

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Margree, Victoria. *British Women's Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860-1930: Our Own Ghostliness*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019. 203 pages.

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<1>Victoria Margree's *British Women's Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860–1930: Our Own Ghostliness* borrows a quotation from Virginia Woolf, to open with the claim that women are under-represented in scholarship of supernatural fiction. There is no doubt that this is a field that can be accused of tokenism, beguiled as it is by the Victorian 'masters' of the ghost story - M.R. James, Charles Dickens, Walter de la Mare and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, to name but a few. Any brief survey of even recent scholarship shows these names to still dominate the pages of most studies. When I once sent a work on the Victorian ghost story for publication, the primary concern of my reviewer was that I had not paid sufficient attention to female authorship. After expanding my discussion of female writers in the introduction, and highlighting my coverage of May Sinclair, my volume was ready for publication, with the consciences of both myself and the reviewer eased. Nonetheless James and his companions remained the focus of my book. Where many of us may have remained in this trap, however (worthy further of exploration as these authors are), several others have directed their attention explicitly to the Female Gothic, as Diana Wallace calls it. Margree also draws our attention to several major discussions, particularly from the 1990s, such as Vanessa Dickerson's *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*. One might ask, then, whether a volume is needed in order to shift the attention of the field further towards female authorship. The answer is that Margree is not simply dusting off neglected works, nor just providing readings for stories that have been underexamined, but rather provides a volume that deliberately complicates 'a critical framework that emphasises marginality' (13). Margree seeks to position female authors of supernatural short fiction as those who reimagine and subvert the Victorian ghost-story tradition, and challenges the perceived wisdom of a literary 'rupture', in which the Victorian short story didn't survive the First World War. Margree's claim is that by reading through this transition period from the nineteenth century into the interwar years, female authors can be seen as nurturing the ghost story through into the twentieth century, and in doing so rethinking narrative formulas to reflect the changing positions of women in the twentieth century.

<2>Chapter Two, following this introduction, reads stories by Margaret Oliphant and Charlotte Riddell, and this chapter does pick up on established themes in current scholarship. Here we see women as marginalised or victimised, their social ghostliness reflected in the stories. However, Margree's readings are more interrogative than this, examining as she does not only women as othered, but as what she calls 'hosting the other'. Margree draws out the inherent social conservatism of Oliphant and Riddell, noting how their tales ultimately reinforce Victorian capitalist (class) and racial structures. What is interesting about this chapter is that Margree makes this claim without undermining the recognition of female marginalisation as concurrent themes.

In Riddell's 'Old Mrs Jones', for instance, Margree convincingly argues both for a tale 'highlighting female economic dependence' (51) and a 'conservatism that consists in her affirmation of a capitalist system more broadly' (52). This begins a series of chapters in which Margree unpacks a number of seemingly conflicting themes without attempting to artificially reconcile them.

<3>The following chapter on depictions of death in Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Edith Nesbit is the chapter that situates itself most strongly in established scholarship, focusing as it does on female ghosts as images of disenfranchised or excluded women. It argues, however, that the stories under discussion nonetheless disrupt both the aestheticization of female death and the objectification of the male-scientific gaze. Margree notes, for instance, how Nesbit's corpses appear out of place, 'not within a medical or religious context – where it might be presented in an acceptable way – but in ones where it is out-of-place, unexpected, and capable of communicating a traumatic realisation of our own mortality. It is this that marks Nesbit distinctly as a writer of *horror*, and not just of supernatural fiction' (90). This example also shows Margree's careful taxonomies of supernatural fiction, which is important for her overall project.

<4>Margree's chapter on Alice Perrin in the context of Anglo-Indian imperialism is perhaps the most removed from this overall project, and in some ways the least convincing. Here, Margree's (through Perrin's) focus is on marriage as a means through which women partook of colonialization. Alice Perrin's stories, argues Margree, are interesting in that they recognise the difficulties and constraints of marriage while also endorsing and perpetuating the colonial status quo. Each chapter acknowledges juxtapositions and conflicts in the social positioning of the authors, but in this chapter Margree seems less comfortable, reading Perrin's stories as imperialistically conservative, but wanting nonetheless to identify what she calls 'currents of resistance to orthodox norms and values' (126).

<5>The final chapter, which moves on to twentieth-century writers May Sinclair, Eleanor Scott and Violet Hunt, is where Margree's project really comes into its own, and in which her argument that women carried the ghost story into the twentieth century is fully developed. Margree doesn't argue for a specifically Modernist reinvention of the Victorian ghost story (although features of Modernism are explored), but rather the reappropriation of ghost-story motifs as writing for modernity. Here Margree's taxonomy of the ghost-story genre broadens to include the uncanny tale, or what Violet Hunt called 'tales of unease'. In the stories of May Sinclair, Margree sees women depicted not as marginalised protagonists or victims so much as liminal figures navigating the fragility of female identities in the early twentieth century. In Scott, Margree describes the reimagining of the academic masculine protagonist, that stalwart of the M.R. James ghost story. Instead, in 'The Room', Scott gives us a 'homosocial community of bachelor men as flawed and self-deceiving' (164). Finally, Margree rescues Violet Hunt's (nearly unobtainable today) *Uneasy Tales* from under her reputation as a literary socialite and diarist, to discover an author who interrogates the equally uneasy position of women in post-suffrage society. Through these three authors, Margree makes a convincing case for a movement that reinvigorates the Victorian ghost story for the twentieth century, introducing (but not confined to) Modernist narrative approaches in order to reposition the female voice. It is in this way that Margree makes her case for women writers as the true inheritors of the ghost-story

tradition, and, even more so, those who fit the Victorian ghost story for the twentieth century and beyond.

Works Cited

Wallace, Diana. "Uncanny Stories: The Ghost Story as Female Gothic." *Gothic Studies* 6:1 (2004), 57-68.