



Emma Liggins, *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories. Gender, Space and Modernity, 1850-1945*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 307 pp. Hb 83,19 €. ISBN: 978-3-030-40751-3

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Ghost stories have fascinated generations of readers for centuries; indeed, they seem to possess a mysterious power that keeps us all “subject to a common thrill”, as one of Henry James’s characters said in *The Turn of the Screw* ([1898] 2001:17). *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories. Gender, Space and Modernity, 1850-1945* explores haunted spaces, from ruined castles to old villas, from Victorian mansions to modern houses, embracing almost a whole century. The critic’s main aim is to write “a feminist history of the ghost story” (2) by offering a fresh perspective on this field of enquiry, integrating spatial theories and feminist insights. Obviously, Freud’s notion of uncanniness underpins Liggins’s discussion, but her study wants to look at haunted and haunting houses through the eyes and bodies of women. The gendering of space has

not been fully investigated in the ongoing debates about ghost stories and the Female Gothic, and that is one of the most important gaps that Liggins sets out to fill, drawing inspiration from seminal works on the poetics of space – Gaston Bachelard’s famous 1958 study and others – while at the same time providing new interpretive frames for thinking beyond them.

As a corollary of this emphasis on space, the book considers the architectural dimensions that have occupied a prominent place in Gothic fiction since its beginnings. Haunted houses and architectural features often crop up in nineteenth-century narrative, and by no means are they exclusive to women. However, women’s experience of domestic spaces proves very different, reflecting as it does their shifting roles in the household, and more generally in society, in a period of transition. The broad time span covered by the monograph is meant to stress varieties and differences in continuity, deliberately eschewing the Victorian/Modernist divide, to dwell instead on changes in the relationship between women and domesticity across many decades. Liggins singles out a wide range of examples from Elizabeth Gaskell’s Gothic tales of the 1850s and 1860s to Elizabeth Bowen’s post-war ghost stories, showing how they reused and reinvented Gothic conventions, representing female vulnerability, entrapment, desires and fears, while challenging the separate spheres of ideology and what Bachelard and Henri Lefebvre would call the “rules of space” (51).

Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton, May Sinclair and Elizabeth Bowen were all successful writers of short fiction and tried their hand at the ghost story, a lucrative and rewarding genre at the time. In her analysis, which also includes non-fictional works by the same authors, in conversation with contemporary male writers, Liggins demonstrates how in different but equally compelling ways, women reimaged a very potent cultural symbol, the haunted house.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s interest in old architectural styles emerges as early as the 1840s and is strictly interwoven with her narrative. A key idea explored in Chapter Two is that of forbidden spaces, for, in Gaskell’s fiction, spatial restrictions, implying the presence of thresholds and barriers and signifying the imprisonment of women in a patriarchal society, come over very powerfully. One of the most thrilling stories in this respect is “The Grey Woman”, in which the buried past of a long-dead woman is dug up thanks to a letter she had addressed to her daughter. Liggins rightly insists on the architectural dimension of the story, drawing attention to the detailed descriptions of the ruined château where the heroine is trapped after her marriage to a handsome but rather sinister man. By drawing from Radcliffean models, Gaskell brings to the surface a story of violence and oppression, throwing into relief fraught issues within mid-Victorian society.

Along similar lines, Margaret Oliphant’s supernatural tales represent haunted houses inhabited by the presence/absence of female ancestors. In the third chapter Liggins offers important insights into her 1889 collection of *Stories of the Seen and Unseen*, which is pivoted around the paradigm of visibility/invisibility and explores the

disturbing boundary between life and death in the decades of the so-called golden age of spiritualism. Here the critic's view expands upon Henri de Certeau's idea of pasts stolen from readability in connection with space, adding a gendered perspective to it by focusing on some specific rooms or parts of the house. Among them, one of the most intriguing is certainly the garden, owing to its ambivalence within Bachelard's inside/outside dialectic which is central to Liggins' s discussion. While belonging to the house, the garden is also outside it, it is at once "domestic and unhomely" (84), and a fitting place for spectres.

The fourth chapter deals with Vernon Lee's Italian ghost stories, in the light of her travel writing and through the lens of that particular declination of ruin studies that examines the turn-of-the-century fascination for decayed orchards and gardens: for Lee, as a country with a complex relationship with the memories and secrets of its past, Italy is the place where "the most poetic and pathetic" (Lee, 1901: 60) gardens can be found. Again, as with Oliphant, spatial theorists provide new insights into Lee's fiction. A noteworthy example among others is the analysis of "The Winthrop's Adventure", a less-known story which on closer re-examination "offers a subtle and quite different version of the architectural uncanny" (130).

The influence of Vernon Lee is evident in Edith Wharton's tales such as "The Duchess at Prayer", a disturbing story set in a ruined villa in Italy, in which the organisation of space is inextricably intertwined with the power relationships between husband and wife. Images of imprisonment are pervasive, signifying women's oppression and failure to appropriate and navigate domestic space freely. Even the garden, a prominent part of the house, as Wharton points out in her seminal work *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), and undoubtedly an important part of her own mansion, the Mount, is ultimately under male control.

Patriarchal conceptualisations of space are interrogated in May Sinclair's ghost stories as well. Chapter Six includes a number of examples from her short fiction. At the core of it are Sinclair's figures of female revenants and the idea of claustrophobia, closely associated with the modern home. It is in the "compact space" (196) of modern domesticity, a site of ambiguities, both unsettling and desirable, that female spectres appear, (re)appropriating rooms like the library, as in "The Token", and the bedroom. Liggins's analysis in this chapter closes with one of Sinclair's most disturbing tales: in "Where their Fire is not Quenched" the heroine experiences a growing claustrophobia, which suggests women's struggles to find their place and identity in a "horrifying modernity" (222).

The twentieth-century world and the modern house become even more horrifying in Elizabeth Bowen's fiction, examined in the seventh and final chapter before the Conclusion. Her ghost stories, especially those included in the collection *The Demon Lover* (1945) are pervaded by a sense of loss and emptiness. World War II brought about a radical transformation in the domestic sphere, destroying old spaces as well as producing, in Lefebvre's words, new spaces. Liggins situates Bowen's short

stories within the theoretical frame of War Gothic, while also returning to the architectural uncanny which in the 1945 collection finds its ultimate and most disquieting incarnation. Haunted and haunting houses, objects and memories all coalesce in Bowen's narrative, giving expression to women's conflicted relationship with domesticity in the bewildered 1940s. Her characters are in fact, as she herself has been defined, "deeply haunted" and "profoundly death-inflected" (235), obsessed by the past and trying to rescue objects and memories from oblivion in a world that is literally falling to pieces. In this context, the house itself becomes a memory box, "both Pandora's box and memory-site" (278). The complex interplay between past and present, the spectral and the real dimensions is perhaps most unsettling in Bowen's ghost stories, which aptly bring to a close Emma Liggins's monograph.

If it is true that spectres reveal the in-depth fears and desires of an era, then *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories* has much to say about the period it considers, covering the second half of the nineteenth century and looking well beyond the reign of Victoria. The book suggests novel ideas for further research through a gendered approach to space and a thorough exploration of its implications in the light of spatial theories. The wide range of scholarly work on women's writing and the ghost story that is taken into account testifies to the vitality of this field of scholarship; however, many women, such as Rhoda Broughton, whose *Twilight Stories* Liggins edited in 2009, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon deserve more critical scrutiny from this perspective than they have so far received. There are still many haunted houses to map and secrets to unearth before women can be fully reinserted into the history of the ghost story.

Works Cited

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