Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Melissa Edmundson Makala

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The weighty scholarship on the Gothic and the Victorian supernatural makes the prospect for innovative research especially elusive. Melissa Edmundson Makala's thoughtful *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain* surmounts that formidable challenge and refines the critical discussion by tracking the literary influence for women's supernatural writing to the early 1800s' Gothic tradition. She traces a dazzling chronological sweep to prove that women's ghost literature 'became more experimental and subversive as its writers abandoned the stereotypical Gothic heroines of the eighteenth century' and created 'more realistic, middle-class characters (both living and dead, male and female) who rage against the limits imposed on them by the natural world' (17). Recent anthologies have made nineteenth-century women's supernatural writing more accessible (titles Makala reviews in her brisk conclusion), and this new, often entertaining survey, brings into the forefront many neglected, even forgotten, female authors influenced by the Gothic heritage. Makala aims to define the 'political undertone' in the works and to define (in a wonderful term sure to find its way into the critical lexicon) the 'social supernatural' (20) in nineteenth-century women writers' ghost literature. Makala undertakes this mission with bookish precision and gives us an admirably detailed and persuasive survey.

Makala sets her argument about the period's increased popularity of ghost literature within an intelligently organized context that establishes her impressive command of rich secondary and primary source material. The well-documented introduction recalls Michael Cox and R.S. Gilbert's assertion that women wrote ghost stories for purely economic reasons. While they confidently claimed to have answered one of '"great unasked critical questions"' (1) in 1991,

numerous studies on nineteenth-century ghost literature have elucidated far more complex motivations for women authors than mere economic profit. Women writers 'recognized the social and political power behind the genre of the ghost story and used it to shed light on cultural problems and inequalities' (8), a well-established point and one some say not exclusive to women authors. The introduction's solid discussion examines changing period beliefs about the occult and writers' views about supernatural literature's commercial appeal. Makala organizes the subsequent chapters around specific themes, a judicious approach that avoids the pitfall in tackling any writer's full range.

Chapter 1, 'Female revenants and the beginnings of women's ghost literature', launches the argument with early nineteenth-century examples of the female revenant, a figure that emerged from eighteenth-century stories about the undead. Male poets like Goethe and Southey used the image in ways that reinforced cultural attitudes about a dichotomous female gender: their ghosts epitomized a victimized fidelity or a predatory sexual malice that extended beyond the grave. However, women writers rejected the Gothic heroine's clichéd passivity or corrupting influence, creating instead female revenants 'transformed by death' into 'empowered and often intimidating figures seeking revenge on those who wronged them'. This singularly female power 'grows out of their past traumas as silenced or victimized women' (24). Makala thus counters the assertion that only with late century New Woman fiction did a female narrative voice challenge the social and cultural constraints women faced. It happened, she claims, in the 'daring Gothic ballads' (46) of women writers early in the century and she uses three long ignored poets to illustrate: Anne Bannerman, Charlotte Dacre, and Elizabeth Harcourt Rolls. Bannerman's 1802 'The Perjured Nun' and 'The Penitent's Confession' are key in understanding the Female Gothic's 'first representatives of social critique' (25). Makala, perhaps rather glibly, justifies the ambiguity in Bannerman's poetry as a 'comment on the instability of many women in the period, and, indeed, on the financial, social and literary instability of her own life and career' (32). In the poems, the female revenant – whether an object of sympathy or of fear – represents concern for women's potential 'loss of their virtue and emotional freedom'; her demands for retaliations for men's 'past indiscretions' (31) guarantee that male duplicity and criminality find their just desserts. Charlotte Dacre critiques the 'detrimental effects of excessive female desire' (39) in

her 1805 poems in which a ghost passes on her own sad story as a way to save another woman from meeting a similar fate. The poems show a woman's transformation from 'passive victim to active messenger', but it is only as a ghost that a woman gains this agency (35), even if the revenant is regarded as a competitor rather than a savior and her message unheeded. Makala does not skimp with quotations that create a nightmarish chiaroscuro quality in Dacre's ballads, such as 'a lamp the red blood on her bosom betray'd' (line 47; qtd. 36) to describe the spectral lady in 'The Skeleton Priest'. To illustrate the Gothic ballad's shift from a Romantic to a Victorian sensibility, Makala discusses Elizabeth Harcourt Rolls's 1854 'The Ballad of Sir Rupert' which embeds its focus on gender in the larger conflicts of war, a military setting that 'marks a shift in women's ghost literature and signals Victorian women's more direct and wider involvement with the supernatural as social critique' (25). The Spectre Nun in the poem transcends historical and temporal boundaries and occupies the traditionally masculine space of the battlefield. Rolls adapts the Romantic female revenant and lets the cautionary tale the ghost tells at mid-century illustrate those social problems in 'overly masculine attitudes that lead to confrontation and war century after century' (47).

Chapter 2, 'Ghostly lovers and transgressive supernatural sexualities', examines three oft-studied Victorian writers who use the Gothic revenant's seductive provocation in fiction and in poetry. Makala traces the demon-lover motif to an English and Scottish ballad popular in the mid-seventeenth century and a medieval song, 'The Unquiet Grave', that found renewed popularity in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, compiled between 1882 and 1898. Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti, and Vernon Lee rejected the Female Gothic's ubiquitous happy ending that contained or nullified rebellious desire. In their hands, the passionate ghosts and spirits are not pacified nor do they assist in reinstating a lost innocence. The ghosts remind characters they must confront the past; they teach 'responsibility' and the 'consequences of forgetting or ignoring something best not forgotten' (88): the horrors in sexual desire. Gaskell's story 'The Poor Clare,' published first in Dickens's *Household Words* in 1856, employs the doppelganger motif to show a female heritage damned by passionate excess. Given the book's refreshingly sparse dependence on theoretical methodologies, this section's sudden – although not illogical – inclusion of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and Freud's "The Uncanny" comes as a jarring intrusion, disturbing rather than enhancing Makala's thesis. Better are the

copious textual examples that illustrate Gaskell's ability to construct the doppelganger's tantalizing lure and to evoke in her audience the delightfully shivery effects that 'give the story its characteristic Gothic unease' (57). Turning to Rossetti, Makala convincingly explains her supernatural poems' significance in revealing 'fearful, uncontrolled sexual anxieties originating in the Female Gothic' and disputes scholars' disregard of them as 'aesthetically rewarding' (74). 'The Hour and the Ghost' (1862), 'The Poor Ghost' and 'The Ghost's Petition' (both 1866) portray an unremitting hunger for a sexuality 'beyond the social norm' (64). Memory haunts characters who are oppressed by spectres of former lovers but cannot resist the spooky intimacy. Rossetti eschews a happy conclusion in the poems, choosing rather to privilege a 'sense of injustice' that amplifies the ghosts' and their subjects' emotional and psychic pain (72). Vernon Lee, Makala reminds us, found the 'real' ghosts in popular Victorian fiction far less compelling than those from the 'imagination' (76). Her more than twenty supernatural stories dramatized her fascination with Renaissance Italy and that drew acclaim for her talent to invoke the ethos of that period and region. Lee's spirit forces, then, 'are the most artistic creations of any of her contemporary women writers of the supernatural' and her stories more 'tragic' since they show characters whose obsessive yearnings for a past time demonstrate an 'emotional incompleteness' that limits their lives in their own (75). Both 'Winthrop's Adventure' (*Fraser's Magazine* 1881) and 'Amour Dure' (*Murray's Magazine* 1887) show narrators consumed by a sexualized past stimulated by their study of old manuscripts, sculptures, and portraits. Here, the chapter's organization slips and its discussion restates generally accepted views about transgressive haunting in 'Amour Dure'. Nonetheless, Makala's scrupulous explication stresses Lee's heated sexualized terminology and accentuates the resulting sexual disorientation when men turn from their contemporary time and live in past worlds of their own imagination.

Chapter 3, '"Uncomfortable houses" and the spectres of capital' focuses on haunted house stories, a concept so exciting for Victorian readers that Dickens devoted a special 1859 *All the Year Round* Christmas issue to tales only about haunted dwellings (91). The nineteenth-century phrase 'uncomfortable houses' originally meant places possessed by the devil and became a common term for haunted domiciles after the 1857 Indian Uprising (97), a terrific etymological

detail and testimony to Makala's delight in her research. While homes and mansions in Gothic fiction symbolized anxieties about social status and inheritance, Makala explains Charlotte Riddell, Mary Louisa Molesworth, and Margaret Oliphant complicate views about the Female Gothic as a conservative mode. They '"refurnish" their Gothic houses' to challenge domestic ideology and 'replace the "angel in the house" with the "ghost in the house", a presence which haunts rather than reassures the inner workings of the Victorian household' 130) and that encouraged greater 'public knowledge of social issues in Victorian Britain' (129).

The three writers describe houses and families affected by economic negligence and portray the social ramifications in political economy. Although this aspect of Victorian supernatural fiction has received a great deal of play, Makala supplies abundant intriguing background material on Victorian urbanization, finance, and property ownership. Contemporary reviews belittled Riddell's supernatural fiction as '"a profitless occupation" and sniffed '"they are not thrilling"' (qtd. 101), the attitude Makala contends still plagues the author's reputation and one she counters with grace. 'The Old House in Vauxhall' and 'Walnut-Tree House' (1882) show how a male character's confrontation with a spirit liberates him and his family from a shameful past. The heroes' encounters with the 'abandoned souls' (99) protect them from spiritual bankruptcy and instruct about wealth used wisely and about self-improvement, that concept dear to the Victorian heart. Thus, Riddell's happy endings promote complicated lessons about financial honesty, familial duty, and class consciousness. Makala pursues this theme with Mary Louisa Molesworth whose ghost stories often left readers '"puzzled and unsatisfied"' (qtd. 117) and whose reputation since her death in 1921 has rested on her children's literature. 'Lady Farquahar's Old Lady' uses the conceit of storytelling between a spectral woman to her living female listener to stress unity, rather than retribution and death as in Dacre's ballads. The ghost is pitiable rather than fearsome (189). It is, Makala notes, a 'quite literal sense of the "social" supernatural' (98); the friendship between the spirit of a financially destitute old woman and the young affluent heroine constructs a singularly female bond that overcomes 'corporeal, class, and national differences' (115). Not unlike Riddell, Margaret Oliphant's prolific outpouring came from the desperate necessity to support herself and her family, especially after her husband's

death, with many supernatural tales in the period's most popular magazines. Those familiar with her autobiography will recall her touching assessment that shouldering the financial responsibility prevented her from becoming a great author. Given the extraordinary attention 'The Open Door' (1882) has received, Makala handles the story well even if her argument that the liminal trope represents divisions between social classes is not a novel one. The hero-investigator Mortimer is 'exorcised . . . of his narrow views towards the working classes' (123). In 'Old Lady Mary', the ghost tells the story, a woeful confession about how withholding her fortune from her ward has forced the young woman to work as a governess, that dismal female employment Victorian studies has examined so extensively. The story effectively shows that 'class consciousness also extends beyond the grave' (127) and iterates the conflict between ideological gender constructs and the realities of Victorian middle-class women's economic powerlessness.

Chapter 4, 'Haunted empire: spectral uprisings as imperialist critique,' contends that shifts in the ghost tale's plots and the spectre's symbolism reflected anxieties about England's late century colonial activity. Although women writers were among the first to address colonialism's repercussions, the scholarship on those works is 'in its early states, and examination of the Female Gothic tradition within the Female Gothic tradition within Anglo-Indian colonial contexts is almost non-existent' (133). This riveting chapter, one of the book's best, does much to alleviate that situation. Both Mrs. Henry Wood and Bithia Mary Croker yoke the Imperialist sense of the mysteries in a foreign place with the more conventional social concerns typically found in English supernatural fiction (132) and illustrate that supernatural aggression results from 'cultural misunderstandings' (134). Wood, known most for her fabulously popular novel *East Lynne*, had a deep love for history and politics. She was prolific, conservative in her political views, but adamant in her concerns about England's involvement in the territories far from the nation's borders. Her ghost stories critique what Makala (in an unfortunate phrase) calls England's 'militaristic mentality' and are 'as much anti-war as they are anti-imperialist' (133). Her 1857 tale 'A Mysterious Visitor' makes a vilifying comment on British blindness about imperialism and the India Mutiny. In 'A Mysterious Visitor', Louisa, a young wife and

mother, whose husband is away serving in India, has a vision in which he returns to the house; however, the story concludes with the understanding the vision signalled his death. Twenty-five years later, in 1882, the newly founded Society for Psychical Research would print accounts about the increased appearances of 'informative' spirits that carried sorrowful tidings from the colonized territories. Makala praises Wood for this 'imperial second sight' (139) 'A Mysterious Visitor' confirms she commands. Unlike Wood who never actually travelled to the colonial places she uses so chillingly, the long-neglected Bithia Mary Croker (1850-1920) lived in India from 1877-1892 when her husband served in the Royal Scots and Muster Fusiliers. Makala challenges critical commentary that has belittled Croker's fiction since the 1930s. She was not a '"female Kipling"' (qtd. 164), but an author who wrote 'serious political commentary' (157) about women's ability to see their 'complicity as participants in an imperialist enterprise' (164). Croker reworks the domestic space and women's place within it. Her female protagonists are 'imperial adventurers themselves' (147) with an 'uncertain existence among those whom' they presumably rule (153). She situates them in unfamiliar architectural structures and awkward physical situations that enact a slow process of acculturation. In the stories, women are 'privileged interpreters to the history of colonial tension' (155) but often unable or unwilling to describe that awakened awareness, reflecting a deep 'uneasiness about their marginal position as outsiders in India' (156). The bungalow's domesticity becomes a fraught place in which women who see ghosts become 'privileged critics of British imperial power' (146). Makala draws on Victorian debate about the fraught bungalow space and incorporates period attitudes about the memsahib, or 'lady-ruler', who was, in her own way, a tyrannical colonial ruler. The material underlines Croker's aim to highlight imperialism's precarious authority and a pernicious Indian 'retributive violence' (152).

Makala's densely researched and scrupulously documented investigations amply support her insights. Her abundant summaries and textual examples confirm the breadth and diversity in the period's supernatural writing by women. Plentiful evidence about the authors' affinity for the occult, their loyal professionalism, and their opinions about the commercial frenzy for séances and spiritualism frame chapters' lavish attention to individual works. The manuscript, however,

would have benefited from a more stringent editorial eye and more incisive copy-editing. At times, loose transitional sentences stall an argument's momentum. Overdependence throughout on long block quotations from other scholars muffle Makala's fine voice and limit, rather than amplify, her astute observations and explications. Lengthy endnotes suggest uncertainty about what to do with material or indecision about its significance. A book with such commendable ambitions, laudable energies, and gratifyingly intelligent conclusions deserved that technical guidance. Even so, *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain* stands as a remarkably solid and insightful study and will remain a valuable and rich resource for all who study the Female Gothic and the Victorian supernatural traditions.