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## MAPPING FOLK HORROR THROUGH HISTORY'S DAMNABLE TALES (2022)

Review by Marietta Kosma

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**Wells, Richard. *Damnable Tales: A Folk Horror Anthology*. Unbound, 2022. 448pp.**

*Damnable Tales: A Folk Horror Anthology* (2022) is a collection of 22 tales selected and illustrated by Richard Wells. It features classic short stories and lesser-known texts from the Folk Horror sub-genre, which first rose to popularity in the late 1960s and has enjoyed a resurgence in the 2010s. The collection features supernatural fiction, including the work of M. R. James, Sheridan Le Fanu, Thomas Hardy, and Arthur Machen as famous maîtres of the Horror genre, alongside authors such as Eleanor Scott, E. F. Benson and Margery Lawrence. The tales in the anthology are presented chronologically, showing how the genre of Folk Horror developed stylistically, particularly across the twentieth century. In doing so, *Damnable Tales* echoes the mutable nature of the genre observed in Gothic criticism, agreeing with Catherine Spooner's observation that contemporary "Gothic is no longer where it used to be, but rather than lament its passing, seeks to map its new territories" (8).

Each story is accompanied by one of Wells' full-page original lino-cut illustrations, including a series of prints based on the ghost series of Emma James, making the anthology unique. What is interesting is how the editor of the collection immerses the reader into further dwelling on a disturbing subject matter through his illustrations. He depicts historical horrors in a way that, at first glance, appears as images from a children's picture book yet manages to perfectly capture the eeriness of each story using the dark humour in his illustrations. These black and white outlines, depicting scenes from each story in a simplistic manner, leaves space for the reader to imagine sinister associations for themselves. The book includes a foreword by the author Benjamin Myers whose quirkiness and humour suit these Folk Horror tales well, finding the macabre in the mundane.

Grounded in Well's extensive knowledge of the field, the breadth of the book's scope is remarkable, moving from early nineteenth-century Folk Horror narratives to postmodern Gothic narratives of the twenty-first century. Wells is attentive to the question of which narratives get labelled as 'Gothic.' He decisively contributes to the project of articulating the relationship between Folk Horror and the Gothic beyond genre, bringing into this conversation the role of the uncanny in Gothic literature. *Damnable Tales'* movement from the nineteenth century to early twenty-first-century literature foregrounds the presence of the Gothic uncanny through the development of Folk Horror, enacting what Fred Botting describes as "the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism" contrasting "the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence" (1). Many of the tales in Well's collection consist of what we may call the tales of the uncanny or the unheimlich, featuring the occult, hauntings, the supernatural and the peculiar to create creepy, frightening, and

shuddersome settings. As such, the author exposes the widespread impact of the *unheimlich* in Gothic literature from the nineteenth century onwards, a fact that has remained obscured by critical attention.

As many of the short stories in the collection are of British or Irish origin, Wells represents the relationship between folklore and landscape in Folk Horror, alongside the pervasiveness of the occult. As a collection, the stories eschew or radically reinterpret the ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and other supernatural figures from Gothic and Horror fiction. Instead, they depict unholy rites, sinister traditions and ancient horrors through the uncanny, immersing the reader in the dark side of folklore in unsettling homesteads. In fact, a strength of this collection is that it delves into the history of the occult and the movements of the nineteenth century, more particularly the movement of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the cult of the soil. These movements are part of that retreat from the industrial culture, which looked for a more rooted mythological past, claiming an unbroken transfer of lineage back to ancient Egypt. In doing so, the anthology highlights the importance of these real-life movements in the development of Folk Horror as a literary development.

Many tales use out-of-the-way places and remote locations, a staple of Gothic literature, where folk traditions linger which are pagan and potentially satanic. From people in rural Wales to protagonists in New England, these landscapes are haunted by old religions and folkloric traditions. In focusing on lingering beliefs often from a pre-Christian era, a potential shortcoming of this collection is its focus on the 'othering' of non-European populations and beliefs represented by many of the early Folk Horror tales. If this collection represented the classics of the genre, which have the power of authority to associate normative images of the individual and the nation as predominately white, male, and European, then the Gothic and Horror traditions can re-conceive this power as "a spectral power [that] haunts modernity with a superhuman power of its own", as Charles Martindale argues (216). So, while this collection is especially focused on British and Irish narratives, future collections may wish to consider Folk Horror in more global contexts and expand the genre's scope.

A further recurring theme through the anthology is the adverse effects these Folk Horror topographies have on their inhabitants' social and moral identities. Simon J. Bronner observes that many communities represented in Folk Horror narratives are "bound up in the processes of intergenerational transmission and localized culture" (1). As previously explored in the presentations of folkloric landscapes and the occult, the otherness characterised by the local communities in several stories are reminders of the past. However, the same otherness sometimes expresses their society's concern about the members of it depicted in these stories as not controllable or conforming. For example, in Thomas Hardy's "The Withered Arm" (1888), the folkloric figure of the incubus represents one female character's fear of a new arrival in their local community replacing her, commenting on the restrictive social roles available to women in rural nineteenth-century England. In another story, John Collier's "The Lady on the Grey" (1951), the isolated location and imperial history lead to a complex set of moralities in which the ghostly lady bewitches the story's protagonist for his pursuit of her fellow countrywomen and his English ancestor's colonisation of Ireland. The topography of the tale isolates the protagonists, who become "cut off from some established social progress of

the diegetic world," as Adam Scovell describes in *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017, 17). Scovell continues that these isolated figures are led to the adoption of "skewed belief systems and morality," which ultimately leads to a sacrifice (18). The interplay of these "skewed belief systems," isolated topographies, intergenerational horrors, and othered outsiders is a key concern in Wells' anthology that offers an original contribution to Folk Horror scholarship and an immersive induction to new readers of the genre.

*Damnable Tales* is essential reading for anyone interested in the origins of Gothic folklore. This anthology offers a dynamic compilation of Folk Horror, drawing in readers and scholars looking to explore the Gothic, the uncanny, and manifestations of Horror in rural settings. By recounting the unfamiliar in a familiar way, Wells provides a vivifying archeology of the origins of Folk Horror, illuminating the evolution of this recently popular sub-genre and the power of the uncanny to unsettle its readers. It is a good choice for those new to the Folk Horror genre as it encompasses well-known and lesser-known short stories with folkloric elements. While some of the stories use heavy vernacular dialect, making them potentially inaccessible to a wide readership, the short story mode ensures that there is a spooky atmosphere for everyone. The collection's Bibliography of primary texts makes it an ideal teaching tool, encouraging further reading and independent research. *Damnable Tales* offers a collection of tales particularly selected to exemplify the changes and developments of the Folk Horror tradition, challenging disciplinary categories and forcing us to reconsider the familiar spaces of Gothic and Horror.

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#### BIONOTE

**Marietta Kosma** is a second-year DPhil student in English at the University of Oxford, UK, at Lady Margaret Hall. Her academic background includes a Masters in English from Jackson State University, USA, and a Masters in Ancient Greek Theatre from the University of the Aegean, Greece. Her research interests lie in twentieth-century American literature, post-colonialism and gender studies.