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TALES OF THE TROUBLED DEAD: GHOST STORIES IN CULTURAL HISTORY (2019) BY CATHERINE BELSEY

Review by Lucy Hall

Belsey, Catherine, *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History*. Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 288pp.

The tale of Dorothy Dingley is a simple one on the surface. A young boy is suspected of idleness when he becomes reluctant to go to school. When pressed, he reveals a far more surprising reason. Time and again he has passed by the same woman, Dorothy Dingley. This is an unremarkable fact in itself, until it is revealed that Dorothy is – or should be – dead. What follows is an account of confrontation with the spirit until her message is conveyed and she disappears into the ether. Appropriately, it is with this ghost story that Catherine Belsey's *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History* (2019) opens. And despite its relatively barebones account, Dorothy Dingley's story acts as an example of how tales of haunting are often filtered through layers of narrative and cultural commentary as they evolve over time. It is the ways in which such tales morph and change with social and literary convention that Belsey goes on to explore in the course of this book.

Situating the ghost stories in their cultural and historical parameters is by no means a new topic for academic study. Most notably, Owen Davies's 2007 study *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* fulfils this aim successfully and comprehensively. A similar excavation of the meaning of the ghost can be seen in a wide variety of Gothic criticism, which has frequently touched on this argument as part of an overarching desire to uncover the appeal of the genre. Notably, Andrew Smith's *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920: A Cultural History* (2010) endeavours to do just this in the context of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. Belsey's study also leans significantly towards literary sources for her exploration of how the figure of the ghost has evolved in Western (predominantly, though not exclusively, anglophone) cultures, from classical society, through the middle ages, and into the iconic ghosts of modern authors like M. R. James and Susan Hill.

Belsey locates the defining moment for the modern ghost with the first staging of *Hamlet* in the early 1600s. Much like the discussion of Dorothy Dingley, this first chapter outlines the ways in which representations of a classic ghost can change throughout history. Indeed, various iterations of the ghost of Hamlet's father make uncanny returns throughout Belsey's analysis as touchpoints for the changes in cultural representations and interpretations of the undead. A great strength of the study is the way in which the author demonstrates just how interwoven the influences and similarities between texts from vastly different time periods are. Having established William Shakespeare's tragedy as a cultural touchstone, Belsey takes the reader back in time and leads them through the evolving concepts of the ghost and dominant concepts of the afterlife that influenced the spirits of the Renaissance stage, as well as those who would follow. Belsey takes us from classical theatre and

philosophy, though the oral fireside tradition of the middle ages using a plethora of examples to outline the prevalent and often contradictory traditions that inform later representations of the ghost. It is here that Belsey teases out the themes that form the bedrock of her study: the negotiation of the tangible revenant versus the intangible shade; pagan versus Christian tradition; low versus high culture.

The book continues chronologically with a particularly moving chapter, "The Ghost of Mrs Milton," that explores the ghost as an expression of loss in John Milton's "Sonnet 19" (1650s), in which his recently deceased wife appears to him in a dream. This helps to establish the consolatory function occasionally attributed to the ghost, an element that returns in later chapters. But here Belsey also draws out the multiplicity of metaphorical readings that make many ghost stories so enduring. Alongside this thematic strain, Belsey successfully incorporates extensive discussion of how nuances of ghostly representation articulate with Christian theological disputes and conceptualisations of the soul during the 1600s.

From this point on, a more thematic route is taken that weaves these early ghost traditions into a variety of texts from M. R. James to Toni Morrison, Charles Dickens to Jerry Zucker's *Ghost* (1990). In Chapters Four and Five, "Women in White" and "Dangerous Dead Women," Belsey goes on to discuss gender, agency, and misanthropy in the depiction of consoling, mysterious, and malevolent female ghosts. Chapter Six – "Unquiet Gothic Castles" – sees class and social conservatism become the focal point in an exploration of the rise of Gothic genre through the haunted castle. Chapters Seven and Nine – "Spectres of Desire" and "Listening to Ghosts" – go on to examine the operation of desire and danger, the frisson of pleasure in fear, that feeds into the compulsive telling and retelling of the ghostly narrative. This is bolstered by discussions of the connection of haunting to psychoanalysis and the uncanny that arise in Chapters Eight and Ten, respectively entitled "All in the Mind?" and "Strange to Tell." These explore ideas of the ghost as a symbol of the unnameable or unspeakable experience, as well as the metaphorical capabilities of the genre (in the Coda, "Figurative Phantoms").

One of the most effective aspects of Belsey's study is the anecdotal contextualising that precedes many of the chapters, evoking the oral fireside tale from which the ghost story tradition emerges. This frequently acts as an anchor for the reader, gently leading them into the concepts discussed more broadly throughout the chapter and helping to ground literary ghost stories in a wider social and historical context. This is valuable as it demonstrates the rich traditions (particularly British traditions) that form the cultural bedrock for later, more literary, narratives which adhere to, break from, or merge with the fireside convention.

Throughout her study, Belsey highlights a number of interesting themes that are recalled time and again to the point where it seems many would deserve further, closer study on their own merit. The tensions between the ghost in high and low culture and its evolution from a distinctly female, oral culture to a written art form with all of the political and social baggage this entails are particularly interesting elements. Belsey's attention to ghostly apparel and the material trappings that are key to many ghost stories is especially interesting. From white ladies, ladies in black to

the cultural shifts in depicting the ghost of Hamlet's father on stage – the social significance of the clothes that spirits wear and the objects and buildings they haunt is a fruitful vein and something that would lend itself to further exploration.

The expansiveness of Belsey's scope, perhaps inevitably, leads to some areas receiving less attention than others. The discussion of the ghost as a metaphor is treated all too fleetingly. Though it is a shame that this is not developed further, it is understandably not necessarily Belsey's principal aim in this particular book. Although Belsey explicitly acknowledges that the ghosts she explores are distinctly western and largely European in origin, some further consideration of how narratives of haunting approach colonial and postcolonial contexts could have been interesting. This is touched on briefly in Belsey's discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), but it would have been interesting to see how ghosts that do not fit easily within a originate from a classical or medieval European tradition may reject, or even uncomfortably assimilate, these culturally established traditions.

Finally, because of Belsey's early focus on the ghost story as folktale, it is a shame that the author does not take this further and consider oral ghost tales from a more contemporary standpoint. There are many apocryphal ghost stories that have influenced literature and culture throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries (the 'Amityville' haunting being the most obvious example). Though these more recent ghost stories may not have been passed on in a strict oral tradition, I would be interested to see how such recent incarnations both inspire their cultural successors and are influenced by the hundreds of ghost stories that came before them.

However, these minor areas of oversight are less a fault of the book in itself, as Belsey clearly establishes the parameters of her study early on. Instead, they demonstrate how vast and fertile the study of ghosts and their cultural impact is. For a book to leave the reader with enthusiasm for engaging in further discussion is no mean feat. Overall, Belsey's study is a valuable broad sweep of ghost story tradition that would be a good primer for those interested in generic convention and its development in Western anglophone literature and culture. Belsey's writing is informative, accessible, and entertaining. Her literary and cultural references are far-reaching and the way in which the author draws out the connections between seemingly disparate texts and time periods is deeply enjoyable. Perhaps the most satisfying element of this book, is its tone. Part academic, part evocative of the fire-side recitation of ghost stories, Belsey takes the reader by the hand and guides them through this haunted history.

BIONOTE

Lucy Hall completed her PhD in 2018 at the University of St. Andrews, UK, with a thesis examining the cultural output of the Second World War Home Front and its affinities with the Gothic mode. Her writing explores the themes of tyranny, terror, monstrosity, and haunting that run through the literature, film, and art of the period. In the past she has presented on topics of film adaptation, memorial culture, and tyrannical 1940s husbands. She has chapters published in a recent volume of essays exploring heroism and British culture and a forthcoming collecting exploring mid-twentieth century women's writing.