over at the same place, where the servant said he saw them two years before.' He then called on his family to confirm this was no optical illusion and upon arriving at the spot they 'all agreed in the same opinion'. The excitement of seeing these apparitions again died down until the Midsummer Eve preceding the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. On this occasion twenty-six people

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convened at the spot 'who all affirm they then saw the same appearance'. Some of the company who were eager to discover the cause of the vision climbed the mountain the following day 'through an idle expectation of finding horse-shoes', but upon investigating 'they saw not the vestige or print of a foot.'

The narrator of this tale was reluctant to attach a supernatural explanation to these uncanny visions and yet the whole story was peculiarly resistant to logical explanation. A 'lambent agitated meteor' might be blamed for these ghostly visions he argued but how could it 'affect the optics of so many people', and why did it appear on three separate occasions on the same day and in the same spot? As discussed previously, optical research had a clear impact on the way in which people thought about ghosts and yet in spite of this knowledge, there seemed to be a clear pattern to the visions at Souter Fell that defied the logic of coincidence. The author's confusion was deepened further by his acquaintance with the witnesses who he claimed, 'could have no end in imposing on their fellow-creatures, and are of good repute in the place where they live.' Unable to discount the story based on personal reputation or by claiming that all twenty-six of them were deceived by an optical illusion the author reluctantly confessed that the issue was 'at present beyond my philosophy to explain'. He sought assistance therefore from his fellow readers, appealing to 'such as will give themselves the trouble of enquiry'.

In the December issue of 1747 a reply was published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. However, it offered no new philosophical or optical explanations whereby to explain the ghostly figures. Instead this author attacked the need 'to deny the facts, by accusing the relators of falsehood, folly, or credulity, or impute them to other causes.'<sup>71</sup> Why he asked, did the narrator seek to naturalise such visions? 'Might he not truly answer, that they were a company of spirits, confined for a time to inhabit

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<sup>71</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, December 1747, pp.611-612.



material bodies of different forms and textures?' Where, he demanded, 'is the absurdity in supposing it possible for some spirits to appear for a short time in bodies still more refined, and capable of what shape they please, and when?' *The Universal Library: or, Compleat Summary of Science* concurred with this opinion and offered a physical explanation of how this process took place. Souls of the dead were able to cloak themselves in 'a Sidereal or Elemental thin Body' and return to earth therein, so long as the body of the deceased retained moisture. When the moisture drained away 'the Apparition or Ghost does grow weak, and at last vanish'.<sup>72</sup> Applying organic understandings of the natural world to life after death could thus validate the existence of ghosts. Having forcefully presented his case, the author finished with the following postscript. 'It is pleasant to observe that, notwithstanding the endeavours to discredit the being of spirits, there is hardly a person in England (I believe I may say the world) but hath either heard or seen one himself, or been acquainted with those that have: and if this was rightly attended to, such apparitions would be reckoned no more supernatural than it is to see an American or East-Indian; the one being as much a work of creation as the other.' This debate neatly encapsulated the fragmentation of learned opinion about the reliability of ghost stories in these years and the contestation of purely natural explanations of the world. Astronomical research into the effects of meteors and growing knowledge of the science of optics were just two means by which natural philosophy narrowed the contexts in which ghost stories remained credible. Nevertheless, as I will argue in the next section, intellectual trends could also provide new justifications and contexts to confirm the legitimacy of the eighteenth-century ghost story.

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<sup>72</sup> Curzon, *Universal Library*, pp.367-368.

## VIII Dreams

In February 1739 John Walker from Gloucestershire wrote to the *Gentleman's Magazine* with a story from Bristol in which a clergyman's wife relayed tidings of her daughter's death to other members of her family whilst in a dream. This account was quickly followed by the story of a gentleman who claimed to have seen 'his own Apparition in the day-time'. In 1722 *The universal library: or, compleat summary of science* commented on the increasingly common appearance of ghosts in dreams and attempted to explain the mechanics of this phenomenon.

It is far easier and familiar for the Deceased Souls to communicate their Secrets to their Living Friends in Dreams...for Men in Dreams are nearer unto the Condition of departed Souls than when awake, and therefore they can with ease and great familiarity discourse and reveal their Minds unto them...the Souls of Strangers do sometimes make Application to such sympathising Souls of the Living, whilst the Body lies asleep and reveal great Secrets, or foretell them of things sometimes good, and sometimes evil that are likely to befall them.<sup>73</sup>

One such instance was recounted by the bookseller William Owen in his *Warning Piece Against the Crime of Murder* (1752). A poor woman from Bristol whose husband left town in search of work discovered that he had been robbed and murdered after his ghost appeared to her in a dream. A publican with whom the poor man had lodged whilst on his way to London committed the crime. She related the dream to a local minister who judged it a sign of providential intervention. He informed a local magistrate and the publican was investigated and eventually

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<sup>73</sup> Curzon, *Universal Library*, pp.359-360.



executed for the crime.<sup>74</sup> Religious visions had for hundreds of years presented themselves in dream sequences but the reported incidence of ghosts encountered in dreams increased noticeably in the eighteenth century. The ghost-in-dream scenario was popular among the poorer sorts whose testimony might otherwise be discounted. If a ghost was encountered during sleep, the individual was considered less likely to be guilty of fraud and more likely to be the recipient of some divinely inspired message from beyond the grave. Such inspiration was claimed by a number of Methodist supporters who commonly met with visions of departed souls in dreams.<sup>75</sup> The generation of ghost stories by Methodists will be discussed in more detail in chapter five but for now I want to suggest that the ghost-in-dream scenario became an increasingly acceptable way to frame a ghost story thanks to developing theories of the unconscious and the idea of interiority in many aspects of eighteenth-century intellectual life. Heavy emphasis on the consciousness of man was typical of much seventeenth-century philosophy, especially in the work of Rene Descartes, but this was challenged in late seventeenth-century England by the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth who engaged with abstract ideas of the unconscious mind in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). In the same year fellow Platonist John Norris declared that 'we have many ideas of which we are not conscious'<sup>76</sup> and John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1689, was among the most influential of texts to examine the workings of the unconscious mind. Locke saw no connection between the thoughts produced whilst sleeping and those conscious ideas that could be confirmed by the human senses. In Locke's view,

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<sup>74</sup> W. Owen, *A Warning Piece Against the Crime of Murder* (London & Sherborne, 1752), p.88.

<sup>75</sup> John Fletcher, the vicar of Madeley in Shropshire was seen many times in dreams. His wife Mary Fletcher had a well-known dream in which John Fletcher appeared in the late eighteenth-century, 'Letter from Miles Martindale in Leeds to Mary Fletcher', *Fletcher-Tooth Collection*, Methodist Church Archive (hereafter MCA), MS. MAM FL 5/1/9. In a letter from Clifton in 1800 George Fothy claimed to have seen the ghost of his neighbour Joseph Bradley in a dream, 'Letter from George Fothy to Mary Fletcher', *Fletcher-Tooth Collection*, MCA, MS. MAM FL 6/7/19.

<sup>76</sup> L.L. Whyte, *The Unconscious Before Freud* (London, 1978), p.96.

an individual could not control the wanderings of the mind when asleep and it therefore followed that people could not be blamed or ridiculed for the visions they saw in dreams.<sup>77</sup> This radical detachment of the unconscious mind from the human senses was however subjected to more intense scrutiny in the following years. Physicians specialising in sleep research surmised that the involuntary movements and thoughts that took place evidenced 'an inner mental vision' that was 'superior to mere physical sight'.<sup>78</sup> Growing confidence in the powers of the unconscious mind problematised John Trenchard's argument in his *Natural History of Superstition* (1709), that 'Spirits and Apparitions' encountered in dreams were false images that could not be relied upon because the mind was cut off from 'the Organs of sense'.<sup>79</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century, these 'Organs of sense' were regarded with much greater distrust; the eyes especially were too easily tricked. Sight became commoditised and aestheticised by traders who deliberately set out to pervert it by perfecting and peddling the art of optical illusion.<sup>80</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century, a series of sight-related toys came into fashion – optical boxes, magic lanterns and kaleidoscopes - designed both to deceive and to entertain the eye.<sup>81</sup> By 1796 *Gale's Cabinet of Knowledge* confidently described how to fabricate the appearance of a ghost. The trick involved positioning an inverted portrait of a familiar person under a door. When the portrait was illuminated, it would reflect off a large concave mirror and form a most convincing apparition for an unsuspecting dupe entering the room.<sup>82</sup> *The Laboratory* (1799) informed readers how a Camera

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<sup>77</sup> John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1726), p.185.

<sup>78</sup> Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p.437.

<sup>79</sup> J. Trenchard, *Natural History of Superstition* (London, 1709), cited in Porter, *Enlightenment*, p.121.

<sup>80</sup> Distortions of vision tapped into deeper human tendencies to exaggerate the size of bodies and souls in eighteenth-century European culture. In Lucia Dacome's *Resurrecting By Numbers in Eighteenth-Century England*, the idea of grotesque fat souls was linked to excessive human sin in medical and theological discourses of re-embodiment. Susan Stewart has also identified the increasing exaggeration of bodily size in these years with fears of disorder and loss of control. S. Stewart, *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (London, 1993).

<sup>81</sup> Donovan, *Sketch of Opticks*; Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p.366, 371, 372, 373.

<sup>82</sup> *Gale's Cabinet of Knowledge; Or, Miscellaneous Recreations* (London, 1796), p.201.



Obscura could be used to conjure up an imaginary ghost, which was a trick practiced by fortune-tellers to make a profit from the 'credulous and ignorant people'.<sup>83</sup> Terry Castle has gone even further by describing how the psychological tendency to see the ghosts of loved ones foreshadowed inventions 'such as the magic lantern, photography, cinematography, television and holography'.<sup>84</sup> Given that the physical eyes were so easily cheated, a ghost that was seen by the inner eyes gained greater credence since the faculties of reasoning and deceit were disabled. In 1791 an English clergyman considered dreams to be 'of equal authority with the Bible' and suggested that 'the experience that many men have of significant dreams and night visions' had 'a more powerful effect on their minds than the most pure and refined concepts'.<sup>85</sup> The German physicist and mathematician G.C. Lichtenberg recommended that dreams and unconscious thoughts be recognised as intrinsic parts of human life. He claimed that 'we live and feel just as much in dreams, as in waking, the one is as much a part of our existence as the other'.<sup>86</sup> As Lancelot Whyte has argued, the unconscious mind was thought to link the individual with the universal and the organic.<sup>87</sup> Ghosts were part of this realm and thus by relocating ghosts to an interior space, the networks of natural philosophy worked to authenticate the reality of ghosts rather than to undermine them.

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<sup>83</sup> G. Smith, *The Laboratory; Or, School of Arts* (London, 1799), p.167.

<sup>84</sup> Carson, *Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, p.269.

<sup>85</sup> D. Simpson, *Discourse on Dreams and Night Visions* (London, 1791).

<sup>86</sup> G.C. Lichtenberg cited in Whyte, *The Unconscious Before Freud*, p.114.

<sup>87</sup> Whyte, *The Unconscious Before Freud*, p.69.

## IX Provincial Perceptions

I have known many a Country Lady come to London with frightful stories of the Hall-House being haunted, of Fairies, Spirits, and Witches; that by the time she had seen a Comedy, play'd at an Assembly, and ambled in a Ball or two, has been so little afraid of Bugbears, that she has ventur'd home in a Chair at all Hours of the Night.<sup>88</sup>

This extract from Joseph Addison's play *The Drummer* continued a well-established rhetorical tradition of early modern times that blamed the melancholic, the lunatic, the garrulous old wife and credulous country folk for nurturing fears of ghosts. As we have seen, these tropes were strengthened by philosophical and medical advances but they were also exploited by the wealthier residents of the capital who increasingly fashioned themselves in opposition to provincial culture to reify London as the cultural heart of English society. This metropolitan drive for cultural distinction was evidenced in contemporary periodical literature and was the corollary of the social and economic dominance of London, which was soon to become the financial centre of the world. Fed by immense trading profits from the Americas and the Indies, the wealth of the city expanded on a daily basis, as did its population. Middling sort and upper class entrepreneurs were increasingly drawn to the bright lights of London and they brought their money with them, patronising new trends in theatre, literature, music and the arts to suit their new lifestyle and establish a place in fashionable society.

In the pages of the *Tatler*, the *Spectator* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* London was depicted as the epitome of good taste, rationality and distinction – a far

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<sup>88</sup> J. Addison, *The Drummer; or, the Haunted-House, a comedy, as it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane, by His Majesty's Servants* (London, 1715), Act I, Scene I (Tinsel to Lady Truman).



cry from the supposed ignorance and credulity of regional centres. I have already indicated that London was by no means free of ghostly activity, often generating a number of hauntings that will be explored at greater length in chapter five. But how reliable is the projected image of credulous provincial society? This section explores contrasting representations of ghosts in regional publications that rolled from the provincial presses in the first half of the eighteenth century. The cities of Norwich and Newcastle have been selected because of their strong traditions of religious dissent, their distance and distinctiveness from the capital and their reputations as advanced centres of literacy and printing. Norwich was especially noted for its concentration of printers, booksellers and coffeehouses and for establishing the first provincial 'city' library in England as early as the 1630s.<sup>89</sup> Given its isolation among the sprawling rural communities of East Anglia, one might expect to find tale upon tale of ghostly activity in the Norwich press. However, a fruitless search through periodicals and news media of the day proved this expectation to be largely unfounded. There was in fact surprisingly little said about ghosts in the printed media of this substantial market town.

A few newspaper items did however shed light on how people thought about ghosts in this region. In 1708 Henry Crossgrove published *The Accurate Intelligencer* which contained 'Answers to a Number of Curious Letters Never yet Publish'd in the Norwich Gazette, Being a very choice reserve of such questions as were too long or improper to be inserted in a News-paper'.<sup>90</sup> Among the queries sent in by curious readers of the Gazette was a letter from a gentleman whose friend claimed to have seen a ghost. This man's wife had lately passed away and on the third night after her burial 'he saw her sitting by the Parlour Window in her usual

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<sup>89</sup> K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1998), p.305.

<sup>90</sup> Henry Crossgrove, *The Accurate Intelligencer, Containing Answers to a Number of Curious Letters Never Yet Publish'd in the Norwich Gazette* (Norwich, 1708).

Posture and Dress'. The querist was convinced of the truth of his friend's account but ventured to get a practical explanation about how this could occur. He therefore asked Crossgrove, 'if Persons that appear so are then in their Graves? Or if not, how do they get out?' The need to imagine the dead in a physical location suggests that this gentleman may have shared a materialistic conception of death and the afterlife that characterised many readers of the *Athenian Mercury*. If this ghost had returned to comfort her grieving husband, it was logical to conclude that the dead remained sensitive to the emotions of the living. This correspondent went on to quiz Crossgrove about 'whether Persons have Knowledge of Matters acted here after they are dead'? John Dunton's *Essay Proving We Shall Know Our Friends in Heaven* (1698) supported this idea as did Henry Curzon who argued that persistent affection for loved ones after death was 'the chief General Cause of Apparitions of Souls departed.'<sup>91</sup>

The letter also replicates confusion about the spiritual status of the dead to that presented in London periodicals, asking 'if you think such are happy Spirits that appear to us after they are Dead'. This gentleman's desire to know if his friend's wife was saved or damned was no doubt inspired by his personal affection for the lady, but if she was numbered among the elect her conduct whilst living could prove a useful guide for those friends and relatives left behind who were clearly impatient to receive Crossgrove's thoughts on the matter.<sup>92</sup> Some educated men and women from Norwich thus continued to invest meaning in ghostly appearances because they engaged with issues of death and salvation. The reluctance to admit the separation of body and soul at the moment of death was a very traditional argument for the reality of ghosts. Persistent curiosity about the future condition of the soul may have sustained the impact of ghost stories (as it did in London) but evidence from the

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<sup>91</sup> Curzon, *The Universal Library*, p.367.

<sup>92</sup> The letter to Crossgrove was written on behalf of 'several of your Friends and constant Customers', *Accurate Intelligencer*.



*Norwich Mercury* also suggests that the city was not untouched by sceptical thought about ghosts.

In February 1752 the *Norwich Mercury* presented one of the most important new challenges to the status of ghost stories in this region, at least among the middling sorts who made up a large proportion of the *Mercury's* reading public. A letter entitled 'The Fruits of Enthusiasm' was printed on page three and it came from an anonymous gentleman whose family was reduced to 'real Misery' because of the rebellious acts of his once loyal cook Margery. Margery began to misbehave at morning and evening prayers, when 'she mutter'd to herself incoherent stuff, so that those who kneeled by her, could hear nothing but Sweetest Jesus! Loveliest Lord! Dearest Spouse!' Soon after, the gentleman lamented that John the Butler had joined Margery in her dissention and refused to say *Amen* at the end of each prayer. These disruptions caused division within the household until the gentleman eventually dismissed them to perform their devotions alone. Despite this concession, the gentleman's letter told how Margery's behaviour continued to deteriorate. Several dinners were spoiled by her negligence, her appearance began to be 'ragged and dirty' and her poor mother whom she had always helped to maintain was abandoned to the workhouse where 'she soon died with Sorrow and Grief'.

Some time after Margery was heard screaming from the privy at the bottom of the garden. The noise was so terrible that Sarah the chambermaid was sent to investigate. However, she returned to her master with an ashen face, confessing that she dare not go to Margery because 'she fear'd meeting her Ghost as it should come from her Body'. The Butler was next dispatched to enter the privy and upon his return he reported that Margery 'was dead' and that 'he met her Apparition with a Pair of Eyes as big and of just such a Colour as our Warming-pan Lid, and that in running away he looked back behind him, and saw her ascend into Heaven, for Sir,

says he, she was a pious dear Soul, and had the Spirit'. However, before the gentleman had time to respond to reports of Margery's demise, she appeared before him whereupon all the servants took fright and were taken away for blood letting to relieve their distress. After examining the case, reports of Margery's demise proved rather premature. She was not about to meet her maker but was instead taken by the 'inner spirit' that commanded her to sing 'one of Mr. Wesley's Hymns'. The servants' visions of Margery's ghost were presented as ridiculous delusions by the gentleman whose letter was principally an anti-Methodist satire and formed part of a more general polemic against the spread of Methodism in Norwich.<sup>93</sup> When Calvinist Methodist James Wheatley arrived in Norwich with his congregation in 1751-2, religious tensions ran so high that riots ensued led by the Tory Hell-Fire Club.<sup>94</sup> At the time this letter was published, Norwich was gripped by anti-Methodist feeling and ghosts were thus being made central to a cultural conflict of pressing importance in Norwich, becoming embroiled in angry rhetoric and tarnished as products of 'enthusiasm'.<sup>95</sup>

In spite of this furious disavowal, ghosts continued to be both credible and relevant in other areas of Norwich life at this time. In May 1752 the weekly advertisements on page four of the *Mercury* included a publication notice for *A Warning-Piece against the Crime of Murder*.<sup>96</sup> The preface identified the contemporary relevance of the work; it was a direct response to 'the horrid and unnatural crime of murder' which 'has within a very few Years last past become much more frequent in this kingdom, than it was ever before known to be'.<sup>97</sup> This publication coincided with official anxieties about the frequency of murder in these

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<sup>93</sup> 'The Fruits of Enthusiasm', in *The Norwich Mercury*, 15 February 1752, p.3.

<sup>94</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p.405.

<sup>95</sup> Soon after this letter was published, the *Norwich Mercury* printed a weekly letter addressed to Mr. Wheatley, complaining of the latest excesses of Methodist converts. 'Letter to Mr Wheatley', in *The Norwich Mercury*, 4 April 1752.

<sup>96</sup> *The Norwich Mercury*, May 1752.

<sup>97</sup> *Warning Piece Against the Crime of Murder*.



years that culminated in the *Murder Act* of July 1752. As a deterrent to would-be killers, this legislation introduced harsher penalties for those convicted of this most heinous of crimes.<sup>98</sup> Since human powers of detection had failed to discover the perpetrators of many of these crimes, the value of ghostly revelation came to the fore.

The *Warning-Piece* included many wondrous discoveries of murder, three of which were solved by ghosts who returned to condemn their killers. Having secretly drowned his pregnant wife in a pond, William Barwick thought he had escaped punishment until his wife's ghost was raised to make the discovery. The victim's ghost appeared to her brother-in-law Thomas Lofthouse who reported his suspicions to the Lord Mayor of York. Barwick later confessed to the murder and was sentenced to death at York Assizes.<sup>99</sup> A soldier who fled to the army after murdering his master also figured in the *Warning-Piece*. He was forced to confess his crime however, by 'somewhat like a headless Man' that continually haunted his bedside.<sup>100</sup> Finally, a man put on trial for murder was confronted by the ghost of his victim in the courtroom. The material evidence against the defendant was too circumstantial to secure a conviction and so heaven's justice roused his victim's ghost to incite a confession from the guilty man. He was eventually sentenced to death and 'hanged in Chains at the Place where he declared the Murder was committed.'<sup>101</sup> The *Warning-Piece* was printed in twelve numbers, each containing three half sheets and priced at a modest two pence. It was thus accessible to a wide audience and was sold by Bookseller William Owen at Temple Bar in London as well as in Norwich.<sup>102</sup> As was

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<sup>98</sup> Those found guilty were now to be fed with only bread and water, they would be hanged within forty-eight hours of sentencing and their bodies dissected as a final mark of infamy.

<sup>99</sup> *Warning-Piece*, p.229.

<sup>100</sup> *Warning-Piece*, p.231.

<sup>101</sup> *Warning-Piece*, p.279.

<sup>102</sup> Apart from the initial advertisement, the book was recommended by the *Norwich Mercury* in issues on 23 May 1752, 6 June 1752, 8 August 1752, 15 August 1752.

the case in London, the status of ghost stories was contested in Norwich but retained legitimacy in certain contexts, especially when allied to moral reflections.

If the Norwich press offered only snippets of social commentary about ghosts, the Newcastle press was even less forthcoming. The *Newcastle General Magazine* was however the most fruitful publication, printed monthly and including editorial essays, events in London, poetry, book reviews and general advertisements. In September 1747 an article discussed the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Despite the attention this subject had received from 'Men of Genius and Application in all Ages', the author of this piece was unsurprised 'that so little Satisfaction has been hitherto obtained'. He remained undecided about the nature and properties of the human soul after death but no ghosts were found to accompany his conjectures. In fact, apart from a few poetic offerings about 'enchanted Grounds' and complaints about the 'idle Stories' of servants, ghosts were noticeably absent from this magazine in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>103</sup> Of course this silence does not mean that the reading public of Newcastle no longer believed in ghosts, but indirect references to these preternatural episodes are found only infrequently in the monthly book notices on the back page of the magazine. In February 1748 the register of new books included *Revelation, and not Reason, nor yet Enthusiasm, the Criterion in Religion* and the poetry section for the same issue advertised two volumes of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* at a price of four shillings.<sup>104</sup> Direct mention of ghosts came in a satirical ballad entitled *Lovat's Ghost* advertised at 6d. in May 1747 and a similar pamphlet named *Scelas's Ghost* was included in the July issue of 1748. The ghosts in both of these publications were highly figurative, and served to reinforce general principles of morality rather than

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<sup>103</sup> The reference to 'enchanted grounds' comes in a poem entitled 'Fancy' in the June issue of 1747 whilst complaints of 'idle Stories' can be found in the September issue of 1748.

<sup>104</sup> *The Newcastle General Magazine*, February 1748.



advancing claims for the real existence of these creatures.<sup>105</sup> This was reminiscent of treatments of ghost stories in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* and the *Newcastle General Magazine* may have been influenced by these periodicals, along with the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which enjoyed national circulation. Readers in Newcastle and Norwich were thus able to share in metropolitan opinions of ghosts as well as forming views of their own in line with regional priorities.

## Conclusion

Ghost stories stood in complex relation to readers of fashionable periodicals in the first half of the eighteenth century. Their editors had clear reforming agendas and used the periodical as a platform to shape the manners and opinions of readers. Some chose to laugh ghosts out of countenance and yet this was by no means a straightforward process of disenchantment. This was partly due to the personal beliefs of men like Joseph Addison and Richard Steele who valued ghost stories for promoting self-regulation, humility and moral virtue. As Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714) underlined, these values were increasingly prioritised to counteract the vanity and excess associated with the consumerism of metropolitan society.

Joseph Addison's support for ghost stories did though come with important qualifications. His discussions of these narratives were often displaced into fictional contexts from where Addison could admire the aesthetic value of ghost stories and encourage his readers to do so without admitting to those 'real' and crude ghosts of chapbook notoriety. In this guise however, ghost stories still had an important role to play, and they were pitched into an intellectual battle to defend the 'pleasures of the imagination' from philosophical attempts to limit the human mind to natural and

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<sup>105</sup> *Lovat's Ghost* is a satire on the debauched life of Lord Lovat, Jacobite sympathiser and traitor who was executed on Tower Hill in 1747. *Scelus's Ghost* was another satirical polemic, this time attacking the moral principles of treacherous and greedy lawyers.

domestic issues. Moreover, the dramatic effect of ghosts in poetry and prose relied upon the very ambiguity of these figures. Samuel Johnson's dictionary confirmed this hazy status in his definition of 'Fantasms', which had 'the nature of phantoms' and were described as 'unsteady' 'irregular' and decidedly 'uncertain'.<sup>106</sup> The apparent tensions in these accounts between fiction and reality, pleasure and pain were later elaborated in explanations of the sublime and in the genre of Gothic fiction – two of the most influential cultural forms of the later eighteenth century.

Despite this continuity of interest however, ghosts did appear less frequently in periodicals as the century wore on. Had people simply become less willing to believe in these narratives or were there other factors at play? Currents of scepticism did undoubtedly erode the credibility of ghost stories in these years and they now required greater supporting evidence, moral scaffolding and respected witnesses to gain acceptance in fashionable society. However, the apparent decline of interest in ghosts can also be explained by the evolving nature of the periodical genre itself. Ghosts popped up more frequently in the interactive periodicals of the early eighteenth century. The question and answer format adopted by the *Athenian Mercury*, the *Little Review* and the *British Apollo* also allowed for the most direct engagement with the reader. As the balance of power between audience and editor shifted towards the latter with the introduction of the essay periodical, the decision to include ghost stories in periodicals became a matter of editorial preference. Moreover, the decision to exorcise ghost stories from the press was undoubtedly influenced by the Stamp Acts of 1712 and 1724. These measures were designed to put a lid on anti-government rhetoric, a tax of a halfpenny was levied for each half-sheet published and one penny was charged per whole sheet. This initiative made it increasingly difficult to operate presses at a profit and many publications went to the

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<sup>106</sup> Cited in Stafford, *Body Criticism*, p.432.



wall. Defoe's *Review* folded after the act of 1712 and the *Spectator* survived only by doubling its price. The readership of these publications became increasingly restricted thereafter and the price increase intensified debate about the most appropriate content of these journals.

These legal provisions also help to explain the lack of ghosts in the Norwich and Newcastle presses since space was now at a premium and was most often taken up by reports of foreign affairs and criminal proceedings. Explaining why his readers' questions about ghosts had not been published in the *Norwich Gazette*, Henry Crossgrove claimed that his replies would take up too much space and would be worth enough 'to fill the best Part of a whole Volume'.<sup>107</sup> It was not that people had nothing to say about ghosts but rather that the constraints of the publication process itself limited their appearances. Thanks to the restricted circulation of regional publications, financial considerations played a key role in deciding the most appropriate content for each issue. Leading London periodicals such as the *Spectator*, the *Tatler* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* enjoyed a national circulation for their products, greater financial freedom and the ability to represent a wider range of contemporary issues. They were therefore able to include a greater number of ghost stories and it is surely significant that many of these narratives originated in regional centres and not just in the capital.

The relationship between fact and fiction was increasingly formalised following the introduction of the Stamp Acts.<sup>108</sup> Only real news could now be taxed and so light-hearted features and fictional entertainment were gradually separated from the daily headlines. Legal changes forced the news discourse to split and the boundaries between journalism and literature were more clearly drawn. Tales of the wandering dead occasionally surfaced in periodicals from the later eighteenth century, but many

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<sup>107</sup> Crossgrove, *Accurate Intelligencer*, p.23.

<sup>108</sup> For full explanation see Davis, *Factual Fictions*, chapter 5.

others were relocated to other literary genres and crucially to an interior imaginative space that was increasingly reified by new medical research. The heightened status of the imagination and the unconscious allowed ghost stories to be given full expression in Gothic fictions of the later eighteenth century. The popularity of these texts was especially marked among the leisured classes, and it was encouraged by the material production of reading chairs and bookstands for the home – many of which now incorporated private libraries.<sup>109</sup> The marketplace thus promoted new reading practices that allowed ghost stories to be relocated to domestic spaces and to the individual imagination, which helped to redefine the boundaries between ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’ and limiting public discussions of these narratives in leading periodicals.

The relationship between ghost stories and enlightened philosophy was similarly complex in periodical literature. New optical, neurological and astronomical vocabularies helped to expose many ghost stories as illusion, but a persistent desire to understand the nature and movements of departed souls can be traced with enquiries into the nervous system, psychological disorders, the nature of dreams and in technological developments such as the magic lantern. The public marginalisation of ghost stories can be overstated since in the course of this chapter alone, we have seen how ghosts continued to feature in theatrical comedy and drama, poetry, novels, satire, newspapers, historical narratives, medical treatises, theological tracts and educational discourses to name just a few. Undoubtedly, these ghosts were conceived in different ways but in whatever guise they appeared, they influenced both the content of the narratives in which they appeared and the forms that they took. Ghosts were central to the Graveyard School and they had the power to shape this genre as well as being shaped by it. Important parallels can be drawn with Jacques Derrida’s

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<sup>109</sup> Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp.184-185.



discussion of how the 'Specters of Marx' continued to haunt a new world order that had proclaimed the passing of the communist moment and the death of Marxism itself.<sup>110</sup> The idea of ghosts like the ideas of Marx refused to go away. Despite attempts to transform the reality of ghost stories by cutting them off from empirical substantiation and objective 'proof', they survived as a kind of disembodied knowledge, being reinterpreted and recycled into new, more abstract contexts. Such manipulations and survivals were only made possible because ghosts retained profound personal and emotional significance and were embedded in deep structures of belief.

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<sup>110</sup> J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx, The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International*, translated by P. Kamuf (New York, 1994).

## Chapter Five

### **The Challenge of Methodism: Ghosts and the Religious Culture of Eighteenth-Century Anglicanism**

#### **I Cock Lane**

On 10 July 1763 Richard Parsons and his wife were brought to trial before the chief Justice Lord Mansfield at the Court of King's Bench, Guildhall. With them was the Parsons' maidservant Mary Frazer and Methodist sympathiser the Reverend John Moore, assistant preacher at St. Sepulchre's and Rector of St. Bartholomew the Great, West Smithfield. All four stood accused of conspiracy and after a trial lasting just one day each was found guilty of plotting to 'take away the life of William Kent by charging him with the murder of Frances Lynes by giving her poison whereof she died'. These criminal charges were brought following the exposure of the most sensational ghost story that London had ever known, and Richard Parsons, the drunken parish clerk of St. Sepulchre's as its most unlikely orchestrator. In a narrow alley in the shadow of St. Paul's Cathedral, Parsons had played host to a ghost who famously accused wealthy stockbroker William Kent of murdering his fiancée Fanny Lynes. Kent and Lynes had lodged with Parsons for a short time at his house in Cock Lane in 1759 but had quarrelled after Kent threatened to bring a lawsuit against Parsons to recover a debt of twelve guineas. Kent and Lynes moved out of Parsons' house but Fanny died soon afterwards, giving Parsons the perfect opportunity to secure his revenge. Parsons reported that a ghost known as 'Scratching Fanny' haunted his house and that it was none other than the disturbed soul of Fanny Lynes who claimed that she had been poisoned by Kent as she lay on her sickbed in February 1760. Following a series of public séances led by the Reverend Moore who seemed genuinely convinced of the



ghost's authenticity, news of Scratching Fanny and of William Kent's crime rapidly spread across London and engaged the attention of the capital's most wealthy and renowned citizens as well as the poorer sort who flocked to the house in Cock Lane night after night. No fewer than eight newspapers and four magazines covered the story and such was the consternation it caused that Lord Mayor Samuel Fludyer was forced to intervene.<sup>1</sup> He ordered an independent inquiry into the truth of the ghost that eventually exposed 'Scratching Fanny' as a fake and Richard Parsons as a fraud who had determined to ruin the reputation of his former tenant. The Reverend Moore was heavily fined for his part in the drama, Mary Frazer was sentenced to six months in Bridewell and Mrs Parsons to one year, but the most severe sentence was reserved for Richard Parsons who was to serve two years in prison and ordered to stand three sessions in the pillory. This very public sentence was unusual, but highly appropriate for a man who had excited such extraordinary public interest in the capital in the early months of 1762.<sup>2</sup>

The case of the Cock Lane ghost will be explored in more detail below but it is important at this stage to establish the importance of the affair for this thesis. Firstly, wrangles over the authenticity of 'Scratching Fanny' position ghost stories as persistent sites of cultural contestation and exchange well into the second half of the eighteenth century. Secondly, widespread support for the accusations of the ghost point to a neglected aspect of London's history from below in this period – the groundswell of belief in the activities of ghosts and spirits. Thirdly, and most significantly for this chapter, the implicit religious authority given to the revelations of Scratching Fanny by

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<sup>1</sup> Reports of the Cock Lane ghost appeared in Jackson's *Oxford Journal*, *Lloyd's Evening Post*, *London Chronicle*, *Public Ledger*, *Public Advertiser*, *St. James's Chronicle*, *The Annual Register*, *The Beauties of All the Magazines*, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, *The London Magazine*, *The Monthly Chronicle* and *The Universal Magazine*. D. Grant, *The Cock Lane Ghost* (New York, 1965), preface.

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Beattie suggests that although the pillory was still used, it was much more likely to be restricted to one session rather than three, *Policing and Punishment in London 1660-1720: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror* (Oxford, 2001), pp.307-308.

the involvement of Methodist sympathiser John Moore, brings into focus the complex position of ghosts within the contested religious cultures of the later eighteenth century. In the immediate term, the authenticity of the ghost became a struggle between Methodist ministers and Anglican clergymen to establish superior religious authority, but any sharp division between Methodist credulity and Anglican disbelief is too simplistic an explanatory device. In spite of the public discrediting of the Cock Lane ghost and vociferous opposition to the 'enthusiastic' excesses of the early Methodist movement, ghosts were neither abandoned by Anglican clergy nor by their parishioners. In fact it was largely thanks to the efforts of churchmen in spreading preternatural tales that ghosts were reinvested with important theological meanings in a period of severe social, religious and political dislocation. Reactions to the Cock Lane affair and to similar ghost stories in these years thus highlight the neglected significance of revealed religion and of particular providences in current historical assessments of late eighteenth-century religion and spirituality.

In January 1762, the London daily newspaper the *Public Ledger* first published news of Scratching Fanny in a series of articles detailing the downfall of Fanny Lynes. This young woman from Norfolk had fallen in love with William Kent and followed him to London where, claimed the newspaper, she was persuaded by Kent to take on the role of his wife and although no marriage ever took place she soon fell pregnant with his child. At Kent's insistence the couple masqueraded as man and wife to conceal their illegitimate union, but they were forced to pass through a number of temporary lodgings as and when the deceit was discovered – one of these lodgings belonged to Richard Parsons. Kent and Parsons quarrelled over money, forcing the couple to move to a nearby jeweller's.



So far the story was straightforward but those who later became embroiled in the lurid affair hotly disputed what happened next. All were agreed that Fanny Lynes died soon after she left Parsons' house on 2 February 1760 and that she was laid to rest in the vault of St. John's, Clerkenwell. It was however, the manner of her death that sparked bitter controversy. William Kent would maintain that Fanny had fallen sick soon after she had been forced to move out of Cock Lane and that he called Dr Thomas Cooper to treat her on 25 January 1760. Fanny was now in the late stages of her pregnancy and supposed that she had gone into premature labour having 'an acute pain in the back'. However, further examination revealed that she had contracted a virulent strain of smallpox from which she would never recover. According to a local clergyman who visited Fanny in her final hours, William Kent was extremely grieved by the sudden death of his fiancée and he claimed that he had never seen 'a grief more expressive than in Mr. K.'<sup>3</sup>

This was a very different tale from that told by Richard Parsons and the *Public Ledger*. The newspaper claimed that William Kent had cried crocodile tears at Fanny's funeral since it was he who had lured her to London, compromised her virtue and eventually murdered her to get his hands on her inheritance, administering a fatal dose of arsenic whilst she lay on her sickbed. Fanny Lynes' family supported this version of the story after Kent was given 'absolute disposal' of Fanny's estate in a will written just a few months before her death.<sup>4</sup> The articles in the *Public Ledger* painted a damning picture of William Kent and they complemented Richard Parson's attempts to ruin

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<sup>3</sup> O. Goldsmith, *The Mystery Revealed; Containing a Series of Transactions and Authentic Testimonials, Respecting the Supposed Cock-Lane Ghost* (London, 1762), p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Relations between Kent and the Lynes family soured further when he inherited £150 after the death of Fanny's brother Thomas and a further £94 12s. 7d. from property sale. When part of this sum had to be repaid due to a mistake in the original sale, Kent refused to contribute and John Lynes began proceedings in Chancery against him. Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, p.7, 18, 19.

Kent's reputation in local credit networks that had little prior knowledge by which to judge the conduct of this litigious newcomer.<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Parsons, William and Fanny's illicit relationship was exposed and this shocking tale of sexual immorality was made worse still when it became known that Fanny was the sister of Kent's dead wife.<sup>6</sup> Conventions of public morality had been transgressed and from reports of his lewd behaviour with his dead sister's wife, it seemed that William Kent might indeed be capable of murder.

Parsons circulated rumours that Kent had murdered his so-called 'wife' before 1762 but his mutterings initially fell on deaf ears. However, in the closing months of 1761 he hit on the idea of employing a higher authority to advance his cause and he told a group of local clergymen, Reverend Moore chief among them, that his house had for some time been disturbed by strange scratchings and knockings. Unable to identify any natural cause, Parsons asked Moore to investigate since he feared some supernatural agency was at work. Moore was an early Methodist convert and a follower of John Wesley and when Parsons related his scandalous story of William and Fanny, Moore seemed convinced that the disturbed ghost of the dead woman was behind the disturbances. Even if Kent had not killed Fanny, the Reverend Moore believed that 'these visitations must at least be considered as a judgment on him.'<sup>7</sup>

Moore's particular interest in the case can be attributed to his religious background. Ever since John Wesley felt his heart 'strangely warmed' by the Holy Spirit in 1738, Methodists claimed to have a special affinity with the invisible world.<sup>8</sup> These

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<sup>5</sup> As Douglas Grant notes, Kent's reputation was key to his success in business and in marriage negotiations with the family of his third wife. Indeed, plans for Kent to go into partnership with her brother were shelved after the affair became common knowledge. Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, p.38.

<sup>6</sup> According to Goldsmith, a child had been born to Kent and his former wife and although it barely survived birth; this issue made Fanny and Kent's union impossible under canon law.

<sup>7</sup> Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, p.27.

<sup>8</sup> N. Curnock (ed.), *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley* (London, 1938), Volume II, 24 May 1738.



claims often brought criticism from intellectual quarters where the mechanical theory was gathering support; nonetheless, historians have rightly claimed that the evangelical emphasis of primitive Methodism had some kinship with popular spirituality and enabled the religion to gain a hearing among the common people.<sup>9</sup> The Reverend Moore clearly included returning ghosts in his theological worldview and he sought to capitalise on this tale to advance the cause of Methodism among the labouring classes of industrializing London and with more prominent figures such as William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth. Support for the ghost demonstrated that large sections of the population still preserved a space for the direct intervention of God in the world and what is more, ghosts had a well-established reputation for punishing sinners, thus it was entirely plausible that the disgruntled ghost of Fanny Lynes had received divine permission to expose William Kent for his vile deed.

The Reverend Moore held nightly séances in Parsons' house to communicate with Fanny's ghost and he met with particular success in the chamber of Elizabeth Parsons. Elizabeth was Richard Parsons' twelve-year old daughter and she had formed a special bond with Fanny during her stay in Cock Lane. It made sense then that Elizabeth was one of the few who claimed to have actually seen Scratching Fanny, describing the appearance of a woman 'without hands, in a shrowd'.<sup>10</sup> To further legitimate his enquiries, Reverend Moore called on the Reverend Thomas Broughton, lecturer at St. Helen's, Bishopsgate Within and All Hallows, and secretary to the Society for

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<sup>9</sup> H.D.Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast, John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London, 1989), p.281. Even Joseph Priestley commended Wesley for spreading the gospel among the poor and although he disapproved of Wesley's promotion of the supernatural, he did concede that these accounts were 'exceeding lively and entertaining'. *Original Letters by the Rev. John Wesley, and his friends, illustrative of his early history, with other curious papers, communicated by the late Rev. S. Badcock, To which is prefixed, An Address to the Methodists by Joseph Priestley* (Birmingham, 1791), xi.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Parsons and a local publican also claimed to have seen the dead woman 'with hands, all luminous and shining', Goldsmith, *The Mystery Revealed*, p.18.

Promoting Christian Knowledge. Like Moore, Broughton was an early Methodist convert and Douglas Grant reported that the Methodists promised contributions to the promoters of the ghost - the affair thus became an important case on which the efficacy of Methodist spirituality was publicly tested. Parsons and Moore carefully managed the media spectacle that ensued and Mary Frazer acted as an impromptu medium, quizzing the ghost and interpreting the knocks that came in response – one for yes and two for no. Before a large audience in February 1762 Mary emerged as the ghost’s chief interrogator and she asked Scratching Fanny, ‘Did you die naturally?’ – two knocks for no. ‘Was it by poison?’ – one knock for yes. ‘Did any person other than Mr Kent administer it?’ – two knocks for no. ‘Should Mr Kent be arrested?’ – one resounding knock for yes.

The diverse make-up of the crowd that gathered at Cock Lane was highly significant and this narrow alley was temporarily transformed into a space where the labouring poor, curious maidservants, men, women and children from all social backgrounds literally rubbed shoulders with one another and with the crème de la crème of fashionable London society. Newspapers clearly thought this remarkable and reported that ‘The clergy and laity, the nobility and commonalty...continue their nightly attendance upon the invisible agent.’<sup>11</sup> In a letter to his friend George Montagu, author and politician Horace Walpole described his visit to the most celebrated haunted house in London’s history. It was a cold and rainy winter evening and the hour was late ‘yet the lane was full of mob, and the house so full we could not get in it’. However, having revealed his distinguished companions to be the Duke of York, Lady Northumberland, Lady Mary Coke and Lord Hertford, Walpole was admitted into the house. The group waited for some ghostly action until past one o’clock in the morning when only

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<sup>11</sup> Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, p.52.



‘prentices and old women’ remained and Walpole later reported that a strange kind of knocking was heard behind the wainscot in Elizabeth Parson’s bedchamber.<sup>12</sup>

Walpole went on to parody ghosts in his gothic creation *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) and as Emma Clery has suggested, he may well have appreciated the Cock Lane more as aesthetic spectacle than objective reality. Nonetheless, his correspondence provides an important glimpse of the genuine social interaction that took place in the heart of industrial London thanks to the popularity of the ghost. William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth moved in similar social circles to Walpole but as a Methodist sympathiser, Dartmouth entertained the very real possibility that Fanny’s ghost had been sent on an important providential mission.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, currents of popular scepticism were well catered for in cheap printed wares. A broadside ballad entitled ‘Cock-Lane Humbug’ mocked the disruption that Fanny’s ghost had caused in the capital; local taverns and street vendors profited from the flood of visitors to the area and local hawkers exploited them by selling the best viewing positions in and around Richard Parson’s house – even Walpole and his companions were obliged to line the pockets of these canny men.<sup>14</sup> Walpole wrote to George Montagu that ‘provisions are sent in like forage, and all the taverns and ale-houses in the neighbourhood make fortunes.’ Richard Parsons himself had told landlord of the ‘Wheat Sheaf’ James Franzen about the ghost and he was one of the few who claimed to have seen Scratching Fanny. Little wonder

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<sup>12</sup> W.S. Lewis (ed.), *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, Vol. X (London, 1983), pp.5-7.

<sup>13</sup> For biographical detail see P. Marshall, ‘Legge, William, second earl of Dartmouth (1731-1801)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16360>> (23 February 2005).

<sup>14</sup> William Kent would later count on the support of ‘Carrots’ the servant to deny the authenticity of the ghost in court.

then that Franzen's tavern made huge profits, 'the credulous swallowing down with his beer his tales of terror.'<sup>15</sup>

'Scratching Fanny' undoubtedly had novelty value for contemporary audiences but the question of the ghost's authenticity was key to more serious matters. William Kent's defence against accusations of murder now relied on the exposure of this ghost and the Reverend John Moore had staked his own credibility and that of his Methodist peers on the truth of it. In the hope of reaching a satisfactory conclusion to the affair, the case was referred to Sir Samuel Fludyer, Lord Mayor of London. Fludyer was reluctant to get involved since his predecessor Sir Crisp Gascoyne provoked an angry mob in 1753 following his intervention in the case of Elizabeth Canning who claimed that two ruffians had kidnapped her.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, though Fludyer refused to arrest William Kent for murder or to detain Richard Parsons for fraud, he did order an independent investigation to bring an end to the media circus. Stephen Aldrich, Anglican minister of St. John's Clerkenwell and 'a very orthodox priest' headed up the investigation and he was joined by the Earl of Dartmouth, amateur investigator Dr. John Douglas, hospital matron Mrs. Oakes, eminent physician Dr. George Macaulay, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great essayist and conversationalist who nurtured a lifelong fascination with ghosts.<sup>17</sup> Under Aldrich's direction, the ghost was revealed to be a fraud after Elizabeth Parsons was seen making knocking sounds on a wooden board. Some members of the committee claimed that the noises were nothing like those previously been heard at Cock Lane but

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<sup>15</sup> Grant, *The Cock Lane Ghost*, p.38.

<sup>16</sup> Grant, *The Cock Lane Ghost*, p.45. See also *Genuine and Impartial Memoirs of Elizabeth Canning* (London, 1754); H. Fielding, *A Clear State of the Case of Elizabeth Canning* (London, 1753).

<sup>17</sup> Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, p.12. Despite the outcome of the Cock Lane case, Johnson insisted some years later that 'it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death.' *Everybody's Boswell, Being the Life of Samuel Johnson abridged from James Boswell's complete text and from the "Tour to the Hebrides"*, illustrated by E.H. Shephard (London, 1989), p.290.



Elizabeth's actions turned the tide of opinion in William Kent's favour. The committee therefore concluded that Elizabeth had 'some art of making or counterfeiting particular noises, and that there is no agency of a higher cause.'<sup>18</sup>

The committee's resolution was not sufficient for William Kent and he commissioned as his chief apologist Oliver Goldsmith, the journalist and novelist who attempted to restore his battered reputation in *The Mystery Revealed*, a short pamphlet first published in 1762 and which sold for one shilling. Goldsmith's account contained a highly romanticised version of William and Fanny's relationship, designed to tug at the heartstrings and pardon Kent's moral lapses for the middle-class reader who could both sympathise with his predicament and afford to purchase the pamphlet. Kent also sought redress through the courts and he filed suit against Parsons and his co-conspirators, which, as we know, resulted in Parsons' imprisonment and public humiliation in the pillory. Nevertheless, despite Kent's legal vindication, London opinion was still divided. When Parsons appeared in the pillory he was spared any abuse and a collection was even taken up for him by the supportive crowd. Lord Mansfield's judgment may have followed the letter of the law but it did not fit with customary notions of right and wrong. In spite of his drunkenness, Richard Parsons was a popular man of previous good character and Fanny's ghost had created as much sympathy for him as scorn. For the stranger William Kent it was a different story; no formal charges were brought against him but 'Scratching Fanny of Cock Lane' ensured that a question mark would always hang over his reputation. His innocence was still being questioned in 1850 when J.W. Archer reopened the coffin of Fanny Lynes; inside he found the body of a woman but could discern no trace of the smallpox that had supposedly caused her death.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, pp.71-72.

<sup>19</sup> Archer went to the vault to produce illustrations for Charles Mackay's *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions* (London, 1841). His suspicions were raised by the fact that Fanny's remains were

The historical significance of the Cock Lane affair has been largely neglected. Douglas Grant produced the most comprehensive study of this episode, Andrew Lang discussed the case in his attempt to trace a heritage for nineteenth and twentieth-century ghost stories and Keith Thomas dismissed the episode in just two sentences.<sup>20</sup> All three failed to place reactions to the Cock Lane ghost into wider historical perspectives about the status of ghost stories in eighteenth-century culture or to assess the wider interest of the tale for assessments of eighteenth-century religion.<sup>21</sup> It is with these issues that I will be largely concerned in the pages that following. The Cock Lane affair was clearly a cause célèbre, but how did it change perceptions of ghosts in these years? Emma Clery believes that the affair marked a watershed in attitudes towards ghosts and towards the supernatural more generally. It was the Cock Lane fraud she argues, that effected the commodification of the ghost as an amusing figure of spectacle in consumer London. The epistemological status of ghosts was soon to become irrelevant since they existed only to titillate and entertain, to be bought and sold on the open market. For Clery, Cock Lane was a landmark event as ghosts were ‘freed from the service of doctrinal proof’ and incorporated into a process of fictionalisation from which they would never escape.<sup>22</sup>

However, in her eagerness to provide a genealogy for the rise of gothic fiction, Clery underestimates belief in the ‘real’ supernatural in the second half of the eighteenth century. As I suggested in chapters two and three, the commodification of ghost stories took place much earlier and can clearly be traced back to the explosion of cheap printed

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‘perfectly preserved’ – a tell-tale sign of poisoning. Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, p.2. The shelf-life of the Cock Lane ghost was further lengthened by Charles Elliott who included the affair in his *Mysteries: or, Glimpses of the Supernatural* (New York, 1852).

<sup>20</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic, Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1991), p.712.

<sup>21</sup> Grant, *The Cock Lane Ghost*; A. Lang, *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (London, 1896).

<sup>22</sup> E.J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction* (Cambridge, 1995), p.17.



ghost stories in Restoration England, if not earlier. Moreover, the argument of chapter four describes how the process of fictionalisation that Clery depicted was ambiguous. A number of publications attacking the existence of ghosts appeared for sale in the aftermath of the Cock Lane affair and they clearly suggested that the fact or fiction of ghost stories remained contested. Moreover, these texts were largely designed to counter a number of other publications seeking to capitalise on the revival of interest in ghost stories, two new editions of Charles Drelincourt's *Christian's Defence Against the Fears of Death* were published as well as two editions of Daniel Defoe's *Secrets of the Invisible World Laid Open*.<sup>23</sup>

The laughter that was heard in and around Cock Lane in 1762 can then, be interpreted in a different way. As Douglas Grant suggests, public ridicule of the ghost was fairly restrained before Stephen Aldrich's committee declared it to be a fraud; it was only then that fashionable London set out to minimise the embarrassment to its reputation by parodying the ghost as a figure of fun, a product of vulgar credulity and Methodist enthusiasm which the educated had never taken seriously in the first place. William Hogarth revised his engraving entitled *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* to include the Cock Lane Ghost in 1762; Joseph Addison's satire, *The Drummer*, based on another famous ghostly imposture, enjoyed a new lease of life in the 1760s, and Charles Churchill also ridiculed the episode in his poem *The Ghost!* By laughing ghosts out of countenance, fashionable society sought immunity from the widespread credulity that pervaded the capital during the Cock Lane controversy. It was David Hume after all

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<sup>23</sup> Even after Aldrich's committee had supposedly put an end to the affair, the Cock Lane episode had a vibrant afterlife and poor Elizabeth Parsons was taken to a house near Covent Garden where she was forced to sleep 'in a kind of hammock with her hands and feet fastened with fillets' to see if the scratching continued, see Grant, *Cock Lane Ghost*, p.75. C. Drelincourt, *The Christian's Defence Against the Fear of Death* (London, 1764 & 1770), D. Defoe, *The Secrets of the Invisible World Laid Open: or, An Universal History of Apparitions, Sacred and Profane* (London, 1770).

who claimed that popular delusions were much more likely to succeed amongst ignorant people or in remote countries 'than if the first scene had been laid in a city renowned for arts and knowledge.'<sup>24</sup> Hume's claim was more optimistic than realistic, however, since Charles Coote's *History of England* highlighted the damage that the Cock Lane affair had done to London's reputation when he made reference to the ghost in between his descriptions of great military victories. For Coote, the episode represented 'strong proof of the credulity of the English populace' and he noted that 'the delusion operated with considerable effect; and superstitious terrors were widely propagated.'<sup>25</sup> The Reverend John Adams was more forceful in his condemnation of the London crowd in 1762, whose conduct was proof 'of their blind superstition'.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Scratching Fanny was one of a great many ghosts that haunted the capital in the course of the eighteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

When reactions to the Cock Lane ghost are explored in greater depth along with responses to a number of different ghost stories in this period, it becomes clear that ghost stories in general remained central to both Anglican and Methodist pastoral strategies. The polemical association of ghost stories with the 'enthusiasm' of Methodists deterred public declarations in favour of these narratives at moments of political and religious tension, but away from the heated world of public polemic and over a longer chronological period, Anglican attitudes towards the preternatural world

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<sup>24</sup> A. Flew (ed.), *Of Miracles by David Hume* (Illinois, 1985), p.39.

<sup>25</sup> C. Coote, *The History of England*, Volume IX (London, 1791-98), pp.242-243.

<sup>26</sup> Reverend J. Adams, *Elegant Anecdotes, and Bon-Mots of the Greatest Princes, Politicians, Philosophers, Orators, and Wits of Modern Times* (London, 1790), p.147.

<sup>27</sup> Following the murder of 13 year old Anne Naylor in 1758, the locals of Farringdon came into regular contact with her ghost. A headless woman that haunts St. James's Park was thought to be the ghost of a woman who was brutally murdered by her husband in the 1780s. Admiralty House in Whitehall was haunted by the ghost of Martha Ray, mistress of the Earl of Sandwich (and First Lord of the Admiralty in the later eighteenth century). The ghost of Admiral John Byng, executed for neglect of duty in 1757 haunts the Royal Naval College at Greenwich and a Reverend Douglas investigated a London burial ground in 1789 that was reportedly haunted by a procession of female spirits. See R. Jones, *Walking Haunted London* (London, 1999).



were not irrevocably altered and as I will suggest in the sections that follow, they varied in degree rather than kind from those of their Methodist peers.

## II The Ambiguous Impact of Methodist Ghost Stories

In 1762 an anonymous pamphlet called *Anti-Canidia: or, Superstition Detected and Exposed* was published in London. It set out to free mankind from 'the tyranny of superstition' and to fell the 'mighty Colossus' of ghost beliefs that had lately caused such uproar in the capital.<sup>28</sup> The author was prompted to write the tract by 'the contemptible *wonder* in Cock-lane, that has lately made so much *noise*; and the *more wonderful* attention paid to it, even by some persons of rank and character.'<sup>29</sup> The affair was clearly no laughing matter for this author, who attacked ghosts in this lengthy pamphlet in the interest 'of *pure* religion' and '*for* the honour of God and Providence'. The brand of religion favoured by the writer was 'reasonable' and heavily influenced by the mechanical philosophy that promoted a largely self-sufficient universe and tried to bind religion to the ordinary laws of nature.<sup>30</sup> Rational religion also carried with it a particular view of providence and since mankind was now set on the path to perfectibility, God no longer needed to intervene in the world on a regular basis. Signs and wonders that were made to serve 'insignificant and contemptible uses' therefore offended the dignity of a more transcendent conception of divine providence.<sup>31</sup> The Cock Lane fraud was a case in point and the ghost of Scratching Fanny was deemed a fabrication, serving only to satisfy a sinful lust for revenge. Rational dissenters, whether Deist or Unitarian could not justify the interruption of nature for such a 'particular' and

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<sup>28</sup> *Anti-Canidia: or, Superstition Detected and Exposed* (London, 1762), p.3.

<sup>29</sup> *Anti-Canidia*, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> For fuller discussion see M.P. Winship, *Seers of God, Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1996), pp.42-44.

<sup>31</sup> *Anti-Canidia*, p.21.

‘trifling’ providence as this, nor could they tolerate Methodist support for these so-called miracles.

Methodist encounters with the supernatural were widely published in the early years of the movement because they both reflected and advertised the success of the evangelical cause. There is no denying, however, that some of these accounts were more than a little incredible, leaving the early movement vulnerable to accusations of wild ‘enthusiasm’. In 1756 Wesley published an account from a Dublin clergyman telling how the ghost of Richard Mercier had lately appeared to his fiancée after he had been struck dead by a mistimed Church bell.<sup>32</sup> In 1789, the official Methodist publication, the *Arminian Magazine* related the tale of Mrs Brown who had seen a flash of light in her house and heard the footsteps of ‘a heavy man in loose slippers’.<sup>33</sup> She was unable to account for the meaning of this episode and so deferred to Wesley’s expertise on the subject. If Mrs Brown’s case was perplexing, then the experiences of a woman from Sunderland were even more difficult to decipher. Wesley himself admitted that the case of 22-year old Elizabeth Hobson was ‘one of the strangest accounts I ever read’ but nonetheless he could find ‘no pretence to disbelieve it.’

Elizabeth Hobson had seen more than her fair share of ghosts for such a young person and her experiences began in early childhood when she used to see apparitions of the neighbours either just before or just after they had died. ‘I observed all little children, and many grown persons, had a bright, glorious light round them; but many had a gloomy, dismal light, and a dusky cloud over them.’ Elizabeth clearly had a gift for deciphering the spiritual reward of the ghosts that appeared to her and at the age of twelve or thirteen the spirit of the wicked family lodger visited her all aflame. Four years

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<sup>32</sup> Curnock, *Journal*, 3 June 1756, pp.165-166.

<sup>33</sup> *The Arminian Magazine*, Volume XII, 1789, p.436.



later after her beloved uncle died, Elizabeth prayed to see him one last time and when he appeared before her, it was in the guise of a guardian angel. He was dressed in a white shining robe and accompanied by 'delightful music' and he took care to nurture Elizabeth through her grief by appearing at her bedside for almost six weeks.<sup>34</sup> Next, Elizabeth claimed to have seen the ghosts of two more loved ones, the first was her fiancé who had lately died at sea and the second was her brother George who was drowned along with the crew of his ship in 1763. The ghost of a third sailor, John Simpson, also visited Elizabeth and could not rest until she had vowed to take care of his orphaned children. This ghost also brought an assurance of Elizabeth's future salvation when he told her that 'where I am, you will surely be' before he disappeared accompanied by sweet music.<sup>35</sup> Thus far Elizabeth's narrative was eventful but inoffensive. However, in 1767 she put her affinity with the spirit world to a more lucrative purpose after she inherited a house in Sunderland from her grandfather, John Hobson. Elizabeth employed an attorney to recover possession from her aunts but finding them stubborn she claimed to have been visited by the ghost of her ancestor, 'an exceeding wicked man', who told her that if she wished to evict her ageing relatives from the house that she must sack her present attorney Mr. Dunn, in favour of Mr. Hugill from Durham.<sup>36</sup>

Elizabeth was ultimately successful in her legal suit but her financial windfall raised questions about the reliability of her testimony. It was becoming increasingly difficult to justify the idea of particular providences on a philosophical basis and even Samuel Johnson, who was no enemy of ghosts, was unconvinced by Hobson's story

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth made herself ill through her mourning and the spirit made sure that she was well provided with food and drink whenever she required it. Curnock, *Journal*, p.268.

<sup>35</sup> Curnock, *Journal*, p.270.

<sup>36</sup> Curnock, *Journal*, p.271.

when he heard it in London.<sup>37</sup> One man who would not be persuaded to discount it however was John Wesley and he publicised the tale in the *Arminian Magazine*, which boasted higher circulation figures than even the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the later decades of the century. Wesley provided a running commentary to Elizabeth's tale for the benefit of his readers, drawing parallels with biblical passages and highlighting the salient lessons to be learned from her encounters with the invisible world. John Wesley may have been unselective in his appropriation of ghost stories, but his purpose in spreading these accounts was highly consistent. In accordance with Richard Baxter's thoughts on the subject, Wesley believed that encounters with the invisible world might teach us to admire the 'frame of divine government', 'to confirm Believers against temptations to doubt of the life to come', to prove the immortality of the soul and future judgment, and to inspire love for a God that sent divine messengers to preserve the faithful.<sup>38</sup> Many would have argued (including Wesley himself) that 'standing revelation' or scripture should be sufficient to relay these crucial messages to the laity; however, Wesley understood that in practice, a little more help would be needed if religion was to gain a serious hearing among the disaffected masses.

Wesley's 'A Serious Address to the Preachers of the Gospel of Christ' set out the Methodist recipe for a successful sermon. Preachers were to take care 'that dry speculations and schemes of Orthodoxy, do not take up too large a part of your discourses' and he insisted that 'something practical' was brought into every sermon. Wesley was supremely aware of his audience and a key ingredient in the successful sermon was the conversion narrative, something like the story of Peter Wright that

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson's interest in this affair resulted in his first meeting with John Wesley. Although Johnson admired Wesley's 'various talents and loved his pious zeal' he declared that 'His statement of the evidence as to the ghost did not satisfy me.' Curnock, *Journal*, June 1768, p.275.

<sup>38</sup> Wesley quotes wholesale from Baxter's *Certainty of the World of Spirits* (London, 1691) in the *Arminian Magazine*, Volume VI, April 1783, ff. 212.



related 'the first awakenings of the conscience of a sinner, by some special and awful providence'. The preacher had an obligation to speak from his or her own experience or 'from the Experience of Christians who have passed through the same trials' all of which would make it clear 'that religion is no impracticable thing'. It was believed that 'this sort of instruction would animate and encourage the young Christian that begins to shake off the slavery of sin, and to set his face toward heaven'.<sup>39</sup> Methodists were not renowned for doctrinal innovation but they were famed for identifying new ways to broadcast religion to the population. According to John Wesley's formula, ghost stories were one way in which the gospel could be brought to life for the lay community.

Nonetheless, Wesley's interest in the preternatural was personal as well as practical, and ghosts fitted neatly into his theological outlook. The activity of guardian angels was one of Wesley's favourite topics and the divine agency of these spiritual messengers harmonised with the ideas of Arminianism that emphasised the benevolence of God rather than his wrath.<sup>40</sup> Wesley was also happy to admit that God intervened in the world on a regular basis since he did not conform to the idea that man was a perfectible being.<sup>41</sup> Wesley's theology therefore admitted both reason *and* revelation and he was certainly not alone in this respect since the roots of his evangelicalism can be traced back both to High Church Anglicanism and to the Puritan values of the

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<sup>39</sup> 'Serious Address to the Preachers of the Gospel' in the *Arminian Magazine*, Volume XX, 1797, pp.123-124.

<sup>40</sup> J. Wesley, 'Of Good Angels', *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, F. Baker and R. Heitzenrater (eds) (Oxford, 1980-2003). See also Wesley's early sermon on 'Guardian Angels', *Bicentennial Edition*, iv, pp.225-35.

<sup>41</sup> J. Wesley, 'The Imperfection of Human Knowledge', in Baker and Heitzenrater (eds), *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*.

seventeenth century.<sup>42</sup> Wesley's mixed theology is important for highlighting the limited impact of rational religion in this period.<sup>43</sup>

Wesley's appropriation of ghosts, moreover, was not a new departure for a Protestant minister, and he borrowed heavily from Henry More, Joseph Glanvill and particularly Richard Baxter who inscribed familiar ghost narratives with spiritual and moral principles to popularise Christianity. John Wesley serialised Baxter's work for a new audience in the 1780s and 1790s, and adapted the moral of the tales to suit contemporary concerns about the spread of consumerism, materialism and secularisation in the later eighteenth century. Despite the rhetoric of his enemies, Wesley's engagement with the supernatural world, and with ghosts in particular, was part of a rich Protestant tradition that can be traced back to the early years of the Restoration Church.

Critics of Methodism however, were not all drawn from the margins of rational religion and the most outspoken opponent of the early movement was George Lavington, Bishop of Exeter. He accused Methodists of inciting dangerous 'enthusiasm' among the populace by the crude adoption of signs and wonders from the invisible world. This was the same unruly disease that had gripped England during the years of Civil War, causing anarchy in Church and State in the 1640s and 1650s.<sup>44</sup> In *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared*, Lavington attacked the Methodist 'pretence to Inspiration' and instead compared 'the Extravagant freaks of Methodism' to 'the Fanaticism of the Romish Church'.<sup>45</sup> Lavington's lengthy tract, published in 1749, was a particularly damning indictment of Methodism because it was first printed just

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<sup>42</sup> G.M. Ditchfield, *The Evangelical Revival* (London, 1998), pp.46-50.

<sup>43</sup> General dislike for rational dissent beyond the intellectual elite prevented the circulation of such ideas as did limited publication success. See N. Hampson, *The Enlightenment, An Evaluation of Its Assumptions, Attitudes and Values* (London, 1990), esp. chapter four.

<sup>44</sup> See chapter one for full details.

<sup>45</sup> G. Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London, 1749), preface.



four years after the Jacobite invasion of 1745 that produced the most vehement outbreak of militant anti-Catholic sentiment since the century had begun. Ritual pope-burnings were carried out on the streets and they took ideological justification from the Bishop of London and his clergy who delivered sermons that encouraged ‘a just Abhorrence of Popery’, whilst cheap ballads and pamphlets revived fears of Catholic usurpation and the suppression of British liberties.<sup>46</sup> Against the background of war with Spain and the fall of Robert Walpole in 1742, anti-Catholic tensions reached a peak in the 1740s amidst fears of a political crisis. In reality, early Methodist converts were among the most vehement opponents of the theological precepts of Catholicism but the conflation of the two by Bishop Lavington resulted from the context of paranoia that followed the Forty-Five and in which Methodists could be convincingly fashioned as crypto-Papists, representing a potential threat to the social, political and religious establishment.<sup>47</sup>

Lavington’s anti-Methodist rhetoric largely resulted from fears of political instability rather than doctrinal conflict and this conclusion is further reinforced by closer inspection of his attitude towards ghosts. Lavington articulated Anglican fears that Methodist reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit might promote a more direct relationship between God and the individual, thereby encouraging dangerous anti-clerical sentiment, and he thus went on to rail against the ‘impulses, impressions, feelings, impetuous Transports and Raptures’, which the Methodists had the nerve to ascribe ‘to the extraordinary interposition of Heaven’.<sup>48</sup> Lavington devoted considerable

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<sup>46</sup> N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities, Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), p.379.

<sup>47</sup> See Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c.1714-80* (Manchester, 1993), p.10. The slur of ‘Papist’ was a very old rhetorical ploy and was used by King James I who compared Puritan and Jesuit enthusiasm in his *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue* (London, 1603), pp.52-54. Methodist teachings were also criticised for provoking social division, whilst some men and women opposed the suggestion of spiritual equality implicit in John Wesley’s support for the poorest sections of society.

<sup>48</sup> Lavington, *Enthusiasm*, pp.48-49.

space to debunking episodes of supposed witchcraft, yet he was significantly more circumspect in his dismissal of ghosts and apparitions because in some contexts ghost stories still had ‘some pretension to a Divine direction’.<sup>49</sup> Reiterating a traditional Protestant argument used to authenticate providential signs, Lavington argued that ghost stories ‘may sometimes come from God’ even though many were undoubtedly ‘counterfeits and impostures’.<sup>50</sup> The author of *Anti-Canidia* also agreed that if a ghost story ‘was for the reclaiming of a sinner, and to save but one soul from everlasting perdition; it might be a cause worthy of divine interposition: and consequently in some degree credible.’<sup>51</sup> There was, moreover, a brand of Methodist ghost that inspired reverence rather than incredulity from different confessional groupings.

An entry in John Wesley’s Journal for Sunday 28 March 1736 told the story of Peter Wright, the servant of Mr. Bradley. The young man spoke to Wesley on his sickbed (although Wesley took care to note that he was ‘perfectly sensible’ in spite of his illness) and Peter told him that on Thursday night around eleven o’clock he heard a voice calling his name, ‘Peter! Peter Wright!’. When he looked up his chamber was filled with light and he saw ‘a man in very bright clothes stand by the bed, who said, “Prepare yourself, for your end is nigh”’. Wesley was eager to put this apparition to pastoral use and so he told Wright that ‘The advice was good, whencesoever it came.’ It was with delight no doubt, that Wesley wrote how the apparition had transformed Peter Wright’s behaviour and just a few days later ‘his whole temper was changed as well as his life, and so continued to be till, after three or four weeks, he relapsed and died in peace’.<sup>52</sup> Peter Wright’s experience was convincing because it was familiar and parallels

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<sup>49</sup> Lavington, *Enthusiasm*, p.76.

<sup>50</sup> Lavington, *Enthusiasm*, p.25.

<sup>51</sup> *Anti-Canidia*, p.23.

<sup>52</sup> Curnock, *Journal*, p.187.



could be drawn with the Lives of the Saints and with scripture. The 'conversion narrative' enjoyed a rich biblical tradition and was most famously used in the story of Mary Magdalen. Peter Wright's ghost story was not laughable and its acceptability was strengthened by the weight of scripture and by the fact that it bridged the gap between particular and general providences. Although Wright benefited personally from the intervention of the apparition, the subsequent publication of the tale served a broader purpose, namely to reinforce the value of a pious life to society at large. This was a message with which Anglicans also identified and here the ghost narrative emphasised the common objectives of conformists and dissenters in promoting the value of a practical and moral Christianity in the achievement of salvation.

### **III Loyalism, Protestantism and the Church of England**

George Lavington objected to John Wesley's methods of religious instruction but the two men both hoped to achieve 'an effectual Reformation of manners and Propagation of the Gospel'. Lavington prayed that this might happen 'by all sober and effectual Methods'.<sup>53</sup> But if his formula excluded the use of ghost stories, a number of his fellow clergy did not agree. In 1747 a new six-penny pamphlet ran off the London presses entitled *An Account of the Apparition of the Late Lord Kilmarnock to the Reverend Mr. Foster*. In size and form, this pamphlet resembled those described in chapter two and probably appealed to a mixed audience since it featured the ghost of the infamous William Boyd, fourth Earl of Kilmarnock who was sentenced to death for High Treason in July 1746 for his part in the Jacobite invasion. Following his capture at Culloden, the Reverend Foster attended the disgraced peer in his final hours to urge his repentance. Unsatisfied by Kilmarnock's speech on the scaffold, Foster penned a lengthy narrative

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<sup>53</sup> Lavington, *Enthusiasm*.

of the conversation he claimed to have had with Kilmarnock's apparition on the morning after his execution. Now assured of the error of his ways having received divine mercy, Kilmarnock's ghost dutifully appeared to Foster to 'warn all not to postpone their everlasting Concerns to their last Days'. The ghost went on in the manner of a preacher declaring 'that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that no Man cometh to the Father but by him', 'Dare not' he went on 'attempt to find out a new Way to Heaven: Good Works will follow all Men into Heaven, for none can go there without them.' The words of the Catholic traitor were now used to underline the righteousness of the victorious British nation and the triumphant Protestant faith.

Another dialogue 'between a Clergyman of the Church of England and a Sea-Captain' was also appended to this pamphlet. Having lately arrived from Jamaica, the Sea-Captain had read about Foster's meeting with the ghost (after first hearing it read from a Manuscript) and was overjoyed at news of Kilmarnock's beheading. The clergyman then engaged in a lengthy conversation with the Captain during which the cleric recited the articles of the Church and the Book of Common Prayer. The clergyman then went on to relate how on the same day that Kilmarnock's ghost appeared to Foster, he too was visited by the ghost (whom he knew personally when living) whilst in his garden. The ghost gave the cleric 'a small Paper Book in Octavo. The Writing was plain, and of an azure Colour, shining exceeding bright' and it contained the account of the ghost's conversation with Foster. The clergyman was given divine permission by the apparition to publish the account for the use it might have in bringing sinners back to the path of righteousness. This extraordinary tale was similar to Wesley's account of Peter Wright and the author made full use of not one but two conversion narratives. Not only was Kilmarnock converted from his sinful ways but the Sea-Captain was also transformed by the tale declaring that 'I have been an Infidel hitherto as to Apparitions'



but he was now confirmed in his faith and went on to promise that 'I shall think more of Jesus Christ than ever I did before in all my life.'<sup>54</sup> In contrast to the alleged division and instability promoted by the Methodist emphasis on supernatural forces in the 1740s, Kilmarnock's ghost was now serving the purposes of the political and religious establishment.

The author of this pamphlet capitalised (both financially and spiritually) on the notoriety of Kilmarnock and on the patriotic taste for military victories and bloody executions.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he was not alone in using the marketplace of cheap print to communicate important religious messages and was joined in 1764 by another minister, this time from Northampton. *THE GHOST, OR a minute account of the appearance of the Ghost of John Croxford* appeared two years after the Cock Lane episode and was published as a follow up to *A True and Circumstantial Relation of a Cruel and Barbarous Murder*. The first twelve-page pamphlet told of the shocking murder of pedlar Thomas Corey who had his throat cut before being stabbed in the head after an argument about the price of the stockings he was selling. The killing took place 'at a House of ill Fame' in the Parish of Guilsborough, kept by Thomas Seamark (who was lately executed for highway robbery). After Corey was stabbed, his body was stripped and his clothes were taken upstairs where the Seamark children lay in bed and his body was cut into little pieces and buried in various parts of the house.<sup>56</sup> Three men were convicted of this gruesome murder but the chief villain and the man who allegedly

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<sup>54</sup> *An Account of the Apparition of the Late Lord Kilmarnock*, pp.27-28.

<sup>55</sup> See for example the popular acclaim reserved for Admiral Edward Vernon, naval commander and politician who defeated Catholic Spain at the battle of Porto Bello in Panama at the start of the War of Jenkins Ear in November 1739. In ballads and chapbooks Vernon was revered as a war-hero, patriot and defender of Protestant liberties and his birthday became an occasion for public celebration. N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities, Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), p.236, 374-5.

<sup>56</sup> The entrails were buried under the floor, flesh and bones were burned in the oven and the rest was buried under the threshold of the door.

struck the fatal blow was John Croxford, a twenty-three year old tailor from Brixworth. Croxford was executed in 1764 and his body was taken to Holloway Heath in Guilsborough and hanged in chains on a specially erected gibbet. The justice of his death was however contested in the local area since Croxford never confessed his part in Corey's murder, though he did admit to a string of petty crimes. The opinion of the crowd was divided at the execution ground and protestations of innocence from all three convicted men 'brought many over to a full persuasion of their Innocence, and left others to half between two Opinions'. Ann Seamark, wife of the executed Thomas was the chief witness for the prosecution and it was on her evidence and that of her ten-year old son that Croxford's conviction was secured. Seamark's honesty was brought into question after the execution and a public row followed in which one publication branded her 'the vilest Wretch that ever appeared in a Court of Justice'. This was the background then to the publication of *THE GHOST* by a churchman who was determined to defend the justice of Croxford's sentence and to champion Anne Seamark's role in his downfall.

It was on 12 August 1764 that the ghost of John Croxford first appeared to this clergyman. The scene was highly appropriate since he had just returned to his study after instructing his parishioners in scripture and was reading St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians on the resurrection of the body when all of a sudden he was confronted by 'the perfect form and appearance of a Man'. The ghost bid the cleric not be scared and immediately confirmed that he was sent on a divine mission and could do nothing 'but by the immediate permission of GOD'. The ghost identified himself as John Croxford, 'PRINCIPAL and RINGLEADER' of the gang that had murdered Thomas Corey, and declared that 'he was particularly appointed by *Providence* to undeceive the world, and remove those Doubts which the solemn protestations of their innocence to the very Hour of Death had raised in the Minds of all who heard them.' When the clergyman asked the



ghost why he had denied his part in the murder, he answered that aside from being drunk on the scaffold, that he and his accomplices had entered into 'a Sacramental Obligation' never to tell a soul having sealed this macabre pact by 'dipping their Fingers in the Blood of the deceased and licking the same'. According to the ghost, the guilty men thought they would literally get away with murder because Anne Seemark's husband had been confederate in the killing and so her evidence would be inadmissible - that was until she was widowed shortly before the trial took place. Following these extraordinary revelations, the clergyman wisely asked the ghost for some material proof to authenticate the claims and so he was told to dig in a certain spot of ground where he found a ring belonging to the unfortunate pedlar and which bore the fateful words 'HANG'D HE'LL BE WHO STEALS ME - 1745'. The discovery of the ring not only persuaded the author that he 'had the full use of both my Senses and Reason' when the ghost appeared to him, but it also convinced him of his obligation 'to communicate to the World the Particulars of the Whole.'

This story was bound to capture the imagination of its readers since it contained murder, grisly pacts and buried treasure – all the classic ingredients of a popular folkloric ghost tale. Nonetheless, the pamphlet was perhaps intended to appeal to the educated sorts, being thirty-four pages in length, incorporating Latin quotations (and English translations) and priced at one shilling. Moreover, the author was not just interested in lining his own pockets with the profits of publication since he mixed the familiar motifs of the ghost story with a strong dose of moral and religious rhetoric. Drawing in his readers on the title-page with the promise of a 'GHOST', the author set about preaching on the perils of 'vice and immorality' that seemed to be infecting the nation in 'an Age of Dissipation'. The author made clear that it was only with God's assistance that private and public dissipation could be defeated and it was in this context

that the idea of special or particular providences was safely reasserted. The author firmly linked John Croxford's ghost to 'wonderful Providence' and he went on to contest new linguistic expressions that had come to dilute or to provide secularised alternatives to the idea of divine providence, arguing that 'What we call Fortune, Chance, or Fate here below has a different Name above & is term'd the Power, the Wisdom or Providence of GOD'. This narrative was intended to 'reform the Vicious...quicken the spiritual sluggard, persuade the Diffident, and encourage the Virtuous in a steady perseverance of the Duties of Religion' and John Croxford's ghost was a timely reminder of the punishment that awaited sinners if they strayed from the path of virtue. Central to the achievement of virtue was obedience to the Church and only by respecting the Sabbath and the ministrations of the Church would John Croxford's fate be avoided. This pamphlet was published just two years after the Cock Lane episode and it provides a useful reminder that ghosts had yet to be loosed from doctrinal service. Croxford's repentant spirit reaffirmed the symbiotic relationship between Church and State and linked religion to principles of 'national virtue'.

Both Methodist and Anglican ministers sought to reinforce the authority of Protestantism in an age of apparent 'secularisation' and also to promote a practical, moral theology as a prerequisite to salvation. Ghost stories were an important medium through which to achieve both ends. Moreover, as Linda Colley has argued, anti-Catholic sentiment was an important means of self-definition for British Protestants in the eighteenth century, and a source of unity for Protestant denominations in the face of a common enemy.<sup>57</sup> A Methodist ghost story printed in the *Arminian Magazine* in the 1780s expressed a strong sense of patriotism centred on the defence of the Protestant faith. In 1754, the house of John and Ann Lambert of Winlington, Newcastle was greatly

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<sup>57</sup> L. Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1996), p.26.



disturbed by the ghost of Henry Cooke who had lived there until his death in 1752. Strange noises were heard in the house for about two weeks until Ann Lambert saw 'a man dressed in his grave clothes' at one o'clock in the afternoon. The ghost frightened her so much that Ann persuaded her husband to move to another house in the neighbourhood. However, the Lamberts could find no respite and after just a few days the couple both reported 'the appearance of a man's head as white as chalk' as they lay in bed one night. The ghost next appeared at the bed's foot 'dressed in the clothes which he wore during his life time' and he was immediately identified as the disturbed spirit of Henry Cooke, who was also a notorious Catholic recusant. The revelation of Cooke's Catholicism went a long way towards explaining the violent antics of the ghost that followed over the next year. The Lambert children were dragged kicking and screaming from their beds, the cat was found murdered, Ann Lambert was stamped on by the ghost who came dressed 'in a surplice and white wig' and in December 1755, Ann saw the ghost 'in the likeness of a brown and white calf; it grew bigger and bigger till it was the size of a middling horse, then it leapt into the bed and struck her three times'.<sup>58</sup> The details of the story were sensational but its purpose was clear, namely to connect Catholicism with the Devil since nobody could have mistaken the ghost of Henry Cooke for a benevolent spirit!

In periods of political crisis, the ghost narrative united Anglicans and Methodists through expressions of anti-Catholicism and Protestant patriotism. The timing of Henry Cooke's ghost was highly significant and it represented one articulation of the huge outpouring of popular loyalist and anti-Catholic feeling engendered by the Jacobite invasion of 1745-6. The political threat posed by Catholicism was at its height in the years 1688-1746 when it was explicitly linked to Jacobitism and when the Young

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<sup>58</sup> *Arminian Magazine*, Volume VII, 1784, p.488.

Pretender's claim to the British throne was most vigorously supported by the Catholic states of France and Spain. With these nations newly resurgent on the European Continent from the 1730s, anti-Catholic sentiment reached its peak, cutting across social classes and political and religious denominations. A short two-page ghost story published in 1758 fitted this model of Protestant patriotism, with the ghost of Admiral Edward Vernon referring to French Catholics as the 'treach'rous foes' of Britons and lamenting the failings of British commanders during The Seven Years war, upon which 'proud Gallis builds her fame'.<sup>59</sup> Nicholas Rogers described Vernon as 'the Britannic bane of the great Catholic powers' and an account from 1757 describing the appearance of Admiral John Byng's ghost, displayed similar patriotic qualities and linked belief in ghosts to the true religion of Britain.<sup>60</sup> A number of ghost stories from the mid-eighteenth century thus support Paul Langford's claim that anti-Popery was an 'expression of national unity'; moreover, as the activities of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts demonstrated, anti-Catholic feeling also had an important international dimension.<sup>61</sup>

Nonetheless, after the Hanoverian succession was secured following the death of James Edward Stuart and the Pope's recognition of George III as King of Great Britain in 1766, the nature of anti-Catholic feeling changed, especially among politicians and enlightened intellectuals who were willing to make concessions to Catholics both at home and abroad in order to secure loyalty to the Crown, to cement imperial policy in

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<sup>59</sup> *Admiral Vernon's Ghost* (London, 1758).

<sup>60</sup> N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities, Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), p.375. *A Full and Particular Account of a Most Dreadful and Surprising Apparition* (London, 1757).

<sup>61</sup> P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), p.202. Colin Haydon suggests that anti-Catholicism in this period was 'the chief ideological commitment of the nation, a set of generally held attitudes, not the obsession of 'ultra-Protestants'. Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism*, p.18.



the colonies and to further commitment to religious toleration.<sup>62</sup> However, this periodisation of anti-Catholic feeling should not be too categorically enforced. The Gordon Riots of 1780 suggest that a latent groundswell of Catholic hatred persisted, especially among the poorer sorts and that it could erupt in moments of crisis.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, as I will suggest in the final section of this chapter, the re-appropriation of ghost stories by Anglicans and Methodists in the 1790s once again positions these narratives as shared resources among different confessional groupings that upheld the legitimacy of Church and state when the threat of French invasion seemed imminent.

If the political menace of the Catholic faith was diluted after 1766, evidence from ghost stories show that theological objections to Catholicism persisted, among Anglicans but especially among Methodists. A new edition of John Tillotson's *Discourse against Transubstantiation* was published as late as 1797 and a ghost story serialised in the *Arminian Magazine* for 1785 explicitly denied any association with Catholic beliefs surrounding the fate of the dead in the afterlife.<sup>64</sup> It may also be significant that a number of eighteenth-century ghosts displayed angelic qualities. As we saw earlier, Elizabeth Hobson was visited by her uncle in the guise of a Guardian Angel, the ghost of a Scottish laird insisted that 'many angels or departed spirits' were sent as missionaries from God to guard and protect the faithful, and as I suggested in chapter three, Daniel Defoe's *History and Reality of Apparitions* reprinted in 1752, 1770 and 1791 discussed the comparable qualities of angels and apparitions of the dead.<sup>65</sup> The

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<sup>62</sup> For reactions to the Quebec Act (1774) and the Catholic Relief Act (1778) see Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism*, p.164, 189, 203.

<sup>63</sup> For fuller explanation of the anti-Catholic dimension of the Gordon Riots see N. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998), chapter five. For anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century see E.R. Norman, *Roman Catholicism in England: from the Elizabethan settlement to the Second Vatican Council* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>64</sup> 'A Strange Account, Dunbar, May 26, 1784' in the *Arminian Magazine*, July 1785, Volume VIII, p.378.

<sup>65</sup> D. Defoe, *The History and Reality of Apparitions* (London, 1752).

increasingly blurred metaphysical distinction between angels and departed souls during the eighteenth century may well have been an important differentiating feature of Protestant ghost stories, deflecting any association of departed souls with a middle state of purgatorial trial.<sup>66</sup>

Changing notions of anti-Catholicism throughout the eighteenth century thus heavily influenced Anglican and Methodist ghost stories and these narratives were also comparable in articulating common concerns for moral reformation among the laity. Bishop Fisher of Exeter declared that Christianity was a gospel of social action and the moral code of Protestantism was termed ‘the common possession’ of all.<sup>67</sup> This consensus is unsurprising given that John Wesley’s theological roots grew from the same preoccupations of the Restoration Church that influenced many conformist churchmen. The importance of a practical, moral Christianity was not only championed as a means of engaging with the ethical instincts of a disaffected population, but also as a unifying force for Protestant denominations who could work together to achieve a common goal. Wesley laid great store on the need for godly reformation to smooth man’s path to heaven and the publication of ghost stories was designed to shock men and women out of spiritual lethargy. Wesley was no doubt also familiar with his father’s appropriation of ghost narratives in the *Athenian Mercury*, which served a similar purpose.<sup>68</sup> As we have seen, these accounts were mostly published in the 1690s and they coincided with Samuel Wesley’s participation in a broader clerical project for moral reform in this decade. A drive to restore ‘our decaying Christianity to its primitive life and vigour’ began in earnest in 1690s England and gave rise to the Society for

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<sup>66</sup> For discussion of John Wesley’s interest in ‘angelology’ see R. Webster, *Those Distracting Terrors of the Enemy: Demonic Possession and Exorcism in the Thought of John Wesley* (Unpublished Paper, Oxford University, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> W. Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832, Unity and Accord* (London, 2001), p.11, 126.

<sup>68</sup> See chapter four for full details.



Promoting Christian Knowledge (1699), the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (1701) and numerous societies for the reformation of manners. Although their theological outlooks differed, both John and Samuel Wesley were concerned with the moral and spiritual welfare of the people and both went on to preach sermons for the reforming societies.<sup>69</sup>

The fruits of this campaign were realised in the eighteenth century, which saw 'the flourishing of practical Christianity' in England.<sup>70</sup> The drive to inject new vigour into parish religion was especially needful as the century wore on. Churchmen feared that imports of luxurious foreign goods and the rise of a consumer mentality would distract the populace from religion and lure them into habits of vanity and dissipation. The author of John Croxford's ghost story condemned Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* for celebrating private vices and others feared that the new industrial age would produce a nation of atheists and libertarians. To stem this tide of immorality the SPCK published bibles and other religious literature at a prolific rate and societies for the reformation of manners tried 'to regulate public morality by exhortation' in an effort to win back the loyalties of parishioners.<sup>71</sup>

Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Secker (1758-1768) was determined that the Church would learn from the traumas of the seventeenth century and find new ways to engage with the laity. Secker was famed for his pastoral zeal and he told one clerical assembly that 'We have in fact lost many of our people to sectaries by not preaching in a manner sufficiently evangelical'.<sup>72</sup> To remedy the situation Secker taught his clergy how

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<sup>69</sup> Samuel Wesley had preached for the Society for the Reformation of Manners at Westminster in 1698 and he began a religious society of his own following correspondence with the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.). For more details see H.D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p.53.

<sup>70</sup> A. Armstrong, *The Church of England, the Methodists and Society 1700-1850* (London, 1973), p.20.

<sup>71</sup> Ditchfield, *Evangelical Revival*, p.36.

<sup>72</sup> Armstrong, *Church of England*, p.19.

to deliver a sermon effectively and he also proposed a compromise between the principles of rational religion, where man might aspire to knowledge of God through his own efforts, and a revelatory faith where God could still intervene to teach lessons to the faithful. Bishop Butler's *Analogy of Religion* anticipated Secker's blueprint for reform in 1736 when he sought to bring the works of revelation and nature closer together. The idea of a transcendent divine providence was by no means out of step with the religious culture of Hanoverian England and William Gibson has gone so far as to call it 'a corner-stone of eighteenth-century Anglicanism'.<sup>73</sup> The legitimacy of both Church and State was consistently expressed in providential vocabulary since the Glorious Revolution and the accession of William III was justified as an act of supreme providence. Similarly, the defeat of the Jacobite rebels in 1745 and Britain's escape from the revolutionary turmoil of 1790s Europe were also proclaimed as benevolent judgments on the chosen Protestant nation.<sup>74</sup> Sermons compared Britons to the ancient Hebrews trying to free themselves from popery, and assisted by the grace of God.<sup>75</sup> Secker's emphasis on the revelatory aspects of religious faith complemented rather than conflicted with the religious culture of Anglicanism and provided a platform for churchmen to communicate with their congregations.

If Anglicans and Dissenters were united by a common belief in Britain's divine fortunes, they were sometimes divided by the need to outdo one another to attract and retain the loyalties of the people. Parishioners could legally worship outside the Church of England following the Toleration Act of 1695 and Archbishop Secker's call for greater clerical activism was no doubt a response to this competitive marketplace of

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<sup>73</sup> Gibson, *Church of England*, p.1.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Hayter saw the defeat of the rebels as 'a recent instance of such divine providence vouchsafed to our gracious sovereign in the suppression of an attempt to rob him of his Kingdom.' Cited in Gibson, *Church of England*, p.39.

<sup>75</sup> Gibson, *Church of England*, p.153.



religion. If the Church of England was to keep up with its sectarian rivals then religious ideas had to be packaged and communicated in effective ways. Success could be achieved through lively sermons and cheap religious tracts that were expressed in plain language and accessible to the common man.<sup>76</sup> John Wesley and his brother Samuel devised a series of pioneering techniques to enliven Methodist worship and music was to prove a crucial medium with which to attract and retain followers. Wesleyan theology was played out in hundreds of hymns and popular ballads and collections of these pieces were widely published and targeted at specific interest groups - children for example. John Wesley banned organs from Methodist chapels in case they drowned out the voices of the congregation and because the lyrics 'intensified the emotion of Methodist worship', expanding the ways in which Wesley could spread the Methodist gospel.<sup>77</sup>

Reared as a dissenter himself, Thomas Secker realised that he had much to learn from the Methodists: he was envious of their evangelical methodology and sought to imitate it within the Church of England. He demanded that something be done 'to put our psalmody on a better footing' because 'the Sectarists gain a multitude of followers by their better singing.'<sup>78</sup> If clergymen could reach their parishioners through song then they also did it through print. Cheap pamphlets and short collections of ghost stories provided a particularly lively and engaging way of grabbing the attention of readers and a number of conformist clergy went on to write these accounts.<sup>79</sup> *A History of Apparitions, Ghosts, Spirits or Spectres* was published in 1762 and according to the frontispiece was written 'By a CLERGYMAN'. The author boasted contributions from a

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<sup>76</sup> John Tillotson's writings pioneered this work in the Restoration period, H.D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p.29.

<sup>77</sup> Armstrong, *Church of England*, p.76.

<sup>78</sup> Armstrong, *Church of England*, p.79.

<sup>79</sup> See for example, *The Wonderful, Strange, Apparition and Ghost of Edward Ashley* (London, 1712); *Life After Death; or the history of apparitions, ghosts, spirits or spectres* (London, 1758).

network of colleagues including 'a reverend clergyman of Wiltshire'. The 'late reverend and learned Dr. Scott' gave an account of a dissolute young squire who was visited by his father's ghost to warn him 'to reverence the church, and duly pay tithes to the parson of the parish'.<sup>80</sup> The Church ministry received divine sanction from this particular ghost and a more general justification for the publication was given by the author who thought ghosts were 'the strongest inducement to believe the Christian Religion' that he could find. Ghost stories were effective because they dramatised the spiritual and moral principles of religious life and carried 'more conviction with them than vast Volumes stuffed with Morality, or multiplying the Doctrines and Disquisitions of Theology'.<sup>81</sup> These accounts preserved an important balance between instruction and entertainment and often followed the pattern of a familiar conversion narrative or parable with which an audience could readily identify. The success of these endeavours however, ultimately relied on the reception of these narratives at parish level. Did the lay community invest ghosts with religious meaning or were they just fodder for local gossip and titillation? A case from Harbury in Warwickshire helps to shed some light on this complex issue.

On Sunday 4 May 1755 Richard Jago, vicar of Harbury preached a sermon in the parish church, 'On Occasion of a Conversation said to have pass'd between one of the Inhabitants, and an Apparition, in the Church-Yard belonging to that Place'.<sup>82</sup> Few details of this encounter survive but the conversation supposedly took place on the Thursday night previous and the event caused such excitement in the local community that Jago seized his opportunity to turn this apparition to some useful pastoral purpose. It

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<sup>80</sup> *The History of Apparitions, Ghosts, Spirits or Spectres; Consisting of Variety of Remarkable Stories of Apparitions, Attested by People of Undoubted Veracity* (London, 1762), pp.66-7.

<sup>81</sup> *THE GHOST, OR a Minute Account of the Appearance of the Ghost of John Croxford* (London, 1764), p.32.

<sup>82</sup> R. Jago, *The Causes of Impenitence Consider'd: As well in the Case of Extraordinary Warnings, As Under the General Laws of Providence, and Grace* (Oxford, 1755).



was his intention, he wrote, 'to adapt the present Occurrence, not building on any fanciful Notions, or disputable Arguments, but on the fundamental Principles of Reason and Revelation'.<sup>83</sup> For this serious and committed minister, the apparition constituted 'a serious Call to Repentance' for the people of Harbury. The vicar believed that those who thought the apparition 'to be something supernatural' suffered from lax morality and a guilty conscience since God would only intervene in such dramatic fashion to warn the most degenerate of sinners to reform. It was these people to whom Jago was preaching when he chastised those 'that are *slow* and *heartless* when ye are summon'd to attend the Duty of Public Prayer' and those 'that can loiter about the Doors of this holy Place, when the Service is begun'. He reminded them 'that *Revellings* and *Drunkenness* are inconsistent with this holy Calling, and that they who do such Things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God'. For those who dared mock at sin, Jago urged immediate contrition since the apparition went to prove that 'Ye know not what a Day, what an Hour may bring forth'. Jago thus manipulated the interest caused by the apparition to regulate the behaviour of his wayward congregation.

It was not only Jago who invested the event with religious meaning, since the parishioners of Harbury turned out in unusually large numbers to hear the vicar's sermon about the apparition which had been 'the Subject of so much Conversation'. The congregation looked to Jago for guidance about the meaning of the apparition and though he declined to offer his personal thoughts on the matter, he took full advantage of the opportunity to edify his congregation. Jago was however, circumspect in giving a more general assent to supernatural wonders, preferring instead the 'ordinary Methods of Providence' to advance the cause of religion. '*Extraordinary, and supernatural Providences*' he claimed were useful supports to the faith but they were no substitute for

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<sup>83</sup> Jago, *Causes of Impenitence*, p.4.

the authority of Scripture, or for regular sermons and religious instruction by the parish minister. In this he was joined by Joseph Williams of Kidderminster who understood the link between ghost belief and popular spirituality but who regarded it as a sign of weak faith that could be overcome by trusting 'in the promises, the power, and the presence of God and Christ'.<sup>84</sup>

Richard Jago was clearly attracted by the idea of a more transcendent divine providence and the local literary circle in which he circulated may well have fortified this interest.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, Jago was willing to subdue his own scepticism in an effort to win over his flock, and it seems that the ghost had provided him with an ideal opportunity. On this particular Sunday in May, Jago was given the chance to address 'those whom Curiosity may at this Time have brought hither'. He took care to remind them that 'God requireth your public Worship of him, and your thankful Use of his Ordinances' and hoped that his sermon would have some lasting impact and 'may be a Means of bringing them here again, even into the Courts of the Lord's House upon a better Principle!' Jago's use of the Harbury apparition showed how popular belief in ghosts could influence the shape of religious life in eighteenth-century Warwickshire. Jago's move was similarly astute and was likely to make some impact on his parishioners given the rich tradition of haunting and superstition in this rural county. The ghost of Squire Newsham, a dissolute young man ruined by a gambling addiction, was believed to haunt Chadshunt House after his death in 1760 and the Reverend Augustus Fent was reported to have seen the ghosts of 'two kneeling women dressed in grey

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<sup>84</sup> J. Williams, *Extracts from the Diary, Meditations and Letters of Mr Joseph Williams of Kidderminster* (Shrewsbury, 1779), pp.50-51.

<sup>85</sup> Jago was also a successful poet and part of 'the Warwickshire Coterie', a local literary circle. The group was centred on Henrietta, Lady Luxborough and included William Shenstone, William Somerville and Richard Graves. Members of the coterie were highly educated and in tune with new philosophical trends.



cloaks' in St. Lawrence's Church in Napton.<sup>86</sup> Richard Jago prioritised the spiritual and moral welfare of his parishioners before his own philosophical beliefs, claiming that 'what makes such things proper, and sometimes necessary is owing to Circumstances peculiar to a Minister, and his own Congregation, which can never affect others exactly in the same Manner, especially if the Occasion be somewhat singular in itself, as the present was'.

Jago's sermon was first and foremost a considered response to local circumstance but he clearly believed that the Harbury apparition had something to offer a wider audience and so his work was published in 1755. Indeed, Jago's words may well have engaged those people that James Ramble encountered in his tour of Northern England and for whom the idea 'that persons departed visited the upper regions again' was 'a part of their creed'.<sup>87</sup> When news of a ghost circulated in the parish, Ramble described how 'the church-yard was filled with numbers from all parts' who had gathered to watch two local parsons attempting to lay the ghost through prayer. Ramble noted with some disdain how this episode ensured that the two churchmen were 'hailed for their sanctity, and adored for their authority over the realms of darkness.'<sup>88</sup> Ramble's experience was not an isolated one and the implicit link that he identified between ghost beliefs and clerical status was reproduced time and time again. Reflecting on the late eighteenth-century ministry in 1826, Reverend Richard Polwhele recalled that 'some of the rusticated clergy used to favour the popular superstition by pretending to the power of laying ghosts. I could mention the name of several persons whose influence over their

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<sup>86</sup> Lawford Hall was pulled down in 1790 when the Boughtons sold the property to the Caldecote family who declared it 'a thing accursed'. M.E. Atkins, *Haunted Warwickshire, A Gazetteer of Ghosts and Legends* (London, 1981), pp.52-55, 57, 122.

<sup>87</sup> E. Kimber, *The Life and Adventures of James Ramble*, Volume I (London, 1755), p.24.

<sup>88</sup> Kimber, *Life and Adventures*, p.29.

flocks was solely attributable to this circumstance'.<sup>89</sup> When John Atkinson became the minister of Danby in 1850 a local woman was put out when he told her that he could not lay the ghost that haunted her house. She clearly understood the job description of the clergyman to include mastery over the spirit world and complained that 'if I had sent for a priest o' t' au'd church, he wad a'deean it. They wur a vast mair powerful conjurers than you Church-priests'.<sup>90</sup>

Aside from these specific instances, Jago's work would also have gained a wide audience due to the fact that sermons were a very popular medium in eighteenth-century religious life with demand often outstripping supply. According to John Brewer 'the sermon was the single most important literary form' in eighteenth-century England; an aggregate of three new sermons were published each week and readers studied them with a diligence that they did not extend to other texts.<sup>91</sup> Sermons were printed individually, in collections and in newspapers and as Anthony Russell suggests, printed sermons by eminent divines enjoyed huge sales.<sup>92</sup> In 1771 Dr Trusler set up a lucrative business abridging sermons by well-known preachers and those of Dr John Tillotson, former Archbishop of Canterbury figured strongly among them. Tillotson's sermons were best sellers and twelve volume editions of his *Works* were reprinted nine times before 1752. His *Twenty Discourses on the Most Important Subjects* was published in 1763 and 1779 and his individual sermons were still being printed as late as 1797.<sup>93</sup> Tillotson's sermons proved popular because they were essentially concerned with preaching the virtue of morality and common sense religion rather than complex

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<sup>89</sup> R. Polwhele, *Traditions and Recollections*, Volume II (London, 1826), p.605.

<sup>90</sup> J. C. Atkinson, *Countryman on the Moors*, edited by J.G. O'Leary (London, 1967), p.25.

<sup>91</sup> J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.170, 172. Reasons for the popularity of eighteenth-century sermons are also set out in J. Downey, *The Eighteenth Century Pulpit, A Study of the Sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield and Wesley* (Oxford, 1969), pp.1-29.

<sup>92</sup> A. Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (S.P.C.K., London 1980), p.87.

<sup>93</sup> J. Tillotson, *A Discourse Against Transubstantiation* (London, 1797).



doctrinal formulations. These were themes with which the common man could identify and contemporary handbooks taught that the more 'energetic and colloquial preaching' of ministers, that took into account the interests of their parishioners was 'the most generous, and likely method of winning souls to God.'<sup>94</sup> Jago's sermon fits this model of preaching and it is highly significant that the Harbury apparition was incorporated within this genre and thereby assimilated within the religious culture of Anglicanism.

Jago's adoption of the apparition was not enthusiastic but considered and rational and he justified his work to a wider audience by emphasising the civic purpose to which the proceeds of his sermon would be put. All profits from Jago's publication would be used 'for the Recovery of a Salary belonging to the Free-School at Harbury'. This project coincided with similar philanthropic efforts in these years to educate the poor and to improve society as a whole. Civic humanists could scarce object to the Harbury apparition when it served the greater good of the local community.<sup>95</sup> The school would be allowed to stand as a material testimony to the persistent belief in ghosts in Warwickshire and would foster 'a true Sense of Religion, and Humanity' for future generations.

Augustus Toplady, Vicar of St. Olave, Jewry similarly preached on the possibility of ghosts and apparitions for charitable purposes and more specifically to collect money for the parochial school. In a sermon preached in the parish church on Sunday 29 October 1775 and published for a wider audience in 1793, Toplady insisted that 'There is nothing absurd, in the metaphysical theory of apparitions.' 'I do not suppose' he continued 'that one story, in an hundred of this kind, is true. But I am

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<sup>94</sup> Russell, *The Clerical Profession*, p.87, 89.

<sup>95</sup> William Gibson cites civic humanism as one of the key values of eighteenth-century Anglicanism. It was a means by which the Church could participate in cultural life of the nation. *Church of England*, p.2.

speaking, as to the naked possibility of such phaenomena. And this I am satisfied of.’<sup>96</sup> Toplady regarded the Cock Lane ghost as ‘a notorious yarn’<sup>97</sup> but the exposure of this episode did not dampen his ‘stedfast and mature belief, not only that there are unembodied spirits; but also that, upon some special occasions, unembodied spirits and disembodied spirits have been permitted, and may again, to render themselves visible and audible.’ For Toplady these disembodied spirits commanded a logical place in orthodox Trinitarian theology and the idea of ghosts could not be considered unreasonable when ‘God the Holy Ghost’ was conceived as ‘an unembodied spirit’ and shared some kinship with the ‘disembodied spirits’ of ‘glorified souls of the departed elect’.<sup>98</sup> Toplady’s descriptions of the spirit world were designed to entice money from the pockets of his parishioners, but they also formed part of wider attacks on Unitarian heresies that were gathering support in these years and which denied the tripartite division of the godhead. Toplady’s sermons suggest that ghosts were intimately associated with the workings of the Holy Ghost and thus by encouraging belief in the existence of ghosts, Toplady identified an expedient way of defending orthodox Trinitarian Anglicanism and of fortifying the faith of his parishioners.

#### **IV Rational Religion, Revolution and Rehabilitation**

Churchmen played key roles in sustaining the credibility of ghost stories and by engaging with these narratives in print they provided an important channel through which the idea of ghosts could influence local and national audiences. However, if clerical appropriations of ghost stories identified common ground between Anglican and

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<sup>96</sup> A.M. Toplady, ‘The Existence and the Creed of Devils Considered: With a Word Concerning Apparitions’ A Discourse Preached in the Parish Church of St. Olave, Jewry, 29 October 1775, in *Sermons and Essays* (London, 1793), p.282.

<sup>97</sup> R.M. Baine, *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural* (Athens, GA, 1969), p.94.

<sup>98</sup> Toplady, *Sermons*, p.282.



Methodist theologies in the second half of the eighteenth century, Unitarian dissenters did not share these interests. The natural philosopher Joseph Priestley was one of the most outspoken Unitarians of his age and in the 1790s he publicly attacked the legitimacy of ghost stories in print. The idea that the souls of the departed could return to earth was anathema for Priestley because it was the conception of a 'separate conscious state' after death upon which a 'whole fabric of superstition' had been built. Priestley believed that the idea of ghosts was a borrowing from pagan philosophy and represented one of the corruptions of the Christian faith that he railed against in his two-volume *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782).<sup>99</sup> For Unitarians who denied the Trinity and the invisible workings of the Holy Spirit, the prospect of a future life was to be found only in the gospel and specifically through recognition of Christ's humanity on the cross.<sup>100</sup>

Given these religious convictions, it is no surprise that Priestley took issue with a ghost story from Lincolnshire the events of which originally took place in 1716 and 1717 but were only widely published from the 1780s onwards. It concerned a ghost by the name of 'Old Jeffrey' that haunted the Rectory at Epworth in Lincolnshire and it achieved wide public notoriety in the 1780s and 1790s primarily because the incumbent of Epworth at the time was none other than Samuel Wesley, father of John Wesley. The alarm was first raised in the Wesley household on 1 December 1716 when the children and servants of the house '...heard at the door of the Dining room groans like a person in extremist at the point of death'.<sup>101</sup> The noises continued for a number of weeks and explanations varied as to the cause. The mistress of the house Susanna Wesley, 'firmly

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<sup>99</sup> J. Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, Volume I (Birmingham, 1782), p.345.

<sup>100</sup> Priestley, *Corruptions of Christianity*, Volume I, p.425.

<sup>101</sup> 'Letters Concerning some Supernatural Disturbances at the House of the Reverend Mr Samuel Wesley, in Epworth, Lincolnshire', in the *Notebook of Charles Wesley, 1716-1717*, MCA), MS. DDCW 8/15, 8.

believed it to be Rats' and sent for a horn to scare them away but the rest of the household were almost immediately persuaded that the disturbances were raised by a ghost that had been sent to torment them.

Old Jeffrey was named after a man that had died in the Rectory some years before, and his ghost plagued the Wesley household almost every night for the next two months and was variously heard walking about the house 'like a man in a long night gown', slamming doors and jangling latches. He came in many guises: servant Robert Brown thought it sounded 'like the gobbling of a Turkey-cock', whilst something 'like a badger, only without an head' was spotted under one of the beds. When Samuel Wesley and his wife went to investigate the noises one night, they heard a sound that resembled 'a large pot of silver' being poured at their feet at the bottom of the staircase and they were later advised to dig in this spot for buried treasure.<sup>102</sup> Old Jeffrey's ghost became 'very violent' in the Nursery but he reserved his strongest objections for Samuel Wesley. In his journal, Wesley recorded that 'I have been thrice pushed by an invisible Power, once against the corner of my desk in my study: a 2d time against the door of the matted chamber, & a 3d time against the right side of the frame of my study-door'.

The Epworth haunting was perhaps the best-documented ghost story of its day and it seems that the entire Wesley clan, including the servants, were convinced of the existence of the ghost. Samuel Wesley Junior was the first to take an interest in the case after his mother told him of the disturbances in a letter of 12 January 1717. John Wesley later joined him to investigate the case and the pair gathered reports from mother and father, from siblings Suky, Emilia, Molly, Nancy and Kezia, from servant Robert Brown and from Joseph Hoole, vicar of nearby Haxey who was asked by Samuel Wesley Senior

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<sup>102</sup> 'Letters Concerning some Supernatural Disturbances', MCA, MS. DDCW 8/15.



to conjure the spirit from the Rectory.<sup>103</sup> Irrespective of age, sex, education or religious belief, all were ready to attest the truth of the case and to confirm the providential nature of the haunting.

Susanna Wesley became convinced that the ghost had some providential purpose either to announce the death of one of her children or, as she later thought, to portend the death of her brother who had disappeared suddenly whilst working for the East India Company.<sup>104</sup> Samuel Wesley Senior was unsure of Old Jeffrey's motivations but he firmly believed that the ghost was sent on a divine mission and he hoped that God would 'in his good time' put an end to the disturbances.<sup>105</sup> John Wesley believed that the ghost was a judgment on his father 'for his rash promise of leaving his family, and very improper conduct to his wife in consequence of her scruple to pray for the prince of Orange as King of England'.<sup>106</sup> Samuel and Susanna Wesley had separated for a year just prior to the haunting on account of Susanna's Jacobite sympathies.

Although John Wesley conceived a very particular meaning behind the Epworth haunting, he and his brother Samuel also recognised the more general import of the narrative for wider audiences. John Wesley thought the episode would prove a firm support to the faith of the Methodists by demonstrating the particular providence of God and the care he took to chastise and reward his followers. The whole story was thus serialised in the October, November and December issues of the *Arminian Magazine* in 1784, going on to become one of the most famous and well-publicised ghost stories of the eighteenth century. Joseph Priestley chose to address this particular ghost story

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<sup>103</sup> Joseph Hoole was a learned man, educated at Sydney College Cambridge and was Vicar of Haxey in Lincolnshire from 1712 to 1736, *Letters Concerning some Supernatural Disturbances*, MCA DDCW 8/15.

<sup>104</sup> Clarke, A., *The Miscellaneous Works of Adam Clarke, Memoirs of the Wesley Family*, Volume I (London, 1836), pp.285-291.

<sup>105</sup> Addenda to *Samuel Wesley's Journal*, Sunday 23 December 1716.

<sup>106</sup> Clarke, *The Miscellaneous Works of Adam Clarke*, pp.285-291.

because it gained so much publicity; Priestley himself confessed that it was ‘exceedingly lively and entertaining; so that this is perhaps the best authenticated, and the best told story of the kind, that is any where extant’.<sup>107</sup> However his motivation was also linked to the intimate association of the narrative with the beginnings of the Methodist movement and the evangelical cause of which he wholeheartedly disapproved. John Wesley was aged just thirteen years old when the ghost of Old Jeffrey tormented his family and the episode proved to be a formative influence on his spiritual convictions. Wesley became convinced that the hand of God had providentially intervened to punish his family and Joseph Priestley believed that it was this ghost that led Wesley to become ‘strongly tinctured with enthusiasm, from the effect of false notions of religion very early imbibed’.<sup>108</sup> By attacking the credibility of Old Jeffrey, Priestley sought to discredit the evangelical cause and further the interests of Rational Dissent, but his work also underlines the point that ghost beliefs were foundational to eighteenth-century Methodism.

The sixty-seven year time lag between the actual haunting, its publication in the *Arminian Magazine* and Joseph Priestley’s opposition to it can be explained by the disorientating events of the 1780s and 1790s. Priestley’s objections to Old Jeffrey’s ghost surfaced at the same time that he proclaimed his support for the ideals of the French Revolution. While events in France did much to promote the radical religious cause in England and the push for parliamentary reform in the early 1790s, the benefit was short-lived. Indeed, historians have shown that as events in France became increasingly bloody, Britain experienced the rapid growth of militant loyalism that strengthened the conservative reaction against dissent.<sup>109</sup> Loyalist clubs and societies

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<sup>107</sup> J. Priestley, *Original Letters*, ix.

<sup>108</sup> Priestley, *Address to the Methodists*, iv.

<sup>109</sup> H.T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (London, 1994), p.8.



sprang up across Britain and this voluntary activity was motivated by a variety of factors. As Linda Colley notes, loyalist activists came out in defence of county rather than country, others to protect British trading interests at home and abroad but these practical interests were also accompanied by ideological motivations and most notably by naked francophobia and a revival of anti-Catholic sentiment. Religious and economic grievances were combined following the influx of Irish artisans into Britain that led to a revival of xenophobic feeling and anti-Catholic sentiment in the final decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>110</sup>

Philosophical objections to the French Revolution were nurtured in both press and pulpit and were designed to stem the tide of radicalism from spreading across the channel. Moreover, as Harry Dickinson has argued, French principles were depicted as ‘an assault on Christian morality and ecclesiastical authority’ and the Church of England played a crucial role in rejecting these values and in fashioning British morality and Protestant spirituality as the very antithesis of French ideals. High Church Anglicans such as George Horne, William Jones and George Berkeley defended the privileges of the established Church and Samuel Horsley launched a doctrinal defence, condemning Joseph Priestley’s anti-Trinitarian views as heretical and destabilising.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, these conservative ideologies filtered into popular loyalist traditions and the violence directed towards Priestley in 1791 suggests that his religious and political views were not widely shared.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, Priestley’s views contrasted with those of a number of millenarian groups that sprang up in these tumultuous years, that were led by the likes of Joanna Southwell and Richard Brothers and that predicted sudden providential

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<sup>110</sup> Colley, *Britons*, pp.87-89, Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism*, p.247.

<sup>111</sup> J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), p.220.

<sup>112</sup> On July 14, 1791, on the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille prison in Paris, an outbreak of mob violence in Birmingham saw Priestley’s house, library, and laboratory destroyed. He was driven from Birmingham, and finally fled in April 1794.

intervention to destroy a corrupt civilisation and establish the new millennium.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, as Boyd Hilton has argued, the moderate evangelicalism that dominated British political thought from 1784 to the 1840s rejected the 'religion of humanity' in favour of one that was more providentially inspired and in which the mundane activities of economic and social life played out in 'an arena of great spiritual trial and suspense'.<sup>114</sup> As I suggested in chapter four, the Romantic Movement that began in earnest in the 1770s represented a strong religious and cultural reaction against the 'spiritual aridity of Rational Dissent' and Latitudinarian theologians promoted a more 'reasonable' religion that did not exclude mystical qualities.<sup>115</sup>

A combination of long-standing opposition to the extremes of natural religion and the revolutionary events in France thus combined to revive the political value of revealed religion and to rehabilitate the legitimacy of ghost stories. As we have already seen, Augustus Toplady launched a significant attack on Unitarian precepts in a sermon of 1775 and included the philosophy of apparitions to support his argument. However, it is significant that the sermon was not published until 1793, following the declaration of war between Britain and France when notions of the supernatural were increasingly employed to reinforce political and religious orthodoxies in Britain. Richard Watson defended the virtue of revealed religion in pulpit and in print and in 1795 the Reverend John Whitaker, a prominent critic of Arianism, published *The Real Origin of Government, deriving the State from Revelation, not Natural Religion*. It was in this

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<sup>113</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming, Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (London, 1979), p.30.

Harrison sees this millenarian activity as part of a recognisable tradition through the eighteenth century rather than just a freak result of the dislocation of industrialisation and the upheavals of the 1790s.

<sup>114</sup> B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement, The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988), p.13.

<sup>115</sup> The Cambridge Platonists most famously preserved this crucial balance between reason and revelation, see Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, pp.25-27. O. Davies, 'Methodism, the clergy and the popular belief in witchcraft and magic', *History*, No. 82 (1997), pp.252-265. See also D. Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Boston, 1990), p.388.



context that ghost stories were re-adopted as conservative vehicles of loyalist propaganda that stressed the value of public and private morality and political and religious fidelity.

A pamphlet narrating the appearance of Major George Sydenham's ghost shows how ghost stories fitted with these new priorities, clearly setting out the punishments for immorality and irreligion when it was reprinted for a new audience in 1788.<sup>116</sup> Sydenham and his friend Captain William Dyke were religious sceptics and had made a pact that whoever should die first would return from the dead to tell the survivor whether or not there was a God and if the soul was immortal. The Major had the misfortune to die first and true to his word his ghost came to the bedside of the Captain, drew back the curtains and declared 'I am come to tell you that there is a God, and a very just and terrible one, and if you do not turn over a new leaf, you shall find it so'. The evils of religious profanity were further reinforced by a second providential narrative attached to this pamphlet that told 'How a profane young Squire was struck dead by Thunder and Lightning, for Blasphemy against God'. Two of the Squire's dissolute companions died soon afterwards and another fell into a trance 'in which he saw the Torments of the Wicked, and the joys of the Blessed'. When he awoke, he felt obliged to tell his story 'to several Divines, desiring that it might be published as a warning to other wicked persons.'<sup>117</sup>

The distinctive piety of middle-class evangelicals like Hannah More also demonstrated the interaction of spiritual concerns with religious and political priorities in these years and helped to link up personal holiness and morality to 'new concepts of

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<sup>116</sup> *The Atheist's Reward: or, A Call from Heaven, To which is annexed An account of the apparition of the Ghost of Major George Sydenham* (London, 1788).

<sup>117</sup> *Atheist's Reward.*

public probity and national honour'.<sup>118</sup> In so doing, the pious discourses of evangelical reformers legitimated the publication of narratives such as *The Wonderful Apparition of Mary Nicholson*. Published in Durham in 1799, this single page narrative told the story of Mary Nicholson who was executed for theft and of her ghost that came to repent of her sins and to urge others to do the same. The author recommended this account as essential reading 'To the pious christian' for whom Mary's example 'ought to strike deep into the heart and mind' and to remind readers 'that God's judgments were upon the earth'. The narrative concluded in apocalyptic fashion as 'tremendous peals of thunder and an amazing flash of fire' accompanied Mary's ghost.<sup>119</sup> Malcolm Macleod's collection of ghost stories was also authorised by these changing religious and political priorities and was published for a wide audience in 1793 and intended to provide 'confirmation of a future state, & the superintendency of a divine providence'.<sup>120</sup>

The link between ghost stories and conservative reactions to the French Revolution was more firmly established in a short pamphlet published in 1793. *An Account of a most Horrid, BLOODY, and Terrible APPARITION, which lately Appeared in the Parish of SHOTTS* was written by 'a Most Holy Person' and gave an account of a recent meeting in the parish of Shotts in Scotland where a group of conspirators were talking 'of overthrowing the government, established by GOD in this country, and in its place establishing a diabolical plan, by which those who were the greatest thieves, or the most atrocious murderers, would be the sole rulers of the land'.<sup>121</sup> The author's

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<sup>118</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, p.7.

<sup>119</sup> *A full and particular account, of the Wonderful Apparition of Mary Nicholson, which appeared to two Men her intimate friends and acquaintance, at a village near Durham* (Durham, 1799).

<sup>120</sup> M. Macleod, *History of Witches &c. The majesty of darkness discovered; in a series of tremendous tales, of apparitions, witches, augers, in confirmation of a future state, & the superintendency of a divine providence* (London, 1793).

<sup>121</sup> *An Account of a most Horrid, BLOODY, and Terrible APPARITION, which lately Appeared in the Parish of SHOTTS; And a true and genuine account of A DISMAL AND SHOCKING MURDER, In the very words expressed by the GHOST itself, as faithfully taken down by a Most Holy Person, who was present at the whole* (London, 1793).



disapproval was manifest in the linguistic structures of the pamphlet and he went on to draw very obvious parallels with contemporary events in France. The abhorrent plans of this motley crew were derailed however, by the sudden appearance of ‘a most hideous spectre, with a visage as white as snow, his hair clotted with blood, and clad in a white winding-sheet’. ‘Let it be a warning’, declared the ghost, ‘against all seditious attempts; and remember, That the powers which be, are ordained of GOD; whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of GOD; and they that resist, shall receive to themselves damnation.’ With this the ghost disappeared in a cloud of fire and those who witnessed the spectacle fell to their knees and immediately prayed to God for forgiveness.

The Church of England had always been an important support to the political establishment in the eighteenth century, but in the revolutionary context of 1792-3, this role took on heightened significance. Anti-revolutionary propaganda painted the French as ‘atheistic, republican and anarchical’ – everything that Britain was not. What is more, ever since the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, ghost narratives had been specifically constructed to combat atheism, republicanism and anarchism among the masses. The traditional ghost narrative was then an ideal vehicle through which to convey the values of loyalty, patriotism, morality and religiosity. In the context of national crisis, ghost stories helped to dilute the extremes of rational religion and political radicalism by communicating discourses of conservatism and moderation.

## **Conclusion**

If the likes of Joseph Priestley could have written the history of eighteenth-century religion then ideas about the perfectibility of man would have triumphed, along with general laws of providence that supported the idea of a self-regulating universe. God

would have been the overseer of a well-oiled machine and miraculous signs and wonders would no longer be needed to reinforce the Christian and moral duties of the faithful. The realities of Hanoverian England however bore little resemblance to this optimistic script and the meaning of providence itself remained a contested issue. Buoyed by daily evidence of immorality, vice and sin, the fortunes of ghost stories benefited from persistent preferences for *special* or *particular* providences, whereby God intervened more directly into the lives of the faithful and the dissolute to dish out temporal rewards and punishments.<sup>122</sup>

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the relevance of ghost stories was sustained by the explicit fashioning of these narratives as anti-consumerist tales, and they were pitched into the battle against luxury and immorality that was so often spearheaded by reformist elements within the Church of England.<sup>123</sup> According to Donald Macleod, this was an age in which ‘the Pulpit resounds with repeated exclamations against infidelity’ and ‘vice reigns triumphant’ – it was in this context that his collection of ghost stories found an audience in 1763.<sup>124</sup> Nonetheless, ghosts did not escape unscathed from the changing intellectual climate of these years. Early opposition to Methodist ‘enthusiasm’ compounded the difficulties of justifying providential signs and wonders as legitimate vehicles of religious instruction. These challenges led to a drive to curb the most incredible preternatural and supernatural wonders but it would be wrong to suggest that the Church of England was fundamentally opposed to particular providences or to the appearance of ghosts. A process of rationalisation was taking place rather than a wholesale abandonment of ghost stories. Ghost stories were made to speak

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<sup>122</sup> A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>123</sup> *Admiral Vernon's Ghost* commented on ‘vice and fraud...corrupters, gamesters’ that had rendered Albion a ‘steril isle’.

<sup>124</sup> D. Macleod, *A treatise on the second sight, dreams and apparitions: with several instances sufficiently attested* (Edinburgh, 1763), Epistle.



to general moral tenets and specific theological doctrines and as the examples of Richard Jago and Augustus Toplady demonstrate, these narratives often complemented clerical missions to transform the spirituality and morality of the Christian community and to inject new vigour into parish religion. The energetic Methodist appropriation of ghost stories as conduits of devotional instruction implicitly recognised that these narratives connected up to important, if ambiguous meanings in lay spirituality, which will be explored in more depth in the following chapter. The success of these evangelical endeavours may also have reminded Anglican ministers how useful ghost stories could be in rallying support for mainstream Anglicanism. Moreover, both Anglican and Methodist ministers exploited ghost stories in an effort to preserve the lay community from irreligion and thus provided a point of Protestant unity in an age so often characterised by religious fragmentation.

John Wesley and his followers provided fresh impetus in support of the invisible world but as we have seen, the Methodist emphasis on revelation *and* reason was part of a wider Protestant tradition of the miraculous that encompassed men like Richard Jago and Augustus Toplady. In public discourse, ghosts were rationalised for a more moderate eighteenth-century audience by overlaying accounts of their appearances with religious and political orthodoxies. Ghosts stories were also made more acceptable by bridging the gap between particular and general providences and by emphasising the broader purpose of these accounts for the greater good of society. Shorn of enthusiastic associations, supported by biblical tradition and kept under good regulation, ghosts were called into national service in the 1790s to advance the cause of pure, moderate religion.

## Chapter Six

### Places, Spaces and Narrators: The Production, Circulation and Consumption of Ghost Stories

As the previous chapter suggested, clerical appropriations of ghost stories assumed a groundswell of ghost belief among ordinary laymen and women but the precise nature of these beliefs and the contexts in which they surfaced have not been examined in a systematic way; this chapter is an attempt to redress the balance. My focus rests on where – geographically - ghosts appeared, who saw them and how they were understood. Due to the methodological difficulties involved in this endeavour, my starting point is a familiar set of sources – the canonical texts of sceptical commentators. This body of literature, though skewed by its polemical intent, provides important clues about where to start looking to build a counter-narrative, a convincing picture of the vitality of ghost beliefs at the local level and their continuing relevance to the structures and practices of daily life in the eighteenth century. This chapter is therefore intended as a kind of sociology of ghosts, an outline of the places, spaces and contexts in which ghost beliefs and ghost stories figured. How and where did ghost stories spread? Why were they reproduced afresh in an age of supposed ‘rationality’? Who told them and who listened?

This chapter takes a longer chronology than its predecessors, covering the years 1660-1830 and this is partially justified by the nature of the sources used in this chapter. I have extracted a number of childhood recollections from working-class autobiographies and thus must extend my time-span towards the mid-nineteenth century to accommodate those growing up in the final years of the eighteenth century who narrated their experiences as adults.<sup>1</sup> This chronology is also justified by the methods of historical sociology, which according to Philip Abrams comprises ‘the

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<sup>1</sup> John Aubrey’s *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme* includes recollections from the pre-civil war period but my use of this evidence in this thesis can be similarly justified by the time-lag between childhood and early educational experiences and their narration in adulthood. J. Aubrey, *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, 1686-87, edited by J. Britten (London, 1881).



attempt to understand the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organisation on the other as something that is continuously constructed in time'.<sup>2</sup> Norbert Elias similarly justifies the long-term study of historical developments in daily life as a way to examine the links between individual psychological structures (or personality structures) and social organisations.<sup>3</sup> I understand the relationship between social structure and social action to be reciprocal. As such, this chapter tracks the shifting nature of ghost beliefs by juxtaposing individual life cycles with broader social patterns of social and economic change. By looking at the dynamics of how ghost stories were produced, disseminated and reproduced, I will argue that ghost beliefs were deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of English society. As such, the chapter emphasises ways in which individual beliefs, expectations and actions were accommodated within broader social structures, organisations and cultural norms.<sup>4</sup> My findings suggest that the current historiography of eighteenth-century ghosts has seriously neglected the complexities of belief that existed.

To incorporate aspects of continuity and change, I examine ghost stories in a number of different settings, reflecting geographical and chronological diversity. Incorporating the work of folklorists and a growing number of historians, I begin with a discussion of the relationship of ghost stories to local memory and physical landscapes. Moving on to occupational trends, I will suggest that ghost stories were closely linked to contemporary working patterns in agricultural, industrial and domestic settings and that these tales flowed easily between the English town and countryside. Moreover, as the century wore on, accounts of ghostly appearances reflect increasing integration within Britain, and greater contact with the wider world.

The chapter examines the important meanings that ghost stories held for men and for children, and thus seeks to challenge the ascribed status of ghost beliefs as the superstitions of women, nursemaids and 'old wives'. Men were equally prolific

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<sup>2</sup> P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (New York, 1993), p.16

<sup>3</sup> N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process, The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford, 1994), p.184.

<sup>4</sup> According to Philip Abrams the reciprocal relationship between social structure and social action is the principal concern of historical sociology, 'It is the attempt to understand the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organisation on the other as something that is continuously constructed in time'. Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, p.16.

narrators of these tales thanks to contemporary employment trends and the lifestyles that they encouraged. Moreover, regular exposure to ghost stories in childhood was key to the persistent fascination that these tales encouraged over generations. Belief in ghosts was reflected in and encouraged by printed ghost stories and the expansion of the print industry was a crucial factor in the dissemination and reproduction of these narratives through the eighteenth century. Benefiting from the commercial ethos of many printers and capturing the imaginations of contemporary audiences, ghost stories were able to move with the times, finding new spaces and contexts in which to attract fresh audiences. I hope to provide an accurate guide to the changing characters, contexts and motivations in which these narratives persisted.

## I Spectral Landscapes

In 1762, a contributor to a national magazine observed that 'in most country places where I have been, the people are strangely infatuated with a belief of Ghosts and spirits'.<sup>5</sup> According to some writers from the metropolis, tales of the wandering dead belonged to the over-active imaginations of witless rustics; they terrified 'country people in their chimney corners' who went out of their way to avoid haunted towers and enchanted graveyards.<sup>6</sup> The poet James Thomson identified the manufacturers of these 'quaint superstitions' as shepherds and milkmaids, and Joseph Addison was adamant that 'there was never such a thing as a Ghost heard of at London...except in the Play-house'.<sup>7</sup>

But how far does this juxtaposition of rural credulity and urban scepticism stand up to analysis? According to Samuel Bamford's autobiography, Addison may well have had a point. Thanks to Bamford's links with working class radicalism in the early nineteenth century, he was one of a handful of workingmen whose writing provides important insights into the manners, beliefs, and quotidian preoccupations of men and women who barely feature in the historical record. Bamford's *Early Days* was at once a very personal history, but with a broader public purpose; it was intended to further the social and moral improvement of an increasingly self-

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<sup>5</sup> 'The White Witch of the Wood, or the Devil of Broxbon' in *The Beauties of all the Magazines Selected*, Volume I (1762-4), p.29.

<sup>6</sup> M. MacDonald and T.R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls, Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), p.212. D. Defoe, *A View of the Invisible World: or, General History of Apparitions*, (London, 1752), iii.



conscious working class. William Lovett undertook a similar project in these years but unlike Lovett, Bamford was not ready to condemn the preternatural ideas that shaped his youth and fuelled his imagination.<sup>8</sup> Recalling his childhood days in Middleton in the 1790s, Bamford wrote a landscape history or rather a spiritual topography of this rural Lancashire parish. His remarkably vivid recollections of ghost stories and haunted spots formed an imaginative and physical blueprint that Bamford used to chart the contours and character of his childhood home.

Few of the 'lonely, out-of-the-way places' he wrote, 'escaped the reputation of being haunted'. Experience taught that the school-lane – a deep and narrow pathway with trees and bushes growing on either side was to be avoided, since it was home to the apparition of a man killed during the civil wars.<sup>9</sup> Further east was Owler Bridge, said to be 'thronged by spirits' and leading on the other side to the 'haunted field'.<sup>10</sup> The 'solitary footpath...beneath the tall elms and sycamores, [and] past the lonely summer-house' was, according to Bamford, 'a favourite promenade to the beings of another world'. The footpath to the Black Bull public house was home to innumerable spirits and few that ventured through the churchyard after nightfall would leave without their hair 'standing on end'. Middleton was not unique in its catalogue of local superstitions and writing in 1887, the collier Timothy Mountjoy remembered that Grange House in the Forest of Dean had been haunted since time immemorial, and that there was always a ghost to be seen 'at the crooked pear tree and one at the Temple'.<sup>11</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth century, a young William Lovett feared the 'lonely roads' of his native Cornwall because 'popular credulity had peopled particular spots with ghosts and appearances of various kinds.'<sup>12</sup> Cornwall certainly had its fair share of spirits and John Harris remembered that

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<sup>7</sup> J. Addison, *The Drummer, or the Haunted House* (London, 1765).

<sup>8</sup> David Vincent notes that many working-class autobiographers 'retained a deep respect for the education and stimulus to their imagination that they had received from the story-tellers of their youth', D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge & Freedom, A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1982), p.21.

<sup>9</sup> W.H. Chaloner (ed.), *The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford, Early Days*, Volume I (London, 1967), p.29.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp.27-28.

<sup>11</sup> T. Mountjoy, *Hard Times in the Forest, Extracts from "62 Years in the life of a Forest of Dean Collier"* (Coleford, 1971), p.15.

<sup>12</sup> W. Lovett, *Life and Struggles of William Lovett, In his Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge & Freedom, with some short account of the different associations he belonged to & of the opinions he entertained*, preface by R.H. Tawney (London, 1967), p.8.



Camborne 'was famous for its harvest of ghost stories'.<sup>13</sup> James Burn and Samuel Robinson wrote the haunted histories of late eighteenth-century Northumberland and the Scottish borders and John Clare said of Helpston in Northamptonshire that it was impossible 'to travel more than half a mile in any direction without passing a spot where some apparition was said to be seen'.<sup>14</sup>

These writers varied in their attitudes towards such tales but their accounts provide vivid illustrations of the important links between oral tradition, memory and persistent features of the local landscape, which professional folklorists have picked up on and which feature heavily in ghost narratives of this period. Adam Fox argues that visual symbols and landmarks in the local community sustained local traditions and beliefs; they were aids to memory and provided 'mental reference points' with which people readily identified.<sup>15</sup> According to Henry Bourne, a decrepit mansion in the environs of Newcastle that was 'seated on some mellancholy Place, or built in some old Romantick Manner...had a Mark set on it, and was afterwards esteemed the Habitation of a Ghost'.<sup>16</sup> Fields, stiles and old burial grounds were similarly associated with preternatural wonders.<sup>17</sup> Significance was also attached to water and since late medieval times, Northern Europeans had endowed rivers, streams, and lakes with a liminal quality, often treating them as gateways to a world of spirits.<sup>18</sup> Comparable ideas surfaced in Stretford, Manchester in 1806 when a local butcher was reported missing after a recent flood. Following reports that an apparition had been seen by a pool of water, a meeting was convened by town residents who resolved to drain the pool whereupon they discovered the remains of the missing man.<sup>19</sup> Ghost beliefs and stories of their appearance must then be recognised as one way in which people constructed a spiritual topography of their lives. Physical markers of noted events and legends gave individuality to local communities from

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<sup>13</sup> John Harris, *My Autobiography* (London, 1882), p.39.

<sup>14</sup> J. Clare, *Sketches*, p.56 quoted in Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge & Freedom*, p.168.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England* (Oxford, 2000), pp.33-4.

<sup>16</sup> Bourne went on to say that 'Stories of this Kind are infinite, and there are few Villages, which have not either had such an House in it, or near it.' Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares; or, the Antiquities of the Common People* (Newcastle, 1725), p.87.

<sup>17</sup> The Devil sat at a stile to greet the main protagonist of James Hogg's, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London, 1964), p.112. John Clare's *Shepherd's Calendar*, describes the fear and dread experienced by young shepherd boys 'returning home at night from toil...Down lane and close oer footbrig gate and style'. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield (eds), *The Shepherd's Calendar* (Oxford, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past and Present*, No. 151 (August, 1996).



which people derived a sense of their own identity. Moreover, as David Vincent's study of working-class autobiography suggests, men like Bamford may have had a greater need to recall the peculiarities of their hometowns. Self-improving men often suffered 'from a sense of disorientation' after they were separated both physically and ideologically from the inherited culture of their childhoods. Penning a life history was an important way of remembering; it was an opportunity to map the paths you had travelled, to acknowledge the influences that shaped you and to come to terms with a changed identity. This nostalgia for a lost home and uncertain identity is an oft-cited quality of John Clare's poetry and it is significant that his reminiscences contain a number of references to ghosts.<sup>20</sup> As patterns of migration intensified over the course of the eighteenth century, the sense of place implicit in tales of local hauntings and their intensely visual quality, provided an important motivation for the reproduction of ghost stories since they allowed people to remember the physical settings, customs and beliefs of home.

## II Occupational Storytelling

Nonetheless, country ghosts were not just stagnant traditions from a previous age of superstition. These narratives formed part of a vibrant culture of storytelling that interacted with and enlivened the activities of daily life. Verbal narratives came in all shapes and sizes from jokes, moral tales, stories of crimes and executions, naval and military victories, accounts of travellers, folk tales and local gossip concerning love, courtship and marriage.<sup>21</sup> Ghost stories may have been especially popular as, according to David Hume, miraculous tales and religious wonders excited 'the passion of *surprise* and *wonder*', and ordinary folk took 'pride and delight' in circulating these narratives to excite 'the admiration of others'.<sup>22</sup> In 1808 John Tregortha insisted that 'There is nothing more commonly talked of than apparitions

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<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 'News', Issue 6686, 17 March 1806, p.3.

<sup>20</sup> Clare's work contains a number of references to ghosts, spirits and haunted spots, see especially passages on 'January – A Cottage Evening', 'March', 'August' and 'November', in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.

<sup>21</sup> David Hume commented that 'There is no kind of report which rises so easily, and spreads so quickly, especially in country places and provincial towns, as those concerning marriages'. In A. Flew (ed.), *David Hume, Of Miracles* (LaSalle, 1985), p.37.

<sup>22</sup> *Of Miracles*, p.35.



of departed spirits, of daemons and ghosts',<sup>23</sup> and according to Francis Grose, ghosts 'formed a principal part of rural conversations in all large assemblies, and particularly those in the Christmas holydays'.<sup>24</sup> This seasonal distinction is an important one since the settings for telling these tales varied according to the time of year. In John Harris' childhood home, Christmas time was full of good cheer, with 'tales told till the fire seemed to crackle with delight'.<sup>25</sup> In the cold winter months John Clare remembered how dreary evenings in front of the fire were animated by stories of 'dread powers' and 'haunted spots' from the Northamptonshire countryside.<sup>26</sup> James Burn learned the romantic lore of the Borders on winter nights in his moorland farmhouse, when 'tales of ghosts, witches, and fairies, would go round until-bedtime' and when the dark evenings cut short play in the village stackyard, John Younger and his friends gathered around the forge hearth of the local blacksmith and 'told stories of ghosts, bogles, robberies, and fairies until we often durst not go home alone in the dark.'<sup>27</sup>

Publication lists in these years suggest that the telling of ghost stories was a customary and widespread habit and a range of printers both recognised and catered for this lucrative market. London printer James Roberts devoted a whole chapter of *Round About Our Coal Fire* to 'Spectres, Ghosts, and Apparitions'. Initially published in London in 1730 and 1734, Roberts reissued the collection as *Christmas Entertainments* in 1740, to be sold for one shilling by booksellers 'in Town and Country'. In 1796, another London printer, Henry Fenwick, updated this popular series for a further edition.<sup>28</sup> James Hogg's *Winter Evening Tales* included a chapter on 'Country Dreams and Apparitions' and his *Long Pack, or the Mysterious Pedlar* recounted a number of ghost stories from the Scottish borderlands that were published in Leeds.<sup>29</sup> The format of John Tregortha's *News from the Invisible World*

<sup>23</sup> J. Tregortha, *News from the Invisible World* (Burslem, 1808), i.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Grose cited in D. Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture, England 1750-1914*, (Cambridge, 1989), p.205.

<sup>25</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> J. Clare, 'January, A Cottage Evening', in Robinson and Summerfield (eds), *Shepherd's Calendar*.

<sup>27</sup> James Dawson Burn, *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy*, edited by David Vincent (London, 1978), p.66. J. Younger, *Autobiography of John Younger, Shoemaker, St. Boswells* (Kelson, 1881), p.45

<sup>28</sup> *Round About our Coal Fire: or, Christmas Entertainments*, J. Roberts, Warwick Lane (London 1730), chapter five 'Of Spectres, Ghosts, and Apparitions; the great Conveniences arising from them, and how to make them.' *Round About our Coal Fire: or, Christmas Entertainments*, H. Fenwick, Snow-Hill (London, 1796). *Christmas Entertainments*, J. Roberts, Warwick Lane (London, 1740).

<sup>29</sup> J. Hogg, *Winter Evening Tales Collected among the Cottagers in the South of Scotland*, edited by I. Duncan (Edinburgh, 2002). J. Hogg, *The Long Pack, or the Mysterious Pedlar* (Leeds, 1870). Hogg is



(1808) closely resembled the small books of devotional literature that were so popular in these years, and it was specifically tailored to suit the reading habits and pockets of the cottage household in wintertime. Tregortha serialised his tales so they lasted for multiple sittings and, no doubt, to maximise his profits since he was both author and publisher.<sup>30</sup> Tregortha's work circulated mainly in Yorkshire and the Midlands and the more serious tone of his work is an important contrast to the light-heartedness of Roberts and Fenwick. Tregortha's ghosts had moral lessons to teach 'on the shortness of life, and uncertainty of Riches', 'on the awful prospects of the wicked' and on the immortality of the soul and certainty of a future state. The familiar ghosts of George Villiers, Mrs Veal and Elizabeth Hobson made appearances alongside more recent apparitions like that of a drunken foreman from Stockton who appeared to his long-suffering wife in 1783, accompanied by a stinking 'sulphurous smell' to announce his damnation.<sup>31</sup> Tregortha's stories were interspersed with short lessons urging moral fortitude, appropriate excerpts from scripture and simple poems reflecting on the transience of life and the inevitability of death and were published in small and affordable paper covered volumes.<sup>32</sup> This successful combination of the sensational and the sober was reproduced by another author in *The Compleat Wizzard; being a collection of authentic and entertaining narratives of the real existence and appearance of Ghosts, Demons and Spectres* (1770) and in George Sinclair's *Satan's Invisible World Discovered*. Originally published as a single volume in 1685, Sinclair's work was later reduced to chapbook size, enhancing its potential circulation, and was reissued in 1769 and 1808 and in a number of local editions.<sup>33</sup>

If ghosts made regular appearances in the countryside in winter, summer was scarcely less haunted. Ghostly gossiping spread as harvest workers lightened their toil 'with joke and tale and merry peals'.<sup>34</sup> Communal working practices were particularly likely to yield a steady crop of stories since, as Neeson observes, working fields were 'places where people talked while they worked, and they worked

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more famous for his critique of hard-line Calvinist beliefs in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London, 1964), which also featured an apparition.

<sup>30</sup> John Clare noted this narrative practice, 'she then her half told tales will leave/To finish on tomorrows eve'. 'January - A Cottage Evening' in J. Clare, *Shepherd's Calendar*.

<sup>31</sup> J. Tregortha, *News from the Invisible World*, p.197, 208, 83.

<sup>32</sup> J. Tregortha, *News from the Invisible World*.

<sup>33</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming, Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (London, 1979), p.53.

<sup>34</sup> J. Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*.

together'.<sup>35</sup> As a boy, John Clare was employed to scare off birds and weed crops in Helpston. He recalled that the memories of the women who worked beside him 'never failed of tales to smoothen our labour; for as every day came, new Giants, Hobgoblins, and fairies was ready to pass it away'.<sup>36</sup> In Thomas Hardy's romanticised vision of the pastoral regions of nineteenth-century Dorset, Tess Durbeyfield listened to her fellow workers at Talbothay's dairy singing ballads of a murderer, haunted by ghosts, to entice milk from unyielding cows.<sup>37</sup> In terms of historical accuracy, Hardy's description of working practices in Dorset is better suited to an eighteenth-century context, before large-scale shifts to arable farming and industrial production had taken place. This is reinforced by the map in Figure 6, which shows that a number of ghost stories originated from Dorset and from the pastoral regions of southwest England. East Anglia is also well represented on the map and George Evans traced strong connections between forms of agricultural work and the rich tradition of folkloric literature in this region, indicating both the strength of oral testimony and its interaction with print cultures.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England 1700-1820* (Cambridge, 1993), p.2.

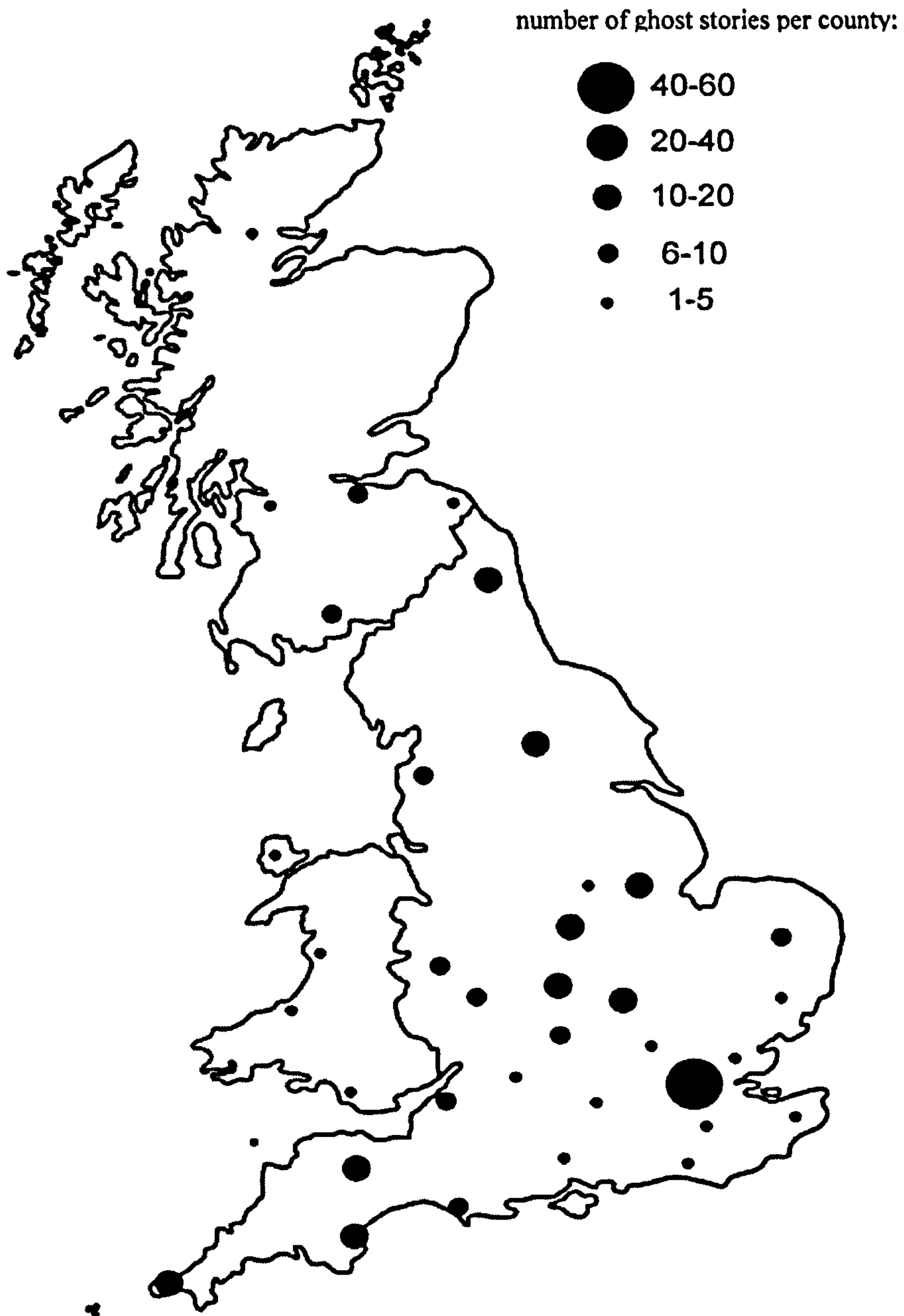
<sup>36</sup> Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge & Freedom*, p.167.

<sup>37</sup> T. Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (London, 1985), p.164.

<sup>38</sup> G.E. Evans, *Where Beards Wag All: The Relevance of the Oral Tradition* (London, 1970)



**Figure 6:** Settings of Ghost Stories in English Published and Manuscript Sources, c.1660-c.1830



**Figure 6:** This map shows the spatial diffusion of 257 ghost stories that were published or narrated in England between 1660 and 1830. This is by no means an exhaustive sample and probably contains around half of the printed ghost stories that circulated in these years. Nonetheless, it does include all extant ghost stories that feature in the *English Short Title Catalogue* between 1660 and 1830, in *The Times* newspaper between 1785 and 1830, in Samuel Pepys' ballad collections and in a large number of miscellaneous collections of ghost stories published in these years. Manuscript sources, diaries, journals and sermons are included to offset the bias of some published material, which partially reflects consumer tastes and the location of major printing centres. The map shows the number of ghost stories produced per county with the exception of the City of London, which alone counts for 42 stories in the sample, exaggerated to some extent by the vibrant printing industry in the metropolis. Stories from Wales and Scotland are included when published in England but this map is not a comprehensive mapping of British ghost stories. For an in-depth justification of this method of literary mapping see F. Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London, 1999), pp.3-10.

Storytelling could then be *occupational* and in his study of popular recreations in England from 1700-1850, Robert Malcolmson describes the habit of telling tales as a natural complement to the working lives of the labouring classes. 'Weavers sang at their looms, haymakers in the fields...and women gossiped over their sewing'. Cornish tin miners and fishermen lived a precarious physical and economic existence, often relying on the benevolence of the natural world to secure life, limb and prosperity.<sup>39</sup> As John Rule has argued, the unpredictability of daily life underground and at sea encouraged attachments to an overarching providential plan and to the idea that good and evil spirits intervened to order the individual fortunes of workers. Reflections on the fate of deceased souls was particularly linked to the short life expectancy of these men and as a local Wesleyan minister noted, 'Life was so uncertain, and at any rate so short, that the converted miners felt continually the world to come to be very near.'<sup>40</sup>

The means of production also shaped patterns of social interaction and where communal working practices were favoured, entertaining narratives helped to pass away the time. Stories cheered the work of spinners, harvesters and servants and were necessary 'accompaniments to labour, sweeteners for monotony and fatigue'.<sup>41</sup> Hans Medick reached similar conclusions about the nature of 'plebeian sociability' in his exploration of the links between production and socio-cultural reproduction among rural artisans in Germany in this period. A contemporary German industrialist complained that idle social intercourse would always result 'where people of both sexes are always together in the warmth of the same room and where they...carry out work that occupies their heads and their hearts so little'.<sup>42</sup> Storytelling thus expressed a need among workers for 'psychological compensation' and provided a vital complement 'to the burdens of uniform and monotonous work'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> J.G. Rule, 'The Labouring Miner in Cornwall c.1740-1870: A Study in Social History' (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1971), p.248.  
<sup>40</sup> J.H. Rigg, *Wesleyan Methodist Reminiscences Sixty Years Ago* (London, 1904), p.67. See also Richard Johnson who reinforced the conceptual significance of providential belief in this period, without which 'the life of man is composed of chance events'. R. Johnson, *Moral Sketches for Young Minds* (London, 1790), p.10.  
<sup>41</sup> R.W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* (Cambridge, 1973), p.15.  
<sup>42</sup> Cited in P. Kriedte, H. Medick & J. Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before Industrialization, Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism*, translated by B. Schempp (Cambridge, 1981), p.63.  
<sup>43</sup> Medick, *Industrialization before Industrialization*, p.63.



### III Women's Work

Labour relations in eighteenth-century England favoured the spread of oral narratives, and the growth of the cottage industry proved especially fruitful in blending storytelling with the routines of the working day. In a transitional period of economic change, the family as a unit of labour became an increasingly vital support of the household economy. The labour of women and children was crucial in this, and when agricultural work dried up, they often engaged in small-scale handicraft production within the home to supplement the family income. Hand spinning and weaving were common activities - women spinning whilst children wound the yarn. Spinning was an important wage supplement for women in southern and eastern counties and Pamela Sharpe has also documented this practice in eighteenth-century Essex.<sup>44</sup> In Lancashire, Samuel Bamford worked alongside his aunt Elizabeth at the bobbin-wheel, and remembered her wonderful tales of ghosts and spirits. Storytelling, he claimed, was a favourite and frequent pastime for 'these tales were always new', sometimes extracted from local incidents, from the *Journal of John Wesley* or from the pages of the *Arminian Magazine*, the official Methodist publication that was filled with colourful and up-to-date narratives of ghosts and spectres.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Bamford clearly required distraction since he considered his work to be 'a piece of bondage, on account of its monotonous confinement'.<sup>46</sup> Bamford's neighbours also introduced elements of sociability into their work with 'Owd Beet wife' humming at her wheel and her daughter 'singing love ditties like a nightingale' as she wove napkins at the loom.<sup>47</sup>

The supervision and education of children was integrated into the productive activities of many women and stories of ghosts, whether drawn from local experience or extracted from small chapbooks and ballads, played a role in shaping these domestic and economic processes. It should not be assumed, however, that women chose to tell stories about ghosts because they were simply more credulous than men. A better explanation might be that the act of storytelling itself was closely related to the types of work that women undertook in this period. Technical advances and a

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<sup>44</sup> Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism, Working Women in the English Economy 1700-1850* (London, 1996), p.30.

<sup>45</sup> Chaloner, *The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford*, p.162.

<sup>46</sup> M. Berg, *The Age of Manufactures 1700-1820, Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain* (London, 1996), p.148.

<sup>47</sup> Chaloner, *Autobiography of Samuel Bamford*, p.102.

long-term shift towards arable cultivation in the second half of the eighteenth century saw a drop in demand for female labour in agriculture.<sup>48</sup> This trend varied from region to region with pastoral farming lasting longest in the southwest, but women's work was increasingly devalued in this sector as the century wore on, resulting in the search for new earning opportunities. Compensation was found in the developing silk, linen and cotton industries, in lace making, straw plaiting, tailoring, millinery, hand knitting, button making and japanning to name just a few.<sup>49</sup> The care of children was often implicit in these occupations; Joseph Mayett for example, was set to lace making with his mother in Buckinghamshire at the age of seven to supplement the family income. The adoption of the one-handed loom saw women and children take up weaving in increasingly large numbers which led to complaints in 1749 from established weavers in Colchester who felt threatened by the availability of cheap female and child labour.<sup>50</sup> In 1788 the exploitation of this labour market in Norwich provoked Arthur Young to condemn local manufacturers for the wretched state of the female and child spinners they employed.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, despite the introduction of the spinning jenny in Northern textile manufacturing from the 1770s, many employers preferred to persist with the low technology, low wage labour of female and child hand spinners. Finer yarn could be spun using the traditional distaff and manufacturing costs proved cheaper for small-scale producers. Use of the distaff also gave women greater flexibility to remain in the home and to combine domestic production with other household activities, including childcare. John Clare for example, told how 'dames oft bustle from their wheels/Wi childern scampering at their heels'.<sup>52</sup> The working conditions of proto-industry thus ensured that women and children worked in close proximity and that sociability could be easily combined with productivity.

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<sup>48</sup> K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor, Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>49</sup> M. Berg, *Age of Manufactures*, p.137; P. Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p.18.

<sup>50</sup> P. Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p.33.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Berg, *Age of Manufactures*, p.144.

<sup>52</sup> Clare, 'May' in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.



#### IV Domestic Service

Another occupation with which both women and ghost stories were increasingly associated in the eighteenth century was domestic service. For 1806, Patrick Colquhoun estimated that 910,000 domestic servants were employed in England and Wales, and that some 800,000 of these were female.<sup>53</sup> Maxine Berg has also asserted that domestic service was increasingly dominated by women over the course of the eighteenth century, and by 1851 female servants outnumbered men by a ratio of nine to one.<sup>54</sup> According to the sample of ghost stories set out in Figure 7, servants were particularly wont to see ghosts and to tell stories about them, and they make up fourteen per cent of those listed as narrators of these tales. It is worth noting that the number of male servants who actually claimed to have seen a ghost was slightly higher than that for female servants in the sample, suggesting that the feminised category of 'superstition' requires careful qualification. The settings, in which these encounters took place, however, were noticeably different, with men tending to see ghosts outside the home whilst women most often saw a ghost in and around the house. At the start of the century, the ghost of Joseph Chambers haunted a house in Chesham for a number of years and was frequently seen in the garden by the maid.<sup>55</sup> Servant Mary Martin was a prominent witness to the haunting of a house in Stockwell in January 1772<sup>56</sup> and it was the family maid that first reported the 'dismal groans' of Old Jeffrey in the Wesley household in Epworth, Lincolnshire.<sup>57</sup> With a few exceptions, the sites of these visions reflect contemporary working patterns since women, although not confined to the domestic sphere, spent more time in and around the home than men.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Colquhoun cited in Berg, *Age of Manufactures*, p.137.

<sup>54</sup> Berg, *Age of Manufactures*, p.137.

<sup>55</sup> *Athenian Mercury*, No. 10, Volume II, Saturday 31 October 1691.

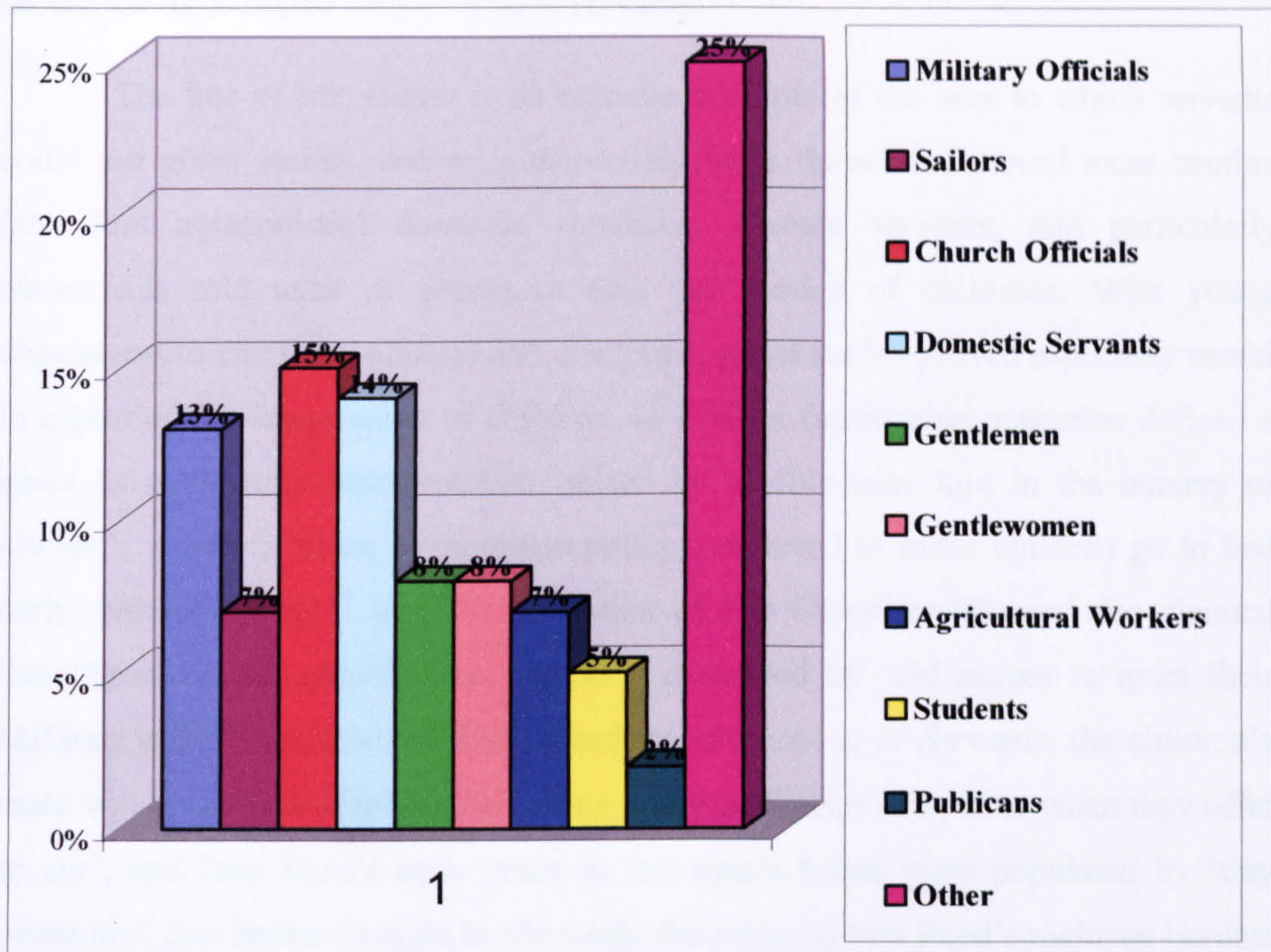
<sup>56</sup> A. Lang, *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* (London, 1886), p.118.

<sup>57</sup> 'Letter to Mr S.W. Junior, Saturday January 12, 1717 from Susanna Wesley', in *Letters Concerning some Supernatural Disturbances at the House of the Reverend Mr Samuel Wesley, in Epworth, Lincolnshire*, MCA, MS. DDCW 8/15, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Capp and Carolyn Steedman have highlighted the doorstep as a permeable social boundary for many working women who were able to enjoy the social life of the neighbourhood while carrying out domestic duties. Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet, Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), pp.52-53 and Carolyn Steedman, 'Lord Mansfield's Women', *Past and Present*, No. 176 (August 2002), pp.123-4.



**Figure 7: Identity of Primary Percipients of Ghosts in English Ghost Stories, c.1660-c.1830.**



**Figure 7:** This graph is based on the same 257 ghost stories as the map in Figure 6. Manuscript sources, diaries, letters and journals have been used to offset the potential bias of published ballads and chapbooks, which to a degree reflect the commercial success of particular narratives, such as naval and military tales, rather than showing a representative occupational spread of ghost percipients. Nonetheless, the graph is valuable in suggesting consumer taste for these narratives and their wide distribution. The graph is based on primary percipients of ghost stories, some ghosts were seen by multiple percipients but this was an inconsistent phenomenon, thus limiting the value of this measurement.

As chapter three argued, the fact that servants gossiped and told tales is now well known and ghost stories could be used to contest power or to announce the abuse of servants at the hands of their employers.<sup>59</sup> As we saw in chapter two, the gossiping of Mr. Carter's servants in Lincolnshire was the most likely cause of their master's murder conviction when his brother's ghost was rumoured to have appeared in 1679 to accuse Carter of murder.<sup>60</sup> With access to the most intimate details of their

<sup>59</sup> Laura Gowing, 'The Haunting of Susan Lay: Servants and Mistresses in Seventeenth-Century England', *Gender & History*, Volume 14, No. 2 (August 2002), p.184.

<sup>60</sup> *Strange and Wonderful News from Lincolnshire* (London, 1679)



employers' lives, it is no wonder that householders became increasingly anxious to secure the tight-lipped loyalty of their servants.

The fate of Mr. Carter is an extreme example of the uses to which servants could put ghost stories, and on a day-to-day basis these tales served more routine (and less antagonistic) domestic functions. Female servants, and particularly nursemaids told tales of ghosts to ease the burden of childcare. With young dependents to entertain, educate and discipline, ghost stories proved especially useful in capturing the imagination of children. In 1762, a fashionable magazine defined a ghost as a 'horrible representation, raised by terrible tales told in the nursery or kitchen'; it was 'a piece of domestic policy, contrived to make children go to bed early without crying'.<sup>61</sup> In 1770 the author of *The Compleat Wizzard* also claimed that 'Spectres and ghosts' were regularly described by 'old nurses to quiet their children with'.<sup>62</sup> In Jonathan Swift's satirical *Directions to Servants*, the children's maid was suspected of telling her young charges 'Stories of Spirits, when they offer to cry', and Jane Eyre's early years in her aunt's house were populated by 'tiny phantoms' that Bessie brought to life while she crimped Mrs Reed's nightcap borders at the nursery-hearth.<sup>63</sup>

It is somewhat ironic that we are able to piece together glimpses of these narrative practices largely thanks to the growing number of complaints about them in the eighteenth century. The foundation for these criticisms was John Locke's attack on Cartesian philosophy in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* first published in 1695. Superstition was not innate, he claimed, but rather it was instilled; 'the ideas of goblins and sprites have really no more to do with darkness than light: yet let but a foolish maid inculcate these often on the mind of a child and raise them there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives'.<sup>64</sup> In 1752, a posthumous edition of Defoe's *View of the Invisible World* added to the chorus, lamenting the routine use of ghost stories by nursemaids 'to affright cross Children into Obedience' because this often left 'the most lasting Impressions

<sup>61</sup> *The Beauties of all the Magazines Selected* (London, 1762-64), Volume I, p.12.

<sup>62</sup> *The Compleat Wizzard; being a collection of authentic and entertaining narratives of the real existence and appearance of Ghosts, Demons, and Spectres* (London, 1770), preface.

<sup>63</sup> 'Of Ghosts, Daemons, and Spectres', in *The Gentleman's Magazine: or, Monthly Intelligencer*, No. 10 (October 1732). C.H. Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge, 1990), p.103. C. Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (London, 1994), p.11.

<sup>64</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, ed. J.W. Yolton (London, 1991), p.10.

of their Folly upon their unhappy Charge'.<sup>65</sup> In 1762, an anonymous author ascribed the persistence of ghost beliefs to 'ignorance and childish fear'. 'Children' he claimed, 'suck them in almost with their first milk; their nurses, no wiser than them, encourage the deceit; and so it is spread from one to another; till they have lost the grounds, from whence their foolish imaginations were derived; and never acquire strength enough of reason and judgement to examine their credibility, or to banish them afterward.'<sup>66</sup> And in 1817 a letter to the editor of *The Times* complained that 'tales of *ghosts* and *hobgoblins* are often known to terrify and harrow up the infant mind, so as to render the most common, *twilight*, shadow, an ideal apparition of horror and dread'.<sup>67</sup>

Condemnation of these childcare practices formed part of broader anxieties among the middling and upper sorts about the 'nurturing but dangerous' status of the nurse in eighteenth-century life.<sup>68</sup> Greater attention was now being paid to the formative years of childhood with educational theorists and physicians asserting that children could inherit both physical *and* moral characteristics from their carers. In 1743 Nicolas Andry de Bois-Regard's *Orthopaedia: or, the art of correcting and preventing deformities in children* was published in London and in it he counselled parents to 'let none of you Servants, nor any other body, foolishly tell [children] any Stories' since 'they do a great deal of hurt to Children, and consequently to Mankind'. According to Andry, fear was a dangerous medical condition, prejudicial to the 'Bodies, Minds, and Manners' of children.<sup>69</sup> A wide range of instructional literature was published as the century wore on containing advice for middle and upper class parents on how best to protect their children from the disease of superstition, irrationality and vulgarity that ignorant servants threatened to transmit. In September 1748, the *Newcastle General Magazine* urged parents to pay special attention to the early years of their child's development because, 'young minds are so soft and tender, that they take any Bent, and so empty, that they receive all Impressions...Shall then the Youth, who is hereafter to command an Army, receive

<sup>65</sup> D. Defoe, *A View of the Invisible World*, iii.

<sup>66</sup> *Anti-Canidia: or, Superstition Detected and Exposed* (London, 1762), p.20.

<sup>67</sup> 'To the Editor of the Times', *The Times*, Issue 10312, 26 November 1817, p.3.

<sup>68</sup> C.H. Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe*, ff.101.

<sup>69</sup> N. Andry de Bois-Regard, *Orthopaedia: or, the art of correcting and preventing deformities in children*, Volume II (London, 1743), pp.210-211.



his first Principles from a Conversation with Servants’?<sup>70</sup> Although commentators primarily located ghost beliefs among impressionable children, their complaints may well have disguised deeper anxieties that lowly servants were sometimes capable of getting one over on their employers by manipulating fears of preternatural appearances. In May 1790 Lord Galway suffered this embarrassing fate when he was ‘gull’d by his domestics into the perception of supernatural appearances’ after he was persuaded that his rented estate was haunted by the ghost of the late incumbent. *The Times* newspaper reported Galway’s folly as a salient warning to others.<sup>71</sup>

## V Childhood

The activities of nursemaids and servants were thus put under the microscope, no doubt leading to a distortion of the supposedly ‘superstitious’ nature of these workers as compared with other members of society. Figure 7 however, is a useful corrective to these impressions, identifying a variety of percipients of ghosts from different social and economic backgrounds. Nonetheless, the identification of childhood as a crucial stage in the formation of ghost beliefs should not be dismissed too hastily.

Religious texts produced especially for the youth market may have reinforced the authority of the ghost stories that provoked such fascination among this age group. A collection of children’s primers and catechisms collected by a clergyman in the late eighteenth century cemented the association of spiritual beings with important aspects of divinity and devotional practice. In common with most catechisms authored by Church officials in the eighteenth century, *The First Set of Catechisms and Prayers* by Isaac Watts taught that ‘God is a Spirit’.<sup>72</sup> *The Catechism Set Forth in the Book of Common Prayer...For the Exercise of Youth* (1797) confirmed Watt’s diagnosis of God as ‘an external spirit’ and it extended the ethereal nature of the spirit world to the Devil, who was identified as ‘our ghostly enemy’, both a ‘spiritual enemy’ and ‘an evil spirit’.<sup>73</sup> This catechism also went on to

<sup>70</sup> *The Newcastle General Magazine*, September 1748, ‘Essay on the Education of Children’ (Newcastle, 1748).

<sup>71</sup> ‘Lord Galway and the Ghost’, *The Times*, Issue 1673, 5 May 1790, p.2.

<sup>72</sup> I. Watts, *The First Set of Catechisms and Prayers; or, The Religion of Little Children Under Seven or Eight Years* (London, 1788), p.9.

<sup>73</sup> *The Catechism Set Forth in the Book of Common Prayer, Briefly Explained by Short Notes Grounded upon Holy Scripture...For the Exercise of Youth* (London, 1797), x, p.18.

recommend regular prayer to its young readers as the most effectual defence against 'all dangers ghostly and bodily'. The Holy Spirit was the only part of the Trinity that was not embodied in anthropomorphic terms and it was also the means by which God's work was most regularly carried out in the world. The Holy Spirit was an active agent, having the capacity to inspire, sanctify and flow through human bodies. Caroline Fry's *Poetical Catechism; or, Sacred Poetry; For the Use of Young Persons* acknowledged this function and suggested ways in which the amorphous concept of the Holy Spirit could take on more concrete meaning in daily life. Fry described the Holy Spirit 'as a 'Comforter' and 'Guide', as a 'Counsellor and Friend'.<sup>74</sup> This formulation was strikingly similar to the role assumed by benevolent ghosts who provided psychological comfort in times of stress and as we shall see in the following sections, also afforded protection and guidance for many soldiers and sailors. I want to suggest then that the linguistic elision of the 'Holy Spirit' and other subsidiary 'spirits', including those of dead people, was no coincidence and that ghosts were sometimes understood as part of a hierarchy of spirit, as divine messengers or emanations of the Holy Spirit – the difference between the two was of degree rather than kind. This conception of 'Spirit' was also reminiscent of Anne Conway's understanding of ghosts set out in chapter one. The Anglican eschatological vocabulary was thus saturated with references to the ghostly and the spiritual, of both a divine and corrupt nature. Although it is difficult to conceive how children and adults understood the nature of this Holy Spirit, it is important to note that they were introduced to the existence and vibrancy of a spirit world as part of their primary religious education. Ghost stories may thus have gained legitimacy from the wider textual culture of Anglicanism.

If notions of the Holy Spirit were instilled at an early age then so were ideas of ghosts and the association of ghost stories with the early years of development is an important link in understanding how preternatural beliefs were reproduced from generation to generation, and between different social levels. John Aubrey, Richard Baxter, John Wesley, Jonathan Swift, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge all remembered hearing ghost stories as infants and the widespread condemnation of superstitious nursemaids in fashionable periodicals suggests that

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<sup>74</sup> C. Fry, *A Poetical Catechism; or, Sacred Poetry; For the Use of Young Persons* (London, 1826), p.17.



these narratives had significant long-term impact on the minds of those who heard them or read about them. Historians are used to making educated guesses about how stories and particularly how oral narratives were actually *received* by listeners in the past, but a number of autobiographies from the turn of the nineteenth century provide rare insights into the emotional reactions of those who heard tales of ghosts. As a child, Samuel Bamford sat around the hearth while his aunt excited his curiosity and wonder with ‘strange and fearful tales of spirits, and apparitions’. He listened ‘in silence and awe, and scarcely breathing, contemplated in imagination, the visions of an unseen world, which her narratives conjured up’.<sup>75</sup> In the early nineteenth-century, John Harris remembered listening to his mother’s stories ‘with wondering joy...and as I listened my young heart beat, and imagination bore me away on her dazzling wings’.<sup>76</sup> The sense of wonder imparted by ghost stories was accompanied by fear in Alexander Somerville’s childhood home at Berwick-on-Tweed, where children were taught by their elders ‘that if they were afraid of such a thing as thunder, or a ghost...the thunder or other thing of dread would come and kill them or take them away’.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, John Clare spoke of the ‘fearful extacy’ of listening to ghost stories in childhood, when children ‘Quake wi the ague chills of fear/And tremble while they love to hear’.<sup>78</sup> Born in Newlyn, Cornwall in 1800, William Lovett first encountered ghosts from the ‘numerous stories...told to me in infancy, reiterated in boyhood, and authenticated and confirmed by one neighbour after another’. Lovett complained that these accounts instilled the reality of ghosts so firmly in his imagination that ‘it was many years after I came to London before I became a sceptic in ghosts’.<sup>79</sup> I will return to discuss London at a later stage, but for now it is worth noting that Lovett’s autobiography was purposely written as an instructional guide to improve the lot of the working classes – he did not consider belief in ghosts to be an appropriate characteristic for his pupils.

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<sup>75</sup> Bamford, *Early Days*, p.162.

<sup>76</sup> Harris’ mother probably had a good stock of ghost stories up her sleeve because the town of Camborne reportedly had a ‘white-sheeted spectre’ for ‘every large rock and abandoned mine-pit’. John Harris, *My Autobiography* (London, 1882), p.14, 39. See also J. Rule, for links between ghost beliefs in Camborne and the strong Methodist influence within this tin-mining community, J. Rule, *The Labouring Miner*.

<sup>77</sup> A. Somerville, *The Autobiography of a Working Man, By One Who Has Whistled at the Plough* (London, 1848), p.59.

<sup>78</sup> Clare, ‘January – A Cottage Evening’, in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*.

<sup>79</sup> Lovett, *Life and Struggles of William Lovett*, p.8.



William Lovett associated scepticism about ghosts with knowledge, literacy and ultimately with 'progress', but David Hume was less optimistic about the power of print and education to overcome the effects of a good story. The question of how language and oral testimony convey authority has been pursued by socio-linguists in the twentieth century, but Hume anticipated this trend when he identified tale telling as a major stumbling block to dispassionate 'reason'. 'Eloquence' he complained, 'when at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection; but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding.'<sup>81</sup> The ability to tell a story well was acknowledged as an important talent and it was one that was encouraged by contemporary educationalists. Published in 1792, an instructional guide for parents underlined the importance of narrative performance, advising moral tales to be told 'with warmth and interest, or they will have little effect; try to make them have the vivacity of plays, by assuming the voice and manner of the different persons who are mentioned; and, in the recital, do not forget the prints which represent them, for they will more deeply impress the truths they give life to on the children's minds, than mere words'.<sup>82</sup> Historians have all too often neglected the physical performance of storytelling but this crucial aspect of communication must be taken into account when attempting to understand how folktales and oral narratives retained an unusually persuasive character.

Indeed, the second half of the eighteenth century saw a number of authors beginning to frame the rational rejection of ghosts within familiar narrative contexts to try to combat this pernicious tide of superstition. These years witnessed the emergence of a whole range of educational and entertaining texts produced specifically for children, and this developing genre of literature was an important arena for the contestation of preternatural ideas. It was against this backdrop that John Newbery first published *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* in 1765. Young readers (or rather their parents) were Newbery's target market and the original book was bound 'in the familiar Dutch flowered and gilt pattern paper'. By the third

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<sup>81</sup> Hume, *Of Miracles*, p.36. In the 1970s, a number of socio-linguists studied the use of oral testimonies in capturing audiences and creating authority for the narrator. See William Labov, *Language in the Inner City, Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Oxford, 1977).

<sup>82</sup> *Elements of Morality for the Use of Children; With an Introductory Address to Parents*, Volume I (London, 1792), xvii. In 1791 Mary Wollstonecraft also translated this text into English, M.



edition of 1766 however, Newbery expanded his potential audience as this small book became more affordable, priced at six pence and including a series of lively woodcuts.<sup>82</sup> The story was set around life in a country village and when the locals imagined they had seen a ghost in the Church one day, the heroine Margery intervened to quash the rumours. 'After this my dear Children', wrote the author, 'I hope you will not believe any foolish Stories that ignorant, weak, or designing People may tell you about Ghosts; for the Tales of Ghosts, Witches, and Fairies, are the Frolicks of a distempered Brain. No wise Man ever saw either of them.'<sup>83</sup> *Youth's Miscellany; or, a Father's Gift to his Children* (1798) taught 'Little Jack' not to believe in ghosts since his father 'had felt the pernicious effects of such inbred terrors himself' and *The Children's Friend* (1786) recounted the tale of a young boy who thought he saw a ghost in the cellar, but which on closer inspection turned out to be a leg of mutton covered in a white tablecloth to keep the flies off.<sup>84</sup> Despite these efforts however, the campaign to eradicate ghosts from children's literature only began in earnest in the later eighteenth century and it would be a number of years before the success of these efforts could be measured. In the meantime, it seems that children were still tempted to believe that ghosts were real, and this was confirmed in part by the publication history of *The Death-Watch* in 1796. Written by a country clergyman, this hefty book took the form of a dialogue between four children who pondered 'the important question relating to the real appearance of Departed Souls, and their power of making their second appearance in the world'.<sup>85</sup> The content was dreary with no woodcuts or illustrations to liven up the dialogue and at 120 pages long and priced at two shillings, its readership was restricted and it did not run into any further editions.<sup>86</sup> The young Joseph Donaldson preferred romances, fairy tales

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Wollstonecraft, *Elements of Morality For The Use of Children*, Translated from the German of the Reverend C.G. Salzmann, 3 Volumes (London, 1791).

<sup>82</sup> *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes; Otherwise called, Mrs Margery Two-Shoes* (London, 1766).

<sup>83</sup> *Goody Two Shoes*, p.56.

<sup>84</sup> *Youth's Miscellany; or, A Father's Gift to his Children* (London, 1798), pp.54-6. M. Berquin, *The children's friend; consisting of apt tales, short dialogues, and moral dramas*, Volume XV (London, 1786), pp.27-30.

<sup>85</sup> *The Death-Watch. Dialogues upon spirits; or, a curious, interesting, and entertaining disquisition on the important question relating to the real appearance of Departed Souls, and their power of making their second appearance in the world, By a country clergyman.* (London, 1796).

<sup>86</sup> From the evidence that does survive detailing the reading habits of youngsters in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *The Death Watch* made a poor showing and although *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* ran through ten English editions by 1830, it enjoyed greater popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century. *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* was reprinted seventeen times between 1855 and 1901, for details see the *English Short Title Catalogue* (ESTC).



and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* while Samuel Bamford's books of choice were *The Arminian Magazine*, *The Drummer of Tedworth*, *An Account of the Apparition of the Laird of Cool* and *An Account of the Disturbances at Glenluce*.<sup>87</sup> In the market town of Penzance, William Lovett recalled only one bookseller's shop, which apart from 'Bibles and Prayer Books, spelling-books, and a few religious works, the only books in circulation for the masses were a few story-books and romances, filled with absurdities about ghosts, spirits, goblins, and supernatural horrors'.<sup>88</sup> As publication lists indicate, there was always money to be made from ghost stories and while the tensions between entertainment and instruction, fact and fiction are difficult to unravel in these narratives, they were no doubt vital in preserving the dramatic potential and commercial appeal of these tales.

Childhood was then, and still is, a crucial stage in the imaginative development of the individual. The fact that ghost stories were so firmly embedded in the life-cycle structures of eighteenth-century life, and particularly associated with childhood (a universal social experience), helps to explain why gentlemen and gentlewomen are strongly represented among those who claimed to have seen a ghost, despite their greater exposure to sceptical ideals in later life. Moreover, William Lovett's example highlights the fact that currents of popular scepticism about the reality of ghosts co-existed with learned belief in them. Many educated men and women chose to preserve the idea that something otherworldly did exist, and Joseph Addison, though something of a sceptic himself, made little objection to these pleasures of the imagination for readers of the *Spectator*. Tales of departed spirits reminded upper-class men and women of 'the Stories we have heard in our Child-hood', and favoured 'those secret Terrours and Apprehensions to which the Mind of Man is naturally subject.'<sup>89</sup> The seductive effects of ghost stories in the eighteenth century are evidenced by the conscious and sustained appropriation of ghosts by Richard Baxter and John Wesley in later life.

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<sup>87</sup> 'The Drummer of Tedworth', 'An Account of the Apparition of the Laird of Cool' and 'An Account of the Disturbances at Glenluce' were all published in chapbook form and in a number of collected volumes.

<sup>88</sup> Lovett, *Life and Struggles*, p.17.



## VI Circulation

To make it into print, ghost stories often had to rely on the involvement of an educated or well-connected person. This is perhaps one reason why ministers, from both Anglican and Dissenting backgrounds, figure so prominently as narrators of these tales in Figure 7. Nonetheless, stories were largely transmitted by word of mouth and sometimes by a mobile agricultural workforce which exchanged gossip as well as labour at markets, local hiring fairs and on harvest migration routes.<sup>90</sup> In 1800, two-thirds of the population still lived and worked in rural areas and mobility levels were high with most of those employed in husbandry working on annual contracts.<sup>91</sup> During his time as a servant in husbandry, Joseph Mayett found frequent employment through the hiring fairs at Aylesbury and Bicester.<sup>92</sup> Yearly hiring fairs were a crucial focus of working patterns in the countryside and in the hiring season (usually around Michaelmas) 'the country roads were full of servants moving from one place to another; and those usually tranquil market towns in which the hiring fairs took place were for a few days exuberantly alive with large crowds of servants, masters and mistresses, and often itinerant entertainers'.<sup>93</sup> All levels of society, men, women and children mixed at these important local events since they 'combined business with social pleasures'.<sup>94</sup> Oral and print cultures interacted on these occasions and the fairs around Norfolk were especially noted for petty chapmen and pedlars selling a wide range of ballads and chapbooks.<sup>95</sup> James Woodforde let his servants Sally and Benjamin attend St. Faith's Fair at Norwich where the first day was reserved for recreation.<sup>96</sup> Sally and Benjamin might well have had opportunity there to tell of the 'large winding sheet' that appeared to Parson Woodforde one evening in the candlelight. Unsure what to make of the appearance, his wife Nancy surmised that it was 'a sure sign of a burying soon'.<sup>97</sup> As we saw in chapter two, a ghost story from the Fair at Exeter in 1677 circulated among the 'Whole-sale-Men'

<sup>89</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 419, Volume III, Tuesday 1 July 1712, p.570.

<sup>90</sup> A folkloric literary tradition can be traced back patterns of agricultural labour. The modern Fairy-Tale 'White-Faced Simminy' begins at a hiring fair when a young servant girl goes in search of work, see A. Williams-Ellis, *Fairy Tales from the British Isles* (London, 1962), p.153.

<sup>91</sup> R.W. Malcolmson, *Life and Labour in England 1700-1780* (London, 1981), p.56, 71.

<sup>92</sup> A. Kussmaul, *The Autobiography of Joseph Mayett of Quainton* (1783-1839), x.

<sup>93</sup> Malcolmson, *Life and Labour*, p.72.

<sup>94</sup> Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.15.

<sup>95</sup> Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.22.

<sup>96</sup> J. Beresford (ed.), *The Diary of a Country Parson: The Reverend James Woodforde*, Volume V, 1797-1802 (Oxford, 1931), p.279.

<sup>97</sup> Beresford, *Diary of a Country Parson*, January 18, 1797, p.7.



that attended and who later relayed the narrative to a London printer for publication.<sup>98</sup>

Seasonal hiring fairs lasted longest in the pastoral regions of southwest England and the Exeter example was probably not unique, suggesting that some ghost stories enjoyed an audience far beyond their place of origin. Patterns of migration in this period show a consistent flow of agricultural workers from the pastoral counties of western England to arable regions in the east.<sup>99</sup> This may help to explain why a large number of ghost stories surfaced in the Midlands, in Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Derbyshire, Herefordshire and Lincolnshire (see Figure 6). The tramping system provides another potential source of circulation for stories of all kinds, with out-of-work weavers, tailors, shoemakers, plumbers and other artisans moving regularly between towns in search of employment.<sup>100</sup> This system, which according to John Rule became a 'national society' in the later eighteenth century, also makes important links between town and country. The high number of ghost stories from in and around London shown in Figure 6 may be partially explained by dense concentrations of printers in the capital, but it is also a useful reminder that city dwellers were no strangers to ghosts. As Raymond Williams reminds us, this is scarcely surprising since simple divisions between the experiences of 'country' and 'city' are inappropriate. They neglect the interdependence and complexities of urban and rural economies, the high levels of in-migration and they suggest degrees of difference and 'otherness', which rarely stand up to historical enquiry.<sup>101</sup>

Domestic service was the largest sector of female employment in eighteenth-century Essex. This work was transitional with many young girls employed on short-term contracts, pointing to high levels of female mobility whilst also providing important links between London (where much of this employment was located) and

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<sup>98</sup> *The Wonder of this Age: or, God's Miraculous Revenge against MURDER. Being a RELATION of an undoubted Truth out of the WEST* (London, 1677).

<sup>99</sup> P. Clark and D. Souden (eds), *Migration and Society in Early Modern England* (London, 1987), p.315.

<sup>100</sup> J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England 1750-1850* (London, 1986), p.258.

<sup>101</sup> High mortality rates in the metropolis meant that London was unable to achieve a natural increase in its population and yet over the course of the eighteenth century the number of inhabitants nearly doubled. See D. Souden, 'East, West – Home's Best?' Regional Patterns in Migration in Early Modern England', in Clark and Souden (eds), *Migration and Society*, p.307, 313. R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973).



the surrounding areas.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, country girls were sometimes preferred to those already resident in the City who knew the market and would demand a higher wage.<sup>103</sup> Great numbers of women were drawn to London in this period; the growing affluence of the middling sorts meant that demand for domestic servants was rising and David Souden found that a high proportion of women were employed in domestic and service occupations in the capital.<sup>104</sup> We have already seen that female servants played an important role in the transmission of ghost stories to young children in their care, and this practice cut across geographical boundaries, being equally applicable (if not more so) in urban contexts as well as rural.

As discussed above, nostalgic recollections of rural homelands may well have given added impetus to the exchange of ghost stories in London, but this is not to suggest that the tales found in the capital were simply second-hand imports from 'superstitious' country folk. An example from Hammersmith proves that homegrown belief in ghosts was alive and kicking in London in 1804. Excise Officer Francis Smith was arrested in January of that year for the murder of James Milwood, a local bricklayer who was shot in the head in the local churchyard one night. When questioned by the magistrate, Smith admitted discharging his gun at a shadowy figure - dressed all in white, but his intended victim was not James Milwood but the infamous 'Hammersmith Ghost', which had been terrifying the neighbourhood for the last two months. Here then was an extraordinary case of mistaken identity and though Francis Smith delivered the fatal shot to Milwood's head, the unfortunate bricklayer was as much the victim of local superstition and gossip networks. The 'Hammersmith Ghost' was rumoured to be the unhappy spirit of a local man who cut his own throat in 1802 and his disturbed spirit was particularly active in the weeks leading up to the shooting. Local watchman William Girdle saw the apparition in the churchyard just a few days before Smith, and it seemed to be covered 'with a [white] sheet or large tablecloth'. Others described this frightening vision 'all in white, with horns and glass eyes'. However, it was the material injuries inflicted by the ghost that led Francis Smith and his gun into the churchyard on that fateful evening. The ghost had grabbed servant Thomas Groom 'by the throat' as he passed through the haunted grounds one night and another poor woman quite literally died of shock after seeing

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<sup>102</sup> Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p.104.

<sup>103</sup> Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p.106.

<sup>104</sup> Souden, *Migration and Society*, p.307.

a tall white figure rising from the tombstones. Parishioners could talk of little else and few dared to venture out alone at night. Francis Smith was one of those who did, and being determined to put an end to the haunting, he lay in wait for the ghost to appear. When Milwood turned up dressed in his work clothes, top to toe in white (despite the advice of his mother-in-law who had begged him to put on an overcoat to avoid being mistaken for a ghost), his fate was sealed. Swayed by the copious amounts of alcohol he had drunk in the pub earlier that night and desperate to avoid the unhappy fate of his neighbours, Francis Smith panicked and shot the ghost (or so he claimed) in self-defence. Local familiarity with evil spirits and with the well-established methods of combating them might then help to explain the sympathetic hearing that Francis Smith met with at his Old Bailey trial. The jury refused to find him guilty of murder until instructed to do so by the Judge and when Smith was convicted, his initial sentence of death was commuted to just one year's imprisonment after a royal pardon was received.<sup>105</sup>

The previous chapter charted the impact of the pretended ghost at Cock Lane on the City's inhabitants, with the result that London was 'looked upon to be more credulous lately than it used to be'.<sup>106</sup> It is perhaps less surprising that the capital was home to a number of lively ghosts when we consider the physical make-up of the city. If persistent features of the local landscape sustained traditions of haunting in rural areas then the green spaces of London served a similar purpose. A 'headless woman' whose body was thrown into the lake after her husband murdered her in the 1780s was supposed to haunt St. James's Park. An apparition of a convict was seen running across Wimbledon Common in the late eighteenth century when the Common was feted as a notorious haunt for footpads and highwaymen. And in 1789 when a procession of shadowy women carrying a coffin was seen in Greenwich Park, Reverend Douglas decided to investigate and found that the site had once been used as a female burial ground in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>107</sup>

Taverns and alehouses provided a central focus for local communities across the country and London had a dense concentration. Alongside a variety of other uses, they functioned as sites of sociability, providing a comfortable setting for the regular

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<sup>105</sup> 'Francis Smith' in *The Newgate Calendar*, <http://www.exclassics.com/newgate/ng470.htm>. The case was also followed in *The Times*, Issue 5912, Friday 6 January 1804, p.3

<sup>106</sup> *The Beauties of all the Magazines Selected*, Volume I (1762), p.199.



exchange of news and gossip, including ghost stories. As we saw in chapter two, the appearance of Mrs. Adkins' ghost in Holborn in 1680, those requiring details of the relation were directed to the Cheshire Cheese Inn where the bones of the children she murdered were put on display.<sup>108</sup> In 1675, William Clark from Northamptonshire was visited by a restless ghost and was made to go to Southwark to uncover the hidden will of the dead man. Following his charitable deed, Clark told his neighbours and the Parish Minister what had happened and when the Northampton 'Carrier' next visited London, he 'told all this of the story at the Castle-Inn without Smithfield-Bars'. Three men who heard the account at the alehouse were willing to testify to the truth of the affair, according to a pamphlet version of the tale published in that year.<sup>109</sup> Francis Smith set out to shoot the Hammersmith ghost only after hearing news of its victims in the White Hart<sup>110</sup> and in 1762 the landlord of the 'Wheat Sheaf' made a small fortune from the Cock Lane ghost, with 'the credulous swallowing down with his beer his tales of terror'.<sup>111</sup>

In London, ghost stories flowed in and out of oral and print cultures with relative ease because this was the hub of a dynamic and ever-expanding print industry. A contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine* may well have had a point when he complained in 1732 that most 'Suburban Ghosts' were 'rais'd by petty Printers and Pamphleteers' in search of profit.<sup>112</sup> Josiah Blare and John Deacon were successful ballad publishers in Restoration London, and both made large fortunes from the print trade with ghosts featuring in a number of their published works.<sup>113</sup> The meaning of these texts lay in their reception, but as both Roger Chartier and Margaret Spufford suggest, the material production of texts and the fortunes of contemporary publishers give indirect evidence of their circulation and popularity. Moreover, as William Lovett suggested in the early nineteenth century, these preternatural appearances were often taken seriously.

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<sup>107</sup> R. Jones, *Walking Haunted London* (London, 1999), p.66, 90, 134.  
<sup>108</sup> *Great News from Middle-Row in Holbourn* (London, 1680), p.3. *A New Ballad of the Midwives Ghost* (London, 1680). See chapter two for full details of this case.  
<sup>109</sup> *The Rest-less Ghost: or, Wonderful News from Northamptonshire, and Southwark* (London, 1675).  
<sup>110</sup> *The Times*, Issue 5912, Friday 6 January 1804, p.3.  
<sup>111</sup> D. Grant, *The Cock Lane Ghost* (New York, 1965), p.38.  
<sup>112</sup> 'Of Ghosts, Daemons, and Spectres', in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, No. 10, October 1732.  
<sup>113</sup> Blare and Deacon's ghosts appeared in *The Dorset-shire Tragedy* (London, 1680), *The Lady's Tragedy* (London, 1684), *An Answer to the Maiden's Tragedy* (London, 1686), and *An Answer to the Unfortunate Lady* (London, 1695). Margaret Spufford estimates that Josiah Blare was 'amongst the richest fifth of the inhabitants of London', *Small Books and Pleasant Histories, Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1989), p.89.



So deeply seated are these superstitious teachings, and so difficult are they to eradicate, that it is very much to be regretted that our sensational tale-writers still continue to foster the absurd notions of ghosts and goblins; for though some may laugh at them, they have a very prejudicial effect on the minds of others, and more especially on children.<sup>115</sup>

It is impossible to prove whether Londoners were more or less credulous than people in other parts of the country but from the evidence of publication histories, they certainly had more frequent access to ghost stories from the vast menu of printed material that was available on this subject than did provincial folk. Moreover, those most able to afford the hefty bound editions of Glanvil and Moreton (alias Daniel Defoe) were the middling sorts and wealthier members of society (to whom Defoe specifically tailored his collections). These people are well represented among those who believed they had seen a ghost in Figure 7, and they include an Artificer, Courtier, Royal Envoy, Politician, Physician, several JPs and merchants and an Assessor to the Westminster Assembly. The article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* supplies further evidence for the wide circulation and appeal of ghost stories in eighteenth-century London by making reference to preternatural accounts from Germany and Russia. Following up this clue in publication records and printed collections, it appears that new and more exotic ghosts were increasingly shipped in along commercial trade routes in these years. Published collections from the later eighteenth century featured ghost stories from Holland, Germany, Rhode Island and South Carolina.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, as David Hall notes, the religious cultures of New England borrowed heavily from the wonder writings of London printers with ghosts able to span the Atlantic divide.<sup>117</sup> A merchant's servant in Boston Massachusetts, saw his brother's ghost with a bloody napkin-cap on his head, claiming that he had been murdered in a London brawl.<sup>118</sup> A similar case from 1726 led to a debate in *The*

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<sup>115</sup> Lovett, *Life and Struggles*, p.11.

<sup>116</sup> G. Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* (Edinburgh, 1789), pp.20-21, 87. *The Compleat Wizzard*, p.270. Tregortha, *News from the Invisible World*, p.345. 'Camden (South Carolina), Aug. 11' in *The Times*, Issue 5882, 2 December 1803, p.3. J. Andrews, *A Review of The Characters of The Principal Nations in Europe*, Volume II (London, 1770), pp.105-6.

<sup>117</sup> David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment, Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989).

<sup>118</sup> J. Tregortha, *News from the Invisible World*, p.49.



*Gentleman's Magazine* about the capabilities of separate souls and the distances they were able to travel.<sup>118</sup>

A brief comparison of publication lists in Britain and New England (both before and after the Revolution) also highlights some consensus about the uses to which ghost stories could be put, not simply as entertainment, but as religious and moral exemplars. *The Reprobate's Reward or a Looking Glass for Disobedient Children* was first published in London in 1788 and told the story of a treacherous son who cut his own mother's throat as she rode to Chippenham market. The murderous deed was discovered by his mother's ghost, which brought him to repent his sins before God. The final lines of this cheap eight-page chapbook which was penned by two Anglican ministers, warned young readers against disobedience and immorality and urged parents to raise their children in the fear of God, since 'he that fears the Lord, his days are blest'. Despite the local setting of this tale just outside of Bristol, its themes resonated across the Atlantic and it was soon reprinted in Philadelphia in 1793 and again in 1798.<sup>119</sup> *The Babes in the Wood* was a similar tale of secret murder and immorality revealed by a ghost and it was widely published in the 1790s in London (1790), Edinburgh (1800), Glasgow, (1790), and in Philadelphia (1791), New York (1795), Albany (1799) and Poughkeepsie (1796).

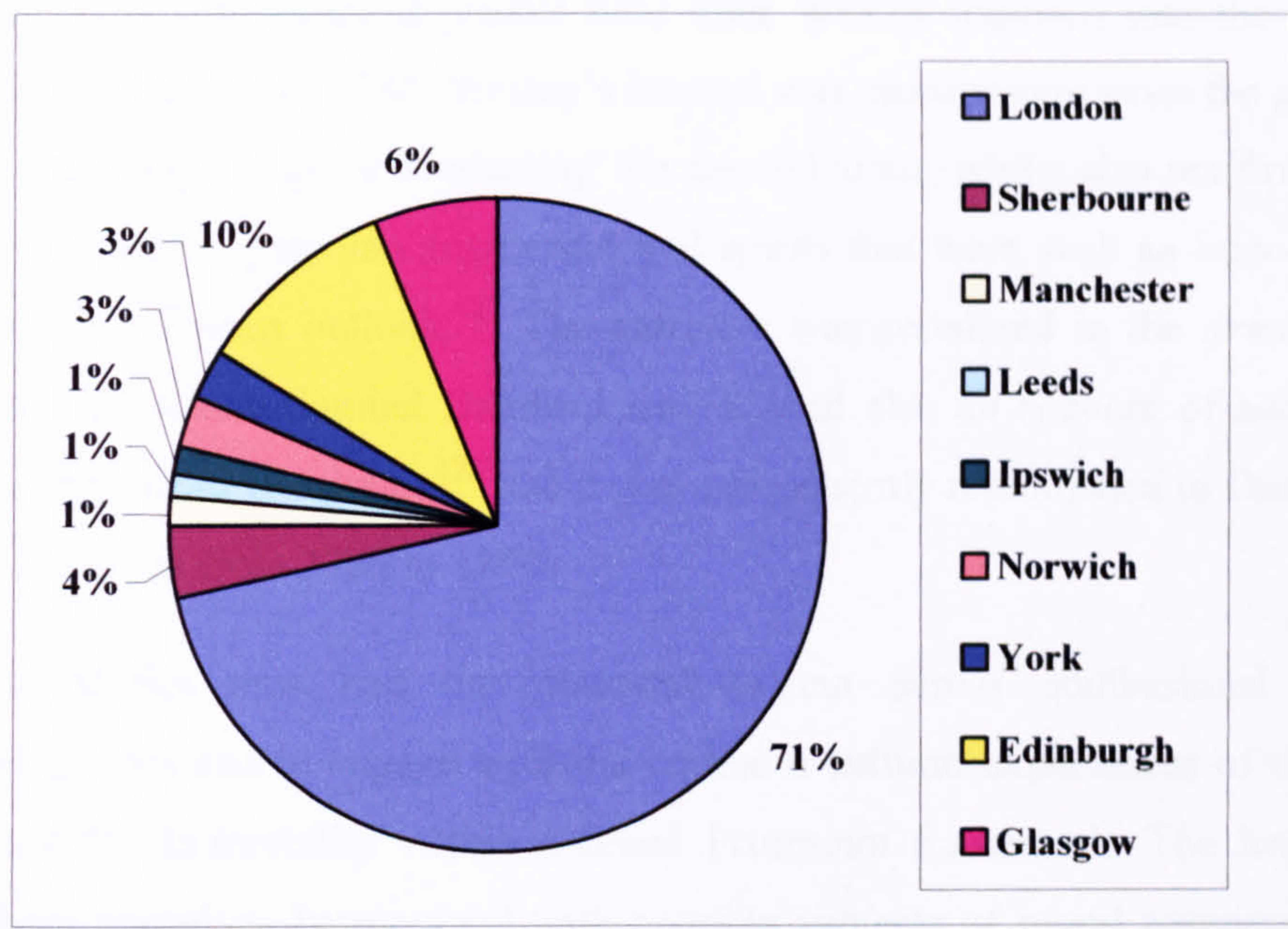
Common themes also emerge from the cheap printed literature aimed at the adult market. The account of *Thomas Ostrehan's Apparition*, published in Philadelphia in 1767 declared the certainty of life after death, warned against the errors of atheism, and encouraged its readers to prepare for death. These concerns were traditional motifs of the ghost story in Britain and they were echoed in *The Atheist's Reward* published in London in 1788. Printers on both sides of the Atlantic reflected and sustained the lucrative market of ghost stories with Anglican, Puritan, Methodist and other Dissenting ministers appropriating these tales for their own didactic ends.

<sup>118</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Volume IX, March 1739, p.75, 117.

<sup>119</sup> The 1798 version was set in Cork not Bristol, but all the main characters and plot remained the same.



Figure 8: Publication Centres of British Ghost Stories, c.1660-c.1830



**Figure 8:** This chart is based on a sample of 117 titles featuring ghosts that were published in Britain from c.1660-c.1830. The sample includes original editions of ballad and chapbook titles, extended devotional tracts and sermons. I have excluded evidence from periodicals due to the heavy geographical bias of these publications towards the metropolis. It should be noted that this sample is not exhaustive, and is largely based on titles from the *English Short Title Catalogue* and on a number of miscellaneous collections of ghost stories that did not have a restricted geographical range.

More than ever before, ghost stories began making appearances from locations across Britain. Edinburgh and Glasgow were already flourishing print centres before the eighteenth century and encounters with restless spirits were reported as a staple of the cheap print market in the North (see Figure 8). The 1789 edition of George Sinclair's *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* recounted a number of Scottish hauntings, including that of a recently widowed butcher whose wife returned to haunt him after he was found cavorting with another woman just days after she was buried.<sup>120</sup> The Act of Union of 1707 tied England and Scotland politically, but as Linda Colley suggests, they also began to identify with each other through common social and cultural experiences, through imperial expansion and a shared Protestantism.<sup>121</sup> John Wesley gave impetus to this gradual process of integration by collecting incidences of ghosts and apparitions on his missionary tours through the British Isles. The apparition of the Laird of Cool appeared to the Minister

<sup>120</sup> Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered*, p.163.

<sup>121</sup> L. Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1996), p.123, 152, 154.



of Innerwick near Dunbar in February 1722. The account was published in Edinburgh in 1751 but achieved greater note after Wesley inquired into the case during his time at Dunbar in 1784. Wesley's interest was unsurprising since the ghost promised 'certain hope of glory everlasting' for the righteous, whilst also reaffirming the activities of ghosts, guardian angels and evil spirits that were such an important part of Wesley's religious outlook.<sup>122</sup> The narrative was serialized in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1785 where Samuel Bamford read it (and also an account of another mischievous spirit from Glenluce),<sup>123</sup> and it was subsequently republished in Dunbar, Falkirk and Dumfries from 1786 to 1800.

Ghost stories thus had the potential to cut across confessional and geographical divides and to engage with the common cultural experiences of death and the desire for immortality within a broad Protestant framework. The lessons taught by these narratives harmonized with ongoing projects of moral regeneration and, as Michael Winship puts it, with the 'practical applied providentialism' that signaled the rationalization, rather than the abandonment of supernatural wonders in Britain and New England.<sup>124</sup>

## VII Male Tales

Margaret Spufford suggested that publishers of cheap print specifically catered for schoolboys like Samuel Bamford with a fondness for blood and violence. The growing number of poltergeist narratives produced in post-Reformation England may well have satisfied these tastes and young men were also renowned for re-enacting these performances to frighten their friends and neighbours.<sup>125</sup> That young boys revelled in the mysteries of the preternatural was also confirmed by William Gordon in 1765 who identified 'the common Notion of Spirits and Apparitions' among the readers of his *Young Man's Companion*. Gordon's instructional treatise chastised the credulity of his audience, lamenting that 'most Men are so prepared by Education to

<sup>122</sup> *Arminian Magazine*, Volume VIII, July 1785, 'A Strange Account, Dunbar, May 26, 1784', p.378.

<sup>123</sup> Chaloner, *Autobiography of Samuel Bamford*, p.110.

<sup>124</sup> M.P. Winship, *Seers of God, Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1996), p.37.

<sup>125</sup> M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, p.72. See also J. Bath, 'In the Divell's Liknesse': Interpretation and Confusion in Popular Ghost Belief', in J. Newton (ed.), *Early Modern Ghosts: Proceedings of the Early Modern Ghosts Conference Held at St. John's College, Durham University, 24 March 2001* (Centre for Seventeenth Century Studies: Durham University, 2002).

believe these Stories, that they will believe the Relation of them in these Cases, when they believe the Relators in nothing else.'<sup>126</sup>

Male fascination with ghost stories did of course extend beyond childhood and a number of ghost sightings and stories originated in universities. In September 1724, John Wesley wrote to his mother after three men from his college were frightened by the ghost of 'a man or woman in light grey' in fields near Oxford. One of the students, John Barnesley later discovered that his mother had died in Ireland at precisely the time the ghost had appeared.<sup>127</sup> In 1694 Abraham De La Pryme also recorded the excitement of his fellow students when a house in Cambridge was thought to be haunted.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, men also indulged their interest in ghosts when they gathered in local alehouses, when they were locked up together in prison and when they worked at close quarters – often at sea and in the armed forces.<sup>129</sup>

The physical processes of imperial and commercial expansion help to explain the wide circulation of ghost stories and they also created new spaces for the production and consumption of these tales. Encounters with the wandering dead were commonplace on trawlers, gunboats and in military regiments, with soldiers and sailors thought to be particularly credulous about the inhabitants of an invisible world. This is certainly one reason why a large number of ghost stories were set in and around British coastal ports and why soldiers and sailors figure strongly as percipients of ghosts in Figure 7. Writing in the first half of the eighteenth century, Jack Cremer observed that 'Sailors in generall have Noshern [notion] of fear of Aperishons' and a report in *The Times* from 1818 gave practical confirmation.<sup>130</sup> After a ghost was spotted near St. Helena, British cruisers gave chase, prompting the journalist to wonder that 'Our seamen, who fear nothing human, are deadly cowards when opposed to spirits or apparitions'.<sup>131</sup> When on duty, sailors in the Georgian

<sup>126</sup> W. Gordon, *Every Young Man's Companion* (London, 1765), p.428.

<sup>127</sup> 'Letter to Mrs Susanna Wesley, November 1, 1724, Oxon', in F. Baker (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 25, Letters I 1721-1739 (Oxford, 1980), pp.149-152.

<sup>128</sup> C. Jackson (ed.), *The Diary of Abraham De La Pryme, The Yorkshire Antiquary* (Durham, 1870), pp.39-42.

<sup>129</sup> For an example of a ghost story told in prison see R. Baxter, *The Certainty of the World of Spirits* (London, 1691), p.88.

<sup>130</sup> J. Cremer, *Ramblin' Jack. The Journal of Captain John Cremer, 1700-1774* (London, 1936), p.90 cited in M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge, 1989), p.183.

<sup>131</sup> 'Editorials/Leaders', *The Times*, Issue 10511, 11 November 1818, p.2



Navy spent much of their time swapping stories and listening out for 'death-watches' - visible signs and eerie noises that were thought to announce impending death.<sup>132</sup>

These notions were often the result of a life spent at sea in the eighteenth century; forced to live at the mercy of the elements and separated from the familiar sights and sounds of home, seamen (both military and commercial) often placed their faith in providential omens which were thought to provide guidance in an uncertain world.<sup>133</sup> Ship-owners in Rhode Island and Massachusetts made regular use of astrologers, fortune-tellers and horoscopes to predict 'what day, hour and minute was fortunate for vessels to sail'<sup>134</sup> and ghosts were also considered useful signifiers in the quest for greater control and reassurance at sea. In 1674 *An Account of Two Voyages to New-England* related the vision of 'a flame... about the bigness of a great Candle' that appeared one night on board the *New Supply*. It was 'commonly thought to be a Spirit' by the ship's crew and if it appeared twice, they were sure that it did 'prognosticate safety' for those on board.<sup>135</sup>

Marcus Rediker has argued that seamen were a largely irreligious bunch with little time for the formal teachings of the Church of England. Their worldview, he claims, was a mixture of 'religion and irreligion, magic and materialism, superstition and self-help.'<sup>136</sup> Nonetheless, Rediker underestimates the informal religious associations of the seamen's 'superstitions' that he describes and which can be understood as part of a practical set of religious beliefs that intersected with the priorities of daily shipboard life. Seamen were clearly attracted by an overarching notion of God's providence, which was invoked particularly in times of danger. Jack Cremer noted that on one of his vessels, 'Prayers we had once a week if [the wind] blowed hard, if little winds, knone'.<sup>137</sup> For sailors and soldiers, as for many others, ghostly appearances offered tangible promises of an afterlife and confirmed the soul's immortality – two fundamental Christian precepts. Moreover, St. Elmo's fire –

<sup>132</sup> G.E. Manwaring (ed.), *The Diary of Henry Teonge* (London, 1927), p.169. When the crew of the *William Galley* saw an apparition in 1705, they concluded that it came to warn of the death of Mr. Nesbitt, who died the night following. F. Rogers, *The Journal of Francis Rogers* (London, 1936), pp.223-4.

<sup>133</sup> See C. Thomson, *The Autobiography of an Artisan* (London, 1847), p.148.

<sup>134</sup> Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion, Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge, 1992), p.232.

<sup>135</sup> J. Josselyn, *An Account of Two Voyages to New-England* (London, 1674), p.5.

<sup>136</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p.185.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, p.171.

a vision that could often be seen after a storm was variously interpreted by sailors as 'the fugitive soul of a dead comrade', 'as the embodiment of Christ' or as 'the Holy Spirit'.<sup>138</sup> This eclectic set of interpretations suggests that some eighteenth-century seamen instilled ghosts with an important, if somewhat confused, religious significance which loosely fitted with the Trinitarian ideals of the established Church.<sup>139</sup>

James Downing, a soldier who spent a considerable amount of time at sea at the turn of the nineteenth century, believed that sailors were particularly sensitive to the wonders of providence, 'For they can see the works of God/Shine forth in brighter rays/Than those that always stay at home/And never cross the seas'.<sup>140</sup> Life on board ship was dangerous and aside from the threat of disease, men fell overboard, were struck by lightning, drowned in tempests or died in battle. Downing saw a man topple overboard one night, and was affected so much to reflect, 'how fleeting is the life of man/how very soon he's hurl'd/though in the midst of health and strength/into another world!'<sup>141</sup> The ballad of *Admiral Hosier's Ghost* was published in 1740 and written by Richard Glover to commemorate the catastrophic Caribbean expedition of 1726 where 4000 men died out of a squadron numbering 4750.<sup>142</sup> No wonder then that Richard Badiley thought it impossible for sailors to avoid contemplating life after death, since survival was uncertain and there was 'but a plank' between them and a watery grave.<sup>143</sup> Ghost stories were particularly relevant to the lifestyles of sailors because they articulated a sense of helplessness and vulnerability to the elements, to divine providence and to the vagaries of fortune, whilst also representing an attempt to predict or impose some kind of meaningful pattern on the unpredictable destinies of these men.

The emotional stresses of life at sea also led to a higher incidence of ghosts than might normally be expected in the daily course of life, and sailors who suffered

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.181.

<sup>139</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity was fiercely defended by Anglican ministers such as Samuel Horsley against attacks from Unitarians like Joseph Priestley. See S. Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism: Political Rhetoric 1770-1814* (Basingstoke, 2003).

<sup>140</sup> James Downing, *A Narrative of the Life of James Downing (A Blind Man), Late a Private in his Majesty's 20<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot* (London, 1815), p.32.

<sup>141</sup> Downing, *Life of James Downing*, p.43.

<sup>142</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World, An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986), p.46, 53, 98.

<sup>143</sup> B. Capp, *Cromwell's Navy, The Fleet and the English Revolution 1648-1660* (Oxford, 1992), p.323.



prolonged separations from loved ones often claimed to have seen a ghost that came to announce a family death or to provide consolation thereafter. On a trading journey to Jamaica at the turn of the nineteenth century, James Butler was told by locals that an apparition had been lately seen when 'a tall lusty man seemed to fall down slain in the fury of the combat'. Butler immediately thought of his brother ('a tall proper man of stature') whom he had not heard from or seen in months, and sure enough, upon his return to England he discovered that his brother had lately died in battle.<sup>144</sup> Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a mariner posted to the West Indies was visited by his mother's ghost after she expressed a desire to speak to him on her deathbed. Her spirit appeared late one night while her son was at the helm of his ship and after talking to him, the ghost 'descended the side regularly to the water, where she seemed to float for a while, and at last sunk and wholly disappeared.' Suspecting this was some meaningful omen; the sailor recorded the time, day and the exact words of the ghost and found on his return to dry land that she had died at the very time her ghost had appeared to him. This unfortunate sailor was drowned at sea soon afterwards, provoking fresh rumours that his mother's ghost had appeared to prophesy his own death.<sup>145</sup> Complementing these narratives was the ballad of *Mary's Dream: or, Sandy's Ghost* (1790) in which sailor Sandy's ghost appeared to his sweetheart Mary to tell her that he had died and to say a final farewell.<sup>146</sup> The emotional traumas provoked by separation from family and friends appeared to be particularly intense amongst sailors and those that they left behind. In this context, ghost stories were important outlets for feelings of loss and bereavement, expressing the psychological pain of absence imposed by a life at sea or overseas. Following the death of a loved one, ghostly appearances were an important source of solace for the bereaved, often bringing an assurance of immortality and a final opportunity to say goodbye. Thus ghost stories were intimately connected to the personal experiences and lifestyles of commercial and military seamen.

Aside from the physical dangers and emotional traumas of a seafaring life, day-to-day activities on board ship provided many practical opportunities for storytelling. Restricted living space made habits of sociability a routine part of daily life; seamen drank, sang and 'spent endless hours telling tales'. Similar conditions on

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<sup>144</sup> W.H.D. Longstaffe (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Ambrose Barnes, Late Merchant and Sometime Alderman of Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Surtees Society, 1867), Volume L, pp.59-60.

<sup>145</sup> J. Tregortha, *News from the Invisible World*, p.345.



board French vessels lead historian David Hopkin to describe ships, as well as army barracks, artisan workshops and prisons as ‘nurseries of narrative talent’.<sup>147</sup> In these settings narrators were assured of a broad and captive audience and the empty passages of time on long trading journeys or between battles encouraged storytelling habits, which Hopkins described as a crucial form of ‘cultural capital’ whereby seamen could ingratiate themselves with fellow crew members.<sup>148</sup>

As a young boy in the late eighteenth century, Joseph Donaldson joined the crew of a cargo ship bound for the West Indies on which every night, instead of going below, the seamen ‘would gather in knots on the deck, and play at various games, or tell stories’.<sup>149</sup> The legend of the Flying Dutchman and ‘many other naval apparitions were talked of and descanted on with much gravity’ by the fascinated crew. British-owned vessels were staffed by sailors from Britain, Europe, North America, Africa and Asia and it was the narratives of a Swedish sailor that captivated Donaldson, who thought he had as large a collection of tales ‘as any person I ever knew: they were those of his country – mostly terrific – ghosts and men possessed of supernatural powers, were the heroes of his stories.’ These exciting chronicles clearly had an impact on the crew and when a strange gleam of light was seen through the darkness one night, accompanied by ‘a low murmuring sound’, whispers began that something preternatural was afoot, prompting the ship’s mate to complain that ‘there was a cursed deal too much of that ghost story-telling of late’.<sup>150</sup> In 1792 the author of a collection of ghost stories also suggested that exposure to dark nights and moonlight shadows produced visions at sea after the crew of a ship bound for New York described a visit by ‘a stately figure in white stalking along the deck’.<sup>151</sup> Similar conditions created the optical illusion of a ghost or apparition on board Samuel Oliver’s ship, the ‘Broot’ as she sailed back to Europe following a voyage to Antigua.<sup>152</sup>

<sup>146</sup> *Mary’s Dream: or, Sandy’s Ghost* (London, 1790).

<sup>147</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p.190. D.M. Hopkin, ‘Storytelling, fairytales and autobiography: some observations on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French soldiers’ and sailors’ memoirs’, *Social History*, Volume 29, No. 2 (May, 2004), p.187.

<sup>148</sup> Hopkin, *Social History*, p.187.

<sup>149</sup> J. Donaldson, *Recollections of an Eventful Life Chiefly Passed in the Army* (Glasgow, 1825), p.40.

<sup>150</sup> Donaldson later fought in Wellington’s army during the Peninsular War of 1808-1814.

Donaldson, *Recollections of an Eventful Life*, pp.42-3.

<sup>151</sup> *An Account of Some Imaginary Apparitions, The Effects of Fear or Fraud* (Dunbar, 1792), pp.7-9.

<sup>152</sup> *Britannic Magazine: or Entertaining Repository of Heroic Adventures* (London, 1793), p.279.



A vibrant oral culture also animated the routines of soldiers, many of whom were convinced of the activities of ghosts and spirits. In January 1804, *The Times* newspaper reported some eerie goings on from St. James's Park in London. Every night for more than a week, the ghost of a headless woman frightened soldiers from the 16<sup>th</sup> Company of the Coldstream Regiment who were on duty near the Royal Cockpit. This ghost had a set routine, always appearing between the hours of one and two o'clock in the morning, and the vision proved so terrifying to the soldiers that one unfortunate man who saw it (even though he was considered to be 'one of the most resolute men in the regiment'), was taken ill and removed to a nearby hospital, suffering from 'the effects of fright'. His comrades quickly heard of the affair and one soldier in particular was determined to confront the ghost on the haunted midnight watch. This intrepid veteran, who according to *The Times*, 'had often braved a cannon-ball' in the course of his long military career, was now 'panic-struck' as the ghost appeared and after scrambling back to the guard room, he 'fell into strong fits' and followed his friend to the hospital.<sup>153</sup> The regiment could talk of little else and rumours soon spread around the neighbourhood and a nearby clergyman resolved to patrol the park whilst a number of local women guessed that the ghost was probably that of a murdered Sergeant's wife, whose husband had cut off her head before throwing her remains into the river sixteen years earlier. Whatever the cause of this preternatural disturbance, it sent chills through the ranks and such was its effect that the officers of the regiment ordered an immediate investigation. Several men testified to having seen the ghost including George Jones, who declared on oath that he saw 'the figure of a woman, without a head'. Jones was later brought to testify before Sir Richard Ford at Bow Street where he confirmed 'that he firmly believed he had seen a ghost'.<sup>154</sup>

This well attested case was followed in October 1816 when *The Times* printed a case from Hull where a soldier claimed to receive regular visits from 'some airy thing, which generally assumes the form of a woman'. His attempts to run the ghost through with his bayonet had little effect and he was plagued with visits for more than three weeks.<sup>155</sup> In 1764, the ghost of a German soldier visited George

<sup>153</sup> 'Another Ghost', *The Times*, Issue 5918, January 13 1804, p.2.

<sup>154</sup> 'The St. James's Park Ghost', *The Times*, Issue 5920, January 16 1804, p.3.

<sup>155</sup> 'Another Ghost', *The Times*, Issue 9971, 21 October 1816, p.3.

Griffith of the Carmarthen Militia<sup>156</sup> and in 1824 the ghost of Captain Rogers was said to have appeared shortly after his death to expose his embezzling servants in Madras.<sup>157</sup>

Ghosts probably surfaced more regularly among soldiers for the same reasons that sailors so frequently reported these appearances. Fears of an early death were rife in military circles, and a career in the army represented an equally precarious lifestyle choice to that spent on board ship. At the close of the eighteenth century, James Downing and his fellow soldiers were regularly confronted by 'sudden deaths' but felt 'Kind providence protecting us' for every day they survived in the King's Regiment.<sup>158</sup> Richard Baxter was able to gather a number of edifying ghost stories from his days as an army chaplain<sup>159</sup> and after General Deane was slain by the Dutch in 1653, his colleague General Monk comforted himself with the thought that 'there are some good Spirits that watch for us, and warn us'.<sup>160</sup>

Many more besides must have protected themselves against the vagaries of battle by placing their faith in God and his providential protection.<sup>161</sup> It seemed moreover, that the established Church wished to promote the impression that God took special care of Britain's military men. *The Book of Common Prayer*, perhaps the most familiar and frequently thumbed text in print after the Bible, made provision for special prayers 'In the Time of War and Tumults' and it was in the revised edition of 1662 that a whole section entitled 'Forms of Prayer to be used at Sea' first became statutory.<sup>162</sup> Under King Charles II efforts were also made to improve the provision and quality of naval chaplains and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge intervened throughout the eighteenth century to provide appropriate books to satisfy and stimulate the spiritual reflections of the Fleet.<sup>163</sup> Prayers were

<sup>156</sup> E. Jones, *A Relation of Apparitions of Spirits in the Principality of Wales* (Trevecca, 1780), p.83.

<sup>157</sup> *The Times*, Issue 12463, 7 October 1824, p.3.

<sup>158</sup> Downing, *Life of James Downing*, p.84.

<sup>159</sup> R. Baxter, *The Certainty of the World of Spirits* (London, 1691).

<sup>160</sup> T. Gumble, *The Life of General Monck, Duke of Albemarle, &c. With Remarks upon his Actions* (London, 1671), p.60.

<sup>161</sup> Downing, *Life of James Downing*, p.44, 84.

<sup>162</sup> As Gordon Taylor notes, the 1662 provision for 'Forms of Prayer to be used at Sea' was partly an effort to compensate for the lack of naval chaplains at sea and it followed the publication by the Long Parliament of *A Supply of Prayer for the Ships of this Kingdom that want Ministers to pray with them* in 1646. The need for better provision of prayers and of chaplains at sea was recognised by Samuel Pepys in his role as Secretary of the Admiralty. G. Taylor, *The Sea Captains, A History of the Chaplains of the Royal Navy* (Oxford, 1978), pp.72-3, 91-93.

<sup>163</sup> Taylor, *The Sea Captains*, p.118.



designed for use in the event of storms, tempests and before battles and the tone conveyed was that of resignation to God's terrible 'works of wonder'. Prayers included supplications to admit God's faithful warriors into his providential protection and to preserve them 'from the dangers of the sea, and from the violence of the enemy'.<sup>164</sup> The extent to which these messages were absorbed may have varied considerably; nonetheless, it is significant that concerted attempts were being made in the long eighteenth century to teach people at home and in battle that God played an especially powerful role in the fortunes of military men. Their individual fate, and the collective fate of the nation, were intertwined and closely linked to a sense of providential destiny.

In military terms, this sense of fated destiny was especially pronounced with God seemingly affording protection (and ultimately victory) to his favoured Protestant nation against the resurgent threat of European Catholicism represented by intermittent war with Spain and France. Ghosts formed part of this complicated providential system of checks and balances; they were sent as benevolent messengers, who 'foreseeing future events', could give warning to those in danger on how best to 'defend themselves against their calamities'.<sup>165</sup> In 1692, this kind of apparition visited a sentry in the Royal Camp at Flanders to warn that 'The King, the King is to be made away, if care be not speedily taken'. The alarm concerned a French plot to murder King William that was subsequently exposed and foiled.<sup>166</sup> An account of the event was soon published in England after a gentleman in London received details of the affair in a letter from his friend, who was a Captain in the King's camp at that time. By contrast, avenging spirits could also appear on the field of battle and were determined to serve heaven's justice on the unfaithful. In this context, it would have made sense to contemporaries when the ghost of General Jasper Clayton was rumoured to have appeared at the Battle of Dettingen in 1743, warning an enemy soldier to renounce his Jacobite sympathies or face certain destruction.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>164</sup> 'Forms of Prayer to be Used at Sea' in *The Book of Common Prayer* (London, 1662).

<sup>165</sup> John Aubrey quoted in *The Compleat Wizzard*, p.271.

<sup>166</sup> *A True and Impartial Relation of a Wonderful Apparition That Happen'd in the Royal Camp in Flanders* (London, 1692), p.1.

<sup>167</sup> *The most strange, wonderful and surprising apparition of the ghost of General Clayton, which appeared to the Man, who wore the yellow Sash at the Battle of Dettingen.* (London, 1743) Sir John Temple's *The Irish Rebellion* was also reprinted in London in 1746 and included a number of



In the first half of the eighteenth century when the Jacobite threat appeared most threatening, stories of returning spirits offered sustenance in battle. Beyond these political fluctuations however, ghost stories were put to more consistent use as sources of consolation and emotional support to soldiers, sailors and sometimes to their families. A letter from Thomas Savage published in *The Long Pack, or the Mysterious Pedlar* (1817) told of the ghost of a murdered soldier who appeared to his wife and young son in Doncaster at the very moment that he died during an expedition to Minorca. Savage, who renounced his professed atheism and became 'convinced of the certainty of another world' as a result of this episode, reported that it had been the last wish of the soldier 'to see his wife and child' before he died.<sup>168</sup> Admiral Coates, Commander of a squadron in the East Indies 'saw the form of his wife standing at his bed-side', only to discover on his return home that she had died on the very day and at the precise time that her ghost had appeared.<sup>169</sup> As young officers in the army, a ghost visited Sir John Sherbroke and General Wynyard. Wynyard, who had received no word from his brother for some time, took it to be the spirit of his sibling and soon after discovered that he had indeed died 'on the day, and at the very hour on which the friends had seen his spirit pass so mysteriously through the apartment'.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, it appears that General Wynyard's story was not unique and may well have had wider resonance since the narrative was altered in subsequent retellings and ran through a number of versions, being alternately set in Gibraltar, in England and in America.<sup>171</sup> Visions of ghosts and spirits of the dead might well be interpreted as emotional manifestations of anxiety, absence and loss following enforced separation from well-loved friends and family or following death. These episodes can therefore be closely related to the kind of lifestyle demanded by a career in military service – an increasingly common experience as the eighteenth century wore on and as Britain's commercial and imperial interests reached unprecedented new heights.

The imposed lifestyles of soldiers and sailors may well have encouraged them to be more sensitive to the activities of wandering ghosts than other members of

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accounts where the apparitions of murdered Protestants returned to expose their Catholic murderers and be revenged upon them. J. Temple, *The Irish Rebellion* (London, 1746), p.100, 121, 122.

<sup>168</sup> J. Hogg, *The Long Pack, or the Mysterious Pedlar*, p.27.

<sup>169</sup> *The Scientific Magazine, and Freemasons' Repository*, Volume I (London, 1797), p.331.

<sup>170</sup> H. Welby, *Signs before Death, and Authenticated Apparitions: In One Hundred Narratives* (London, 1825), p.80.

<sup>171</sup> Welby, *Signs before Death*, p.81.



society, but it should not be assumed that ghost beliefs flourished exclusively in these contexts. First and foremost, the ghost stories that were recounted by soldiers and sailors were not invented but memorised from local traditions and legends that they brought with them from home, as David Hopkin argues, narrators 'cut their coat from the material they had to hand'.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, the stories of naval and military men were particularly well received by those back home who purchased these narratives with alacrity. Stories of ghosts and apparitions enjoyed a wide circulation and were exchanged at ports and in local alehouses where military men could often be found when on dry land.<sup>173</sup> Such was their popularity that David Hume wondered at the 'greediness' with which 'miraculous accounts of travellers [are] received'.<sup>174</sup> Reverend James Woodforde bonded with his servants over strong beer and punch in celebration of Nelson's success at the Nile in 1798 and as a boy, Samuel Bamford heard stories of 'shipwrecks and battles' from the inhabitants of a Manchester workhouse.<sup>175</sup> Bamford and his childhood friend Samuel Richardson were also fascinated by the adventures of *Robinson Crusoe*, and by 'descriptions of sea-dangers, shipwrecks, and lone islands with savages, and far-off countries teeming with riches and plenty'.<sup>176</sup> The promise of a glamorous and romantic life induced Sam to go to sea, where he later lost his life.

Published accounts of naval and military adventures made a lasting impact on eighteenth-century readers and proved to be a great commercial success in the marketplace of print. From the reign of William III, Firth noted 'a great increase in the number of naval ballads published, due to the increased interest which the nation took in maritime affairs.'<sup>177</sup> Born in 1721, Tobias Smollett became a surgeon's mate in the navy and later made a living from his novels, many of which were loosely based on his years at sea and included a number of ghosts.<sup>178</sup> In 1823 Sergeant Butler published his military autobiography, but only after he received encouragement from Reverend John Brown who thought the work 'useful to a very numerous class of readers, who, though disinclined to look into a book that bore a religious title, might be disposed to peruse the Narrative of a Soldier's Life and Travels...expecting to

<sup>172</sup> Hopkin, *Social History*, p.196.

<sup>173</sup> Downing, *Life of James Downing*, p.26.

<sup>174</sup> Hume, *Of Miracles*, p.35.

<sup>175</sup> Beresford, *The Diary of a Country Parson*, viii.

<sup>176</sup> Chaloner, *Autobiography of Samuel Bamford*, p.70, 94.

<sup>177</sup> C.H. Firth (ed.), *Naval Songs and Ballads* (Navy Records Society, London 1908), xliv.



find in it something novel and entertaining'.<sup>179</sup> Soldiers and sailors were imagined as popular heroes and their stories were consumed with unusual alacrity.

There is of course a danger in exaggerating the extent to which soldiers and sailors believed in ghosts given the growing public thirst for stories of war, travel and adventure that might skew the representative nature of the available sources. There were of course a number of men who paid little heed to such tales. Two soldiers who heard a ghost story at Aix-la-Chapelle remained 'bold and incredulous'<sup>180</sup> and sailor Francis Rogers claimed that he was not ready 'to credit the stories of apparitions'.<sup>181</sup> Nonetheless, historians can only work with the evidence that survives, and whilst it is crucial to pay attention to the complexities of individual belief, there clearly was a sense in which ghost beliefs were closely linked to the challenging lifestyles of military men. Moreover as Figure 7 suggests, sailors made up seven per cent of the percipients of ghosts in the sample examined, with soldiers represented an impressive thirteen per cent. By crediting the existence of ghosts and spirits, these occupational groups also help to explain the broad geographical spread of ghost stories in the eighteenth century, from coastal ports at Bridlington, Plymouth, Suffolk, Dorset, Liverpool and Newcastle to Ireland, Spain, the Netherlands, Jamaica and America (see Figure 6).<sup>182</sup>

So do these ghost stories actually tell us anything about real life at sea or in the army in eighteenth-century England, or did they simply feed the escapist fantasies of an avaricious market? The answer is probably a bit of both. As we have seen, the precarious lifestyles of soldiers and sailors may well have led them to be more receptive to ideas of an invisible world but this was by no means inevitable, with small minorities adopting a sceptical and/or atheist attitude towards God and the unseen realms.<sup>183</sup> For those who did profess to believe in ghosts however, the contexts in they were situated give important insights into the social realities of naval and military life and the everyday issues with which these men were concerned.

<sup>178</sup> See especially *Roderick Random* (London, 1748) and *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (London, 1751). Firth, *Naval Songs and Ballads*, lxxi.

<sup>179</sup> Butler, *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Serjeant Butler, Written by Himself* (Edinburgh, 1823), vii.

<sup>180</sup> *An Account of Some Imaginary Apparitions, The Effects of Fear or Fraud* (Dunbar, 1792), p.19.

<sup>181</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p.183.

<sup>182</sup> At Gosport, members of the Surrey Militia believed they saw the ghost of a Dutch sailor after they were ordered to dig up a former burial ground at Spithead. Francis Grose, *The Olio* (London, 1793), pp.268-272.

<sup>183</sup> Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, pp.306-7



### VIII Love, Courtship and Marriage

In his *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, David Hume complained that 'There is no kind of report which rises so easily, and spreads so quickly, especially in country places and provincial towns, as those concerning marriages'.<sup>184</sup> The intricacies of love, courtship and marital relations were at once intensely private affairs but also formed legitimate and popular subjects for public comment and gossip. As chapter two described, these stories spread both by word of mouth and through print.<sup>185</sup> The trials and tribulations of courtship and marital relations were experiences which most of the population could identify with at some time in their lives and the love affairs of soldiers and sailors made for particularly exciting reading. *The Plymouth Tragedy* told the woeful tale of a beautiful young woman who fell in love with John Hunt, a Captain in one of the Spanish regiments. When Hunt was stationed at Plymouth, his sweetheart fell pregnant but he comforted her with the promise that, 'We'll married be so don't lament', and to seal his vow he declared that, 'If ever I prove false to thee, Let Heavens Vengeance fall on me'. Despite these fine words however, Hunt *did* prove false and promptly abandoned the young woman who, in her unhappy state, sold herself to the Devil to be revenged upon him. She stabbed herself to death and vowed that her spirit would not rest until Captain Hunt had been made to pay for his inconstancy. Her 'dismal Ghost' appeared before him and his regiment, and she brought with her such a violent storm that it threatened to sink the ship on which they sailed. Finally, the ghost demanded that Hunt settle his debt, declaring that 'for your cruel Perjury, Your soul along with me must lie' whereupon she dragged him into the sea, never to be seen again.<sup>186</sup> Elements of this story were fantastical but they had some basis in reality and the familiar pattern of love, betrayal and revenge was repeated time and time again in similar accounts with slight variations of character and location. 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

<sup>184</sup> Hume, *Of Miracles*, p.37.

<sup>185</sup> A. McShane Jones, 'Roaring Royalists and Ranting Brewers: The Politicisation of Drink and Drunkenness in Political Broadside Ballads from 1640 to 1689', in A. Smyth (ed), *A Pleasing Sinne -- Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), p.70.

night with babe in arms, vowing to haunt her murderer until she was revenged.<sup>187</sup> *The Plymouth Tragedy* and *Nancy's Ghost* were part of a series of tales that sought to titillate but also to regulate the often-lax morality of soldiers and sailors – particularly where affairs of the heart were concerned. As Nicholas Rodger and Bernard Capp have asserted, these narratives connected with the realities of military life with most sailors in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries aged 25 or under, unmarried, and with little difficulty attracting members of the opposite sex. Vibrant sexual activity helped to sustain consistently high levels of venereal disease among these occupational groups.<sup>188</sup> Even those that did marry were often casual about the bond, adopting an opportunistic attitude to sex when on dry land. Prolonged separations between sweethearts or between husbands and wives put extra pressure on these fragile affairs and temptations to stray were all too often the cause of relationship breakdown.

As I argued in chapter two, ghosts slotted neatly into social commentaries about the abuse of courtship rituals and marital relations because they had a reputation for righting wrongs and upholding principles of social justice. Chapters two and three revealed how women frequently manipulated ghost stories to assert authority and control and these narratives were particularly convenient in entanglements of the heart that had turned sour and where no formal penalty was available to punish inconstant lovers. Moreover, as Hay and Rogers have shown, custom and expectation largely regulated traditional courtship rituals among the labouring classes. Couples met at public events where love-tokens were exchanged before they went 'bundling' – a form of sex-play without full intercourse taking place.<sup>189</sup> As Hay and Rogers note, if one partner transgressed the accepted boundaries of these rituals then the resentment of the local community was likely to be aroused. *The Plymouth Tragedy* can thus be interpreted as a commonplace and publicly sanctioned expression of both individual and communal anger at Captain Hunt's abandonment, forcing his pregnant fiancée to rely on the parish for financial support.

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<sup>186</sup> *The Plymouth tragedy. Being a full and particular account of the strange and wonderful appearing of the ghost of Madam E Johnson* (London, 1770).

<sup>187</sup> *Nancy's Ghost* (Newcastle, 1774 & 1825).

<sup>188</sup> Rodger, *Wooden World*, p.78, 80. Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, p.245.

<sup>189</sup> D. Hay and N. Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society, Shuttles and Swords* (Oxford, 1997), p.47.



With the threat of illegitimate pregnancy and social disgrace ever present, women were more physically, economically and socially vulnerable than men when romantic liaisons broke down. Nonetheless, legal redress for the abuse of courtship practices and marital misbehaviour was largely out of reach, even for women from wealthy backgrounds.<sup>190</sup> Cheating men were rarely subjected to formal punishment but a range of informal means of revenge were devised and put into practice - a cleverly crafted ghost story could be an effective method of retribution for the scorned lover. The romantic liaisons of soldiers and sailors were numerous and flimsy, so it is no surprise that a good number of ghosts appeared to reprove these men in particular for their inconstancy. Nevertheless, these narratives had a broader applicability and a range of occupational groups was represented in similar accounts from butchers, linen-drapers, knights, and farmers to servants and shoemakers. Many of these narratives, like the *Dorset-shire Tragedy* for example, were straightforward lamentations for the loss or betrayal of a lover, with frequent visions of a 'bleeding Ghost' appearing to torment the conscience of the guilty partner.<sup>191</sup> However, a number of these stories were more empowering and involved a deliberate attempt to impose this-worldly judgment on the offender without waiting for heavenly powers to intervene.

Public exposure was the most popular, and probably the most effective means of punishing men for breach of vow, and in 1745, a contribution to *The Female Spectator* showed that this method was employed by women from a variety of social backgrounds.<sup>192</sup> A narrative entitled 'The Lady's Revenge' purported to be a true and 'recent Transaction' and was sent in by 'Elismonda', a subscriber to the magazine from Kensington in London. 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 regain her pride and indulge her powerful 'Sense of Resentment', the lady faked her own suicide and appeared before her former lover one evening, 'dress'd all in white' and called out his name. Haunted by his own

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<sup>190</sup> J. Bailey, *Unquiet Lives, Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England 1660-1800* (Cambridge, 2003), p.24. Capp notes a series of informal strategies employed by women to bring lovers and husbands into line or to punish their misdeeds, Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, especially chapter two.

<sup>191</sup> See for example *The Dorset-shire Tragedy: or, a Shepherd's Daughter's Death and Distruction by a false Steward, her Fellow-servant, and likewise ended his own Days in desperate Despair* (London, 1680).



guilty conscience, the Gentleman was sure that it was 'no other than her Ghost' returned from the dead to claim her pound of flesh. This gentleman fell into a delirium, talking 'of nothing but Ghosts and Death' and he refused to sleep alone; afraid that heaven's justice would come and claim him. Hearing of his sorry state, the Lady was extremely diverted and 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 gentleman thus suffered a double shaming, exposed as a cheater and a coward, but also as a superstitious fool who was thenceforth 'ridiculed by his Acquaintance' whenever he went into company. The editor of the *Female Spectator* clearly approved of this course of action, recommending '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'.<sup>194</sup> This ghost served a similar expository purpose to that of Mary Veal, and represented an important outlet for expressions of personal and public dissatisfaction.

As John Tregortha noted in 1808, expectations of heavenly intervention to regulate social mores was a concept that was instilled from infancy, widely suffused and reinforced by scriptural precedent; the Book of Job taught that 'God oftentimes calls man to repentance by visions and dreams'.<sup>195</sup> In 1762, *The Beauties of all the Magazines Selected* confirmed the well-established duty of ghosts to safeguard love affairs, since these appearances were useful 'to prevent maids meeting men in the dark'.<sup>196</sup> The roguish Colonel Gardiner was prevented from visiting a lady in her bedchamber when he saw an apparition reproving him for his loose morality and Daniel Defoe's *View of the Invisible World* told the story of two young lovers whose secret assignations were thwarted after the lady came face to face with the ghost of the local clergyman on her way to an illicit sexual liaison.<sup>197</sup> The heavenly regulation of sexual relations was also an expectation that was inscribed in *Christmas Entertainments* (1740) and *Round About Our Coal Fire* (1734, 1796). Both texts advised that a young maiden should never forsake her sweetheart for she knew very

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<sup>193</sup> Margaret Spufford argues that love narratives were socially inclusive and enjoyed widespread popularity, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, p.140-3. Public shaming rituals such as skimmingtons, duckings and the pillory also formed part of the cultural fabric of this period.

<sup>194</sup> *The Female Spectator*, Book XIV, pp.155-177.

<sup>195</sup> Tregortha, *News from the Invisible World*, iii.

<sup>196</sup> *The Beauties of all the Magazines Selected*, Volume I, 1762, p.12.

<sup>197</sup> *The History of Witches, Ghosts, and Highland Seers* (Berwick, 1775), pp.79-80. D. Defoe, *A View of the Invisible World*, p.156.



well 'the direful Horrors she must be subject to, from the hauntings of Ghosts and Spectres, whenever she happens to be alone after Candlelight'.<sup>197</sup> For the author of these collections, the prospect of 'a ghastly Figure in a Winding-sheet, with a lighted Taper in one Hand, and a bloody Dagger in the other, crying out for Revenge' was sufficient 'to frighten the stoutest Man that ever wore an Head, and much more Women, who are made of such tender stuff.'<sup>198</sup>

It is highly significant that vengeful ghosts were thought to appear to both men *and* women. The apparent gendering of the complaint literature about ghosts must then be qualified since the central emphasis of these narratives was on breach of vow, rather than on an exclusively male tendency to forsake women. Although women had more to lose from these illicit liaisons in terms of physical repercussions and damaged reputation, it seems that the emotional sense of betrayal also weighed heavily on men. *A Warning for Married Women* related the story of Jane Renalds, who lived near Plymouth and secretly agreed to marry a seaman named James Harris. Harris was forced to go to sea and Renalds pledged to wait for him, but after three long years she received news of his death and agreed to marry a local carpenter instead. Harris's ghost however, appeared before his former mistress four years later to claim her as his own.<sup>199</sup> A ghost appeared to punish Susana Lynard in *The Leicester-shire Tragedy* after she slighted the attentions of a yeoman's son and in a slight variation on this theme, *The Suffolk Miracle* condemned parents who meddled in the love affairs of their children. This ballad told of a young man who died for love after he was separated from the daughter of a wealthy farmer due to his meagre fortune; his ghost later returned to claim her as his own. This narrative may well have been a product of growing concerns to prevent elopements and inappropriate marriages that eventually resulted in the Clandestine Marriage Act of 1753.<sup>200</sup>

In ballads, chapbooks and contemporary literature, ghosts were essential plot devices and, although sensationalised, their appearances were loosely based on real life experiences and linked up to contemporary expectations about the meanings of preternatural intervention. Joanna Bailey rightly warns against accepting this kind of literature as a direct representation of social reality, since sermons, pamphlets and

<sup>197</sup> *Christmas Entertainments*, p.46.

<sup>198</sup> *Christmas Entertainments*, p.46.

<sup>199</sup> *A Warning for Married Women* (London, 1650).

ballads often 'promoted an idealised view of harmonious relations between spouses'.<sup>201</sup> However, this is emphatically not the case in texts featuring ghosts, since these narratives express general discontent and frustration rather than conjugal felicity. Nonetheless, Bailey is right to suggest that love and affection were important factors in a successful relationship in this period. Despite the unhappy endings of some unions, love and courtship narratives suggest that both men and women at least started off with a shared set of expectations and ideals. Moreover, the regular appearances of ghosts in these stories of loss and betrayal dramatise the intense emotional suffering caused by the disappointment of these expectations for both men and women.

### Conclusion

In William Lovett's autobiography, first published in 1876, the author referred to ghostly superstitions as 'the curse of my boyhood'.<sup>202</sup> Born on 8 May 1800, Lovett lived through a period of rapid social change, and after moving to London in 1821 he became an important figure in campaigns to improve the social and political condition of the working classes. Lovett, along with a number of his contemporaries, recognised that a sound education held the key to long-term social change and throughout his life he worked for the reform of infant, primary and secondary education as well as for establishing circulating libraries, employing educational 'missionaries' and writing a number of school textbooks. There was no place for ghost beliefs or ghost stories in Lovett's project since the category of 'superstition' had by now taken on largely negative social and political connotations. Described by Adam Smith in 1776 as a social poison<sup>203</sup> and cited as evidence for the inferiority of the vulgar classes, it is little wonder that Lovett was so keen to exorcise spirits from the minds of his peers. Nonetheless, Lovett's avowed scepticism was out of step with the credulity of his native townspeople, and he was forced to acknowledge that the belief they entertained about ghosts was borne out of conviction rather than ignorance. When he revisited his hometown of Newlyn in Cornwall as an adult, Lovett was reminded of the reverence with which these creatures were regarded; the

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<sup>200</sup> See Hay & Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*, p.37.

<sup>201</sup> J. Bailey, *Unquiet Lives*, p.9.

<sup>202</sup> *Life and Struggles*, p.11.

<sup>203</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Volume II (London, 1778), p.386.



local baker reprimanded him for laughing at reports of a headless ghost that was thought to be haunting the neighbourhood. He told Lovett that if he did not believe in ghosts then he certainly 'could not believe the Bible', going on to cite the story of the Witch of Endor as scriptural justification for his convictions.

By the 1870s Lovett was forced to admit that 'notwithstanding the progress of knowledge among our people, by means of the press, the school, and the rail, the belief in ghosts is still widely entertained'.<sup>204</sup> His reflections neatly encapsulate the key arguments of this chapter; firstly, that empire, commerce, proto-industry and the press - the so-called agents of modernisation - did not preclude belief in ghosts but instead provided new channels for these ideas to spread on both a national and international scale. Secondly, that ghost stories were closely connected to the activities and experiences of everyday life; embedded in contemporary working patterns, in the life-cycle structures of eighteenth-century society and sustained by strong local traditions.

As we have seen, the countryside played host to a vast array of ghost stories, which were often connected to features of the local landscape. Nonetheless, the dichotomy of rural superstition and urban disbelief does not stand up to closer analysis. London and its hinterland provide the densest concentration of ghost sightings in the sample examined, and a pattern which is hardly surprising since towns and cities, and especially London represented hubs of economic and social activity. The capital was a melting pot, made up of people from a variety of national, regional, social, religious and occupational backgrounds, all of whom were densely compacted in the city, swapping gossip and sharing experiences during the working day or after hours in the local tavern. What is more, towns and cities played a greater role in disseminating ghost stories via the numerous printing presses established in these areas. Ghost stories flowed in and out of oral and print cultures and the legitimacy of ghost beliefs was further sustained by the commercial ethos of many publishers, since tales of their appearance attracted debate, conversation and profit. Ghost stories therefore achieved a much wider circulation than the expensive tracts of enlightenment thinkers.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> *Life and Struggles*, p.11.

<sup>205</sup> Norman Hampson argues that 'few men had the means or leisure to keep up to date with the latest works', being put off by the high cost of books and by the opposition of the Church. N. Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (London, 1990), p.132.

Choice of occupation played a role in determining both the relevance and circulation of ghost stories among certain groups. As we have seen, preternatural tales smoothed the course of agricultural work and spread with patterns of seasonal migration from region to region. The cottage industry also provided plentiful opportunity for storytelling with women and children working in close quarters and swapping tales to relieve their labour and to teach moral lessons. If storytelling was one expression of E.P. Thompson's 'plebeian culture', then the interaction of oral narratives with printed texts must be recognised; these narrative habits were not independent, but were encouraged by the marketplace of cheap print and by the special working conditions of proto-industry.<sup>206</sup> These forms of production were however transitional; when communal working patterns became less common features of the labour market; spaces for storytelling may have diminished, threatened by the spread of regimented factory work and the introduction of noisy machinery. Nonetheless, the decline of this semi-independent plebeian way of life should not be overstated in the eighteenth century, since the shift to wage labour and factory production was patchy with many sectors (for example in spinning) combining customary and technologically advanced forms of production well into the nineteenth century.

To some extent then, agricultural work and the cottage industry were in decline towards the close of the eighteenth century, but Britain's imperial and commercial interests certainly were not. The importation of ghost stories from overseas is an important development of this period, with sightings reported from Europe, America and the West Indies to name just a few. Growing overseas commitments demanded larger armies and navies and provided fresh spaces for the verbal narratives of soldiers and sailors, which often contained tales of ghosts and apparitions. Moreover, the prospect of sudden death in battle provided an important legitimating framework to support ghostly appearances and these narratives were well received in the marketplace of cheap print.

Tales of soldiers and sailors 'allowed the expression of psychological complexity'<sup>207</sup> and the appearances of ghosts in accounts of failed love affairs give rare insights into the emotional lives of these fighting men. Ghost sightings

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<sup>206</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991).

<sup>207</sup> C. Steedman, *The Radical Soldiers Tale, John Pearman, 1819-1908* (London, 1988), p.17.



expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness among soldiers and sailors, as well as intense emotion at the passing of a spouse or family member. The feminisation of ghost beliefs and ghost stories by both contemporaries and historians must then be challenged. Men exploited these narratives to express inner turmoil and to promote sanctions against inconstant lovers, while for many female narrators, ghost stories served very practical purposes, assisting in the burdens of childcare and in the primary education of the young.

By looking in the right places then, the status of ghost beliefs seems less a picture of decline than of flexibility, adaptation and changing contexts. In many ways the production and consumption of ghost stories both accompanied and assisted the new challenges of eighteenth-century life – transitional economic change, the rapid growth of overseas commitments and more regular contact with the wider British world. All of these processes created fresh spaces for the dissemination and reproduction of ghost stories.

## Conclusion

Academic study of eighteenth-century ghost beliefs has been dominated by the folkloric tradition, which has portrayed such beliefs as mere 'curiosities', and as unfathomable anomalies within the most economically and culturally sophisticated nation in the world.<sup>1</sup> What I have shown in this thesis, however, is that ghost beliefs were entirely congruent with the dominant themes and discourses of everyday life and thought. Ghost stories have been understood here as complex expressions of ghost beliefs and by reconstructing the material and imaginative contexts in which ghost stories were produced, distributed and consumed, it is clear that these narratives were firmly grounded in the specific social, political, religious and economic realities of the period from 1660 to 1800.

What is more, ghost beliefs have interesting things to say about eighteenth-century life and thought. These narratives highlight the patchy progress of enlightenment philosophies and the contestation of cycles of desacralisation. In fact, taken as a whole, the preoccupations, fears and anxieties inscribed in ghost stories paint a very different picture of eighteenth-century life from the story often related by historians. Despite the apparent optimism invested in human capabilities by proponents of natural philosophy, conjecture about the nature and meanings of ghosts emphasised manifold insecurities about the fragility of the human condition, the threat posed by the mysteries of God and nature, and concerns about what lay in store beyond the grave. Envisaged as the 'dark side' of the age of reason, historians have paid too little attention to mortuary culture, to the eschatological vocabulary of the Church and nonconformist groups, to periodic revivals of apocalyptic feeling and

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<sup>1</sup> *An Historical Miscellany of the Curiosities and Rarities in Nature and Art* (London, 1794), pp.250-251; W. Gordon, *Every young man's companion* (London, 1765); J. Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (Newcastle, 1777), p.54. P.H. Ditchfield, *Old English Customs extant at the Present Time* (London, 1896), preface.



to the historical significance of Romanticism, which represented important expressions of disapproval about the 'rational' progress of man and society.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the idea that a commitment to empirical enquiry precluded belief in an invisible realm of spirits is a misapprehension. The binary opposition set up between 'science' and 'superstition' – both woefully inadequate descriptors - is a historical construct that requires more careful qualification. These amorphous categories were not coherent systems of belief; people could and did draw on elements of both to form a workable cultural hybridity that blended the idea of ghosts with new trends in empirical thinking.

In order to understand why people believed in ghosts in eighteenth-century England, it is imperative to shift the focus away from dry philosophical conjectures that used logic to assess the possibility that dead souls could return to earth. For most people, this dispassionate vacuum was far removed from the contexts in which they most regularly encountered ghosts and the stories in which they were described. This thesis has reconstructed the processes whereby ghost beliefs were transmitted and brought to life in the minds of ordinary men and women. The techniques used to tell ghost stories, both verbal and textual, have therefore been key to this thesis. Persuasive linguistic techniques and physical gestures provided a dynamic and convincing quality to ghost stories transmitted by word of mouth and the inclusion of dialogue, imagery and credible circumstantial detail in textual performances were all designed to secure the attention and confidence of readers. The act of storytelling was itself a performance and must be recognised as a key historical resource.

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<sup>2</sup> Important exceptions to this historical neglect include P. Backscheider, *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore, 1993), esp. pp.149-233. J.B. Monleon, *A Specter is Haunting Europe: a Sociological Approach to the Fantastic* (Princeton, 1990). C. Schmitt, *Alien Nation: Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fictions and English Nationality* (Philadelphia, 1997). D.J. Skal, *The Monster Show: a Cultural History of Horror* (New York, 1993). J. Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre, and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832* (Cambridge, 1999).

Given the pioneering analysis of folktales by historians of France Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier, the relative neglect of folktales by scholars of eighteenth-century England is surprising.<sup>3</sup> This gap in the historical literature of this period is all the more marked given the potential of these narratives to grant access to people who are often absent from the historical record. The ghost stories included in this thesis have recorded the voices of domestic servants, women, working men and children, who used them to make sense of their own lives and experiences. I have argued, moreover, that ghost stories provided a way for these socially and economically marginalized groups to influence their social superiors and to shape the contours of the society in which they lived. When set in their original context ghost stories were both affective and effective narratives, manifestations of emotional attachments to the dead and to a sense of personal immortality, but also rational strategies used to achieve very practical objectives. Ghost stories must be understood as narratives of legitimisation, used to express and enforce non-codified customary expectations of acceptable social conduct; as such they surely deserve a place in Edward Thompson's 'moral economy'.<sup>4</sup>

The customary expectations of when, where and why ghosts appeared were however far from static. The exposure of secret murderers and immoral cheats was a fairly traditional usage of ghost stories throughout the early modern period, but the ghosts of eighteenth-century England also mirrored the shifting concerns and characteristics of the society that produced them. These tales had an intimate connection with domestic priorities, highlighting changing expectations of courtship and marital relations, protesting against crimes of usury and against the material excesses of an increasingly consumer-oriented society. By focusing on the kinds of

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<sup>3</sup> N.Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987); R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1984); R. Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, translated L.G. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1993).



people who told ghost stories and the reasons for this narration, the notion of the 'old wives tale' has been given firm historical context and has been offset by the numbers of men who engaged with these beliefs and who used ghost stories to express their own emotions – often for very specific reasons. As I argued in the final chapter, ghost beliefs deserve more than a footnote in the early phases of proto-industry and in processes of imperial expansion, for they helped to ease these difficult passages of economic and cultural transition. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the role that ghost beliefs played in more advanced industrial centres in the later nineteenth century, but the preliminary research of Karl Bell suggests that these beliefs assumed new and important meanings in such settings.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst this analysis of ghost stories adds depth to histories of the marginalized and dispossessed, I have also described a more inclusive and less antagonistic definition of eighteenth-century culture than that envisaged by either Peter Burke or Edward Thompson.<sup>6</sup> Whilst taking into account the critical scorn that was periodically directed towards ghost stories, I have emphasised the importance of these tales in encouraging social interaction, nuancing simplistic divisions of public and private spheres of action. Authors, printers and publishers catered for diverse audiences and I have consistently emphasised points of exchange and overlap in form and content between expensive canonical texts that featured ghost stories and the ephemeral products available at the cheaper end of the print market. Ghost stories catered for readers from different social, economic and confessional backgrounds and for a variety of age groups. As such, these narratives invalidate a neat model of cultural seepage, whereby enlightened principles were progressively passed down the social hierarchy, eroding the legitimacy of ghost beliefs. Such a model has been

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Bell, *Hex and the City: Magic and Urbanisation, c.1780-1830* (Unpublished Paper, University of East Anglia, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978); Thompson, *Customs in Common*, see especially introduction.

replaced here by a messy hotchpotch of ideas that combined innovative 'scientific' concepts with folkloric customs, proverbial wisdom, official prescription and unofficial religious idioms.

Eighteenth-century ghost beliefs were thus fluid and contested; they emphasised the cultural tensions of the age but also acknowledged points of overlapping interest, and an enduring fascination with the nature of life after death and the post-mortem fate of the individual. These years witnessed a significant burgeoning in the material culture of death and ghost stories deserve a place alongside the elaborate tombs, eulogies and funereal ephemera that were dedicated to sanctifying the memory of the dead.<sup>7</sup> As Peter Marshall has argued, this commemorative urge formed an important expression of historical subjectivity, maintaining crucial links with the past.<sup>8</sup> Ghost stories must then be situated within a history of memory since they formed essential expressions of individual and communal identity, preserving the histories of particular families, communities and localities. These expressions may well have assumed greater significance as economic change led to increased patterns of labour migration and threatened to dissolve geographical and familial associations.

Nevertheless, people found new ways to indulge an interest with death and with those that had passed beyond the grave and the years 1660 to 1800 saw ghost stories diversify in both form and content. Particularly significant was the greater extension of ghost narratives into fictional spaces where new emphasis on the aesthetic value of the imagination invested ghost stories with an important role in developing notions of the sublime, romanticism and interiority. The novels of Sir Walter Scott, ethereal poetry and gothic fictions provided fresh vehicles for contemplating ghost stories, simultaneously inciting and assuaging the terrors and

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller description see N. Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual c.1500-c.1800* (London, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002), p.315.



uncertainties of death but from a safe distance that did not offend the prevailing canons of taste and politeness. At the cheap end of the market the early nineteenth century was also the golden age of the 'penny dreadfuls' in England. Derived from the romantic horrors of gothic fictions, these were a series of cheap magazines that according to E.S. Turner were 'steeped in darkness and diablerie', regularly featuring 'spectres gliding in a green phosphorescence'.<sup>9</sup> The appeal of this low-priced literature was especially noted among the younger generations, and the penny dreadfuls became the latest in a long line of mediums through which ghost stories were accessed and whereby they shaped the beliefs and attitudes of a new generation of readers.

The displacement or abjection of ghost stories is key to understanding the ambiguous quality of fictional ghost stories and their potential to dramatise real events and emotions. The same concept resurfaced in a number of travel narratives from the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that voyeuristically indulged readers' fascination with preternatural phenomena, whilst safely locating such beliefs among unsophisticated foreigners and colonial subjects. In May 1818 *The Times* published extracts from the journal of Hans Egede Saabye, a Minister in the Danish colony of Greenland. Eager to emphasise similarities between native Greenlanders and British nationals within a broad Christian framework, Saabye focused on the Greenlanders belief in 'the immortality of the Soul' and the notion that the soul was 'of the nature of a spirit; but it has something material about it; something delicate and soft, which may be felt'. As Saabye went on to explain, this dualistic notion of the soul legitimated belief in 'Apparitions and ghosts' and authorised the common practice of binding dead men's legs to prevent their souls returning to earth.<sup>10</sup> The author of *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels* presented a similar

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<sup>9</sup> E.S. Turner, *Boys Will be Boys, The Story of Sweeney Todd, Deadwood Dick, Sexton Blake, Billy Bunter, Dick Barton et al* (London, 1948), p.21.

<sup>10</sup> 'Religion and Superstition of the Greenlanders', *The Times*, Issue 10353, 11 May 1818, p.3.

narrative, attempting to defend the religious integrity of the 'Whidah Blacks' by describing how they had 'a faint Idea of a true God' along with 'a Sort of Notion of Hell, Devil, and the Apparition of Spirits'.<sup>11</sup> These authors clearly expected readers to connect with these familiar concepts, and to take vicarious pleasure in reading accounts of ghosts, if not in the crude and unrefined ways in which they were expressed.<sup>12</sup> It is notable that these travel narratives incited much less comment and objection than the ghost stories that continued to flourish closer to home. The infamous case of the Hammersmith Ghost featured in the final chapter was satirised in *The Times* on Friday January 13, 1804 and in 1825 the newspaper also took care to discredit a ghost that was sighted in a churchyard near Blackfriars Road in London by suggesting that the appearance was caused by 'the reflection of the moonbeams upon a white headstone'.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding the vehement and genuine disavowal of some commentators that the ghosts of the dead could appear amongst the living, it was often a matter of taste rather than conviction that dictated public indictments of ghost beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

By focusing on the physical production, distribution and consumption of ghost stories, I have demonstrated the circularity of influences that ghost stories sustained between oral and printed cultures, between men and women of different social, geographical and confessional backgrounds and between different age groups. The massive expansion of the print trade and the diverse products that it churned out ensured that the eighteenth century was particularly well equipped to ensure the swift

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<sup>11</sup> *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels*, Volume III (London, 1743-47), chapter five.

<sup>12</sup> Similar parallels were drawn in *An Account of the Late Wonderful American Vision* (London, 1791), pp.10-13 and in a ghost story from Camden, South Carolina that was published in *The Times* on 2 December 1803, Issue 5882, p.3. See also 'Ghosts and Sorceresses of India', *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal*, Volume 20 (Edinburgh, 1853).

<sup>13</sup> 'Another Ghost', *The Times*, Issue 5918, Friday 13 January 1804, p.2. 'Will of the Late Lord Radstock', *The Times*, Issue 12766, 23 September 1825, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> See also *Ghost-Stories; Collected with a Particular View to Counteract the Vulgar Belief in Ghosts and Apparitions and to Promote a Rational Estimate of the Nature of Phenomena* (London, 1823); J. Taylor, *Apparitions; Or, The Mystery of Ghosts, Hobgoblins, and Haunted Houses Developed* (London, 1815).



and effective distribution of ghost stories across wide geographical spaces. Moreover, the vitality and diffusion of ghost stories was reinforced by robust habits of verbal storytelling, supported by a new set of labour relations and by the physical processes of imperial expansion. Opportunities certainly existed for the plentiful distribution of ghost stories, and the promise of great profit provided sufficient motivation for commercially minded authors, printers and publishers to recycle these tales and to compile them into new miscellaneous and serialised collections that proliferated in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> However, the diverse and novel publications in which these narratives surfaced, the specialised and costly production, illustration and serialisation of these tales necessarily implied an audience who were thirsty to read about the latest intrusions from the invisible world of spirits.

Readers invested texts with particular and differentiated meanings and some of them may well have enjoyed ghost stories as titillation, as laughter inducing tales that served as amusing after-dinner anecdotes or as mere entertainment. However, from the analysis undertaken in this thesis, it is clear that this was by no means a universal attitude. A great number of ghost stories were firmly anchored in the moralistic rhetoric of religious reformers and they were constructed as part of contemporary mortuary culture in such a way that readers could hardly fail to understand the more solemn meanings inscribed in these texts. Indeed as Joseph Taylor recognised in 1815, 'having read many books in favour of Ghosts and Spectral Appearances, the recollection remained so strong in my mind, that, for *years* after, the dread of phantoms bore irresistible sway.'<sup>16</sup> Taylor acknowledged the unique power of the printed word to influence the mores, behaviour and beliefs of

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<sup>15</sup> See for example J. Tregortha, *News From the Invisible World* (Burslem, 1808); E. Jones, *A Relation of Apparitions in the Principality of Wales* (Trevecca, 1780); *Round About Our Coal Fire*, Printed by H. Fenwick (London, 1796).

<sup>16</sup> J. Taylor, *Apparitions; or, the Mystery of Ghosts*, v.

readers and when he later became convinced of the folly of his own youthful beliefs, he used the medium of print as the most effective medium to decry the legitimacy of ghost stories.

Shifting cultural priorities had a significant and sometimes-corrosive impact on attitudes towards ghosts and this was most evident in rigidly materialistic strands of enlightenment thought and among rational religious dissenters. Nonetheless, I have shown how practitioners of natural philosophy were not uniformly hostile to the idea that the spirits of the dead could, in some circumstances, revisit the living. New techniques in optical research and psychological explorations of the nervous system rationalised the volume of ghost stories that were publicly accepted as fact and imposed more stringent demands for the empirical verification of these narratives. But the possibility that ghosts could revisit their former habitations was not rejected outright, and it is fair to say that the configuration of these phenomena as legitimate subjects of philosophical enquiry gave important succour to experimental pursuits and opened up new avenues of enquiry. Indeed as Alex Owen has argued, the Spiritualist movement of nineteenth-century England was the product of an uneasy but workable marriage between scientific naturalism and a commitment to a vibrant world of spirits. Many believers strove for scientific proof of the survival of the spirit after death, exhibiting a desire similar to that of eighteenth-century Romantics who were anxious to balance the 'gross materialism' of the age with contemplations of a higher spiritual order.<sup>17</sup>

Between the close of the eighteenth century and the heyday of Spiritualist séances in the 1860s and 1870s, the balance of power between the living and the dead had shifted firmly in favour of the latter. Whilst the ghost stories of eighteenth-century England had a more firmly entrenched domestic purpose than their sixteenth

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<sup>17</sup> A. Owen, *The Darkened Room, Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London, 1989), introduction. See also J. Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1985).



and seventeenth-century predecessors, they were still conceived within a religious and sometimes providential framework, although the sense of the term 'providence' more often referred to a 'divine superintendence' and had acquired both secular and commercial meanings by the early nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, as the evangelical texts of John Wesley attest, the mysteries of God still remained sufficiently obscure to allow the dead to appear of their own volition in the service of divine authority. However, the late nineteenth-century séance stripped the dead of independent agency. Contact with the spirit world was now subject to strict rules of conduct, with spirits at the beck and call of mediums who invoked and orchestrated their appearances. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to trace the processes by which this shift took place, but this forward glance is helpful in situating the years 1660-1800 as a period of increasing struggle between the worlds of the living and the dead. Optimistic about human progress and attempting to satisfy a constant thirst for knowledge, enlightened philosophers toiled hard to achieve mastery of the preternatural world, but ghosts remained irritatingly resistant to intellectual domination and categorisation. Moreover, such efforts often offended the mores of clergymen and devout laypeople who regarded such intrusions into holy mysteries as extreme arrogance if not as a form of heresy.

Indeed, I have demonstrated throughout this thesis that the non-secular character of ghost beliefs must not be understated. I have consistently emphasised the links between ghost stories and the priorities of Anglican and Methodist clerics who periodically buoyed the public and private legitimacy of these narratives in sermons and in print. But more significant than this are the complex but identifiable connections between ghost beliefs and the confessional identities of laypeople. For some, the concept of small-scale quotidian providences shaded ghostly appearances

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<sup>18</sup> S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Volume II (London, 1818).

into non-religious contexts and they were considered as ill omens, portents of death or of good fortune. However, clergymen played a role in reinforcing the religious associations of ghost stories and such meanings were not simply imposed but intermingled with customary and semi-organic understandings of ghosts as derivations of the Holy Spirit that continued to hold important spiritual meanings. The fit between orthodox Anglican theology and ghost beliefs was by no means perfect, but the idea of providence remained sufficiently elastic to admit the occasional intrusion into the human life world, especially if these episodes encouraged loyalty to the Holy Trinity and promoted the devotional habits and moral fortitude of the laity.<sup>19</sup> As Samuel Gray put it in 1797, 'If then the great causes of morality and religion may be thus benefited by it, let us not hastily erase from the mind an opinion which, at the worst, is perfectly harmless. Let us not, in our admiration of personal courage, condemn that disposition to dread which is one of the first principles of society'.<sup>20</sup>

It goes without saying that shifting beliefs and attitudes can only be communicated in the language available to those that choose to vocalise opinions, and so it makes sense to examine how the linguistic expressions used to describe ghosts had changed by the close of the eighteenth century. A look at the 1818 edition of Samuel Johnson's Dictionary provides a useful indication of how these linguistic constructions had been revised, destabilised and rendered ambiguous by the early nineteenth century. The meaning of 'Ghost' remained largely unchanged, denoting 'a spirit appearing after death', but the term 'Ghostlike' had been inserted since the 1755 edition and described something or somebody 'withered; having hollow, sad, or sunk-in eyes'.<sup>21</sup> This addition reflected the increasingly contested status of 'real' ghosts and can be linked to a number of efforts to naturalise these phenomena and to

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Dictionary*, Volume III.

<sup>20</sup> S.F. Gray, *Phantasmatophaneia; Or Anecdotes of Ghosts and Apparitions* (London, 1797), p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Dictionary*, Volume II.



explode the fraudulent narratives of those that Joseph Taylor termed 'ghost-mongers'.<sup>22</sup> In 1815 Taylor advertised his own folly when he described how he had mistaken a snow-white dressing gown for a ghost in his *Apparitions; Or, The Mystery of Ghosts, Hobgoblins and Haunted Houses Developed*, all in an effort to warn his readers to guard against fraud and imposture.<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein Stephen Fovargue advanced 'a little Dissertation upon Optics' to explain how visions of ghosts could trick the eye, and the 1804 case of the Hammersmith Ghost vividly demonstrated the danger of mistaking real human beings for ghosts, especially on dark nights and in eerie places.<sup>24</sup>

The notion of a 'Bugbear' was positively dismissed by Johnson as 'A frightful object; a walking spectre' that was only 'imagined to be seen' and that was 'generally now used for a false terrour to frighten babes'.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the relegation of this term to the nursery was countered by Johnson's definition of the word 'Spectre', which was altogether more ambiguous, considered to denote 'an image, or figure, seen either truly, or but in conceit'. Johnson's notes also emphasised the increasingly familiar poetical use of this term that did not undermine the reality of spectres but was instead used to 'imply an exact resemblance to some real being it represents'.<sup>26</sup> Moreover as the work of Daniel Defoe suggested, ladies and gentlemen of fashion increasingly preferred to use the term 'Apparition' rather than 'Ghost' to describe a shadowy preternatural appearance since the latter was more indicative of vulgar usage and the former encapsulated a more pleasing degree of indistinctness, having the flexibility to describe a more general appearance or 'visible object' as well as 'a spectre' or 'walking spirit'.<sup>27</sup> For the sceptics, Johnson's

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Apparitions*, viii.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *Apparitions*, vii.

<sup>24</sup> S. Fovargue, *A New Catalogue of Vulgar Errors* (Cambridge, 1767), p.60. For an account of the Hammersmith Ghost see chapter six above.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Dictionary*, Volume I.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, *Dictionary*, Volume IV.

<sup>27</sup> D. Defoe, *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (London, 1727).

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'Apparition' allowed for the appearance of something 'only apparent, not real' but the term was also given authority by its association with astronomical research into celestial apparitions.<sup>28</sup> The word 'Apparition' thus acknowledged a wide variety of interpretative viewpoints, catering for a cautious yet sophisticated engagement with ill-defined preternatural events as well as for considered doubt and outright rejection. Shifts in linguistic terminology thus reflected a deep sense of uncertainty about the epistemological status of ghosts.

The degree to which this formal terminology reflected widespread shifts in attitudes about returning spirits of the dead remains uncertain. It is probably fair to say that Johnson's lexicon catered for more educated outlooks, it was after all a commercially focused product, published by the highly successful bookseller William Strahan and issued in four hefty leather-bound volumes.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the uncertainty suggested by Johnson's classifications do connect up to a broader range of activities and publications from the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On April 12 1790, Capel Court in Bartholomew Lane, London played host to a series of debates regarding the nature of 'GHOSTS, Apparitions, Fortune-Telling, and Dreams'.<sup>30</sup> The event was advertised in the classified section of the *The Times* newspaper, which advertised the main speaker as Dr. Ranger, Professor of Astral Science. Ranger was to demonstrate the practice of 'foretelling future Events by the Position of the Stars' and his presentation was to be followed on Monday week by 'the strange Apparition of the Woman murdered at Pancras'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly in 1791 Coachmakers Hall Society in Cheapside were to debate whether it was 'consistent with the Character of a Christian and a Man of Sense, to believe that the Death of a Friend may be known by a supernatural Token, or that a departed Spirit ever

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Dictionary*, Volume I.

<sup>29</sup> For a study of Strahan's career in printing see J.A. Cochrane, *Dr. Johnson's Printer: The Life of William Strahan* (London, 1964).

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*, Issue 1652, Advertisements, 12 April 1790, p.4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



appeared and conversed with any mortal'. Promising to reflect on the 'eminent' views of Lord Clarendon, Reverend Charles Drelincourt, Samuel Johnson and John Wesley, the discussion was promoted as 'one of the most important that ever engaged the Attention of intelligent Beings'.<sup>32</sup> These examples neatly encapsulate the complex fortunes of ghosts and apparitions; these puzzling phenomena were challenged but they remained topical and were regarded as intriguing subjects for further investigation, promising to yield valuable knowledge about the nature of life after death.<sup>33</sup>

The changing iconography of ghosts provides further testament to the ambiguity with which these preternatural phenomena were increasingly regarded. The familiar ghost, recognisable either by its facial contours or because it appeared in the clothes it wore whilst living persisted throughout this period but it was also joined by a more indistinct and anonymous substance that was often impossible to identify as the returning soul of a particular person from its physical appearance. This kind of ghost featured strongly in fictional literature and especially in poems where the precise identity of the ghost was less important than the more general meanings that it was intended to signify. The ghost that appeared as a floating white substance also crept into more common usage towards the close of the eighteenth century. No doubt this was connected to the more traditional image of the 'ghost in winding sheet' that was prominent throughout the early modern period but it may also bear connections to the increasingly familiar accounts of fraudulent 'ghost-mongers' who dressed up in white sheets and bed linen to play pranks. When a ghost was pursued through St. Paul's Churchyard in 1804, this spectre was discovered to be a fraudster 'attired in a muslin robe'.<sup>34</sup> Although the connections remain oblique,

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<sup>32</sup> *The Times*, Issue 1978, Advertisements, 14 April 1791, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> In 1821 *The Times* advertised 'Ghostiana, with a new Theory of Apparitions', underlining the topicality of this subject. *The Times*, Issue 11180, Advertisements, 26 February 1821, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> *The Times*, Issue 6009, News, 28 April 1804, p.2.

the shifting imagery of eighteenth-century ghosts suggest important links to the burgeoning fields of optical and astronomical research, whereby refractions and reflections of light and the identification of diverse celestial phenomena considerably expanded the visual vocabulary of the age. Medical probing under the human skin and into the unconscious laid similar emphasis on transparent qualities and on the ability to see through and within material and immaterial substance. Unstable visual representations of ghosts were influenced by increased knowledge of the human body, of its capabilities as well as its deficiencies. New explorations of the stars, planets and of other astronomical phenomena expanded the category of 'apparitions' and brought the natural and preternatural worlds ever closer together.

Multiple discussions of an idea suggest its topicality. The numerous debates that continued to take place about the existence of ghosts and the meanings attached to them prove that ghosts were central to the prevailing cultural debates of the long eighteenth century. The boundaries between the natural and preternatural worlds were certainly redrawn in these years, and in some respects they became more stringent, but the persistent return of dead souls from beyond the grave suggests that these borders were far from impregnable. Ghost stories flowed through different literary genres, adapted to contrary modes of thought and circulated in diverse social and geographical patterns that refuse to conform to linear timescales and defy easy categorisation. Moreover, these narratives and the beliefs that they encouraged and reflected remained vital in the imaginations and activities of ordinary men and women. The complex cultural environment of eighteenth-century England therefore provides the most compelling explanation of why ghost beliefs continued to haunt the physical and imaginative landscapes of its inhabitants.



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