

Review of Catherine Belsey, *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History*

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BOOK REVIEW

Catherine Belsey. *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History*. Edinburgh University Press, 2019. Softcover ISBN 978-1-4744-1737-2. ePub ISBN 978-1-4744-1739-6.

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Once, in a charity raffle, I won a ticket to have lunch with a Famous Author. The event was at a members-only club in Calgary, and when the dozen of us sat down in a private dining room, I realized the others looked like people who could afford to buy their tickets full price and who were probably not interested pushing the boundaries of literary interpretation. The Author was impressively professional, steering the conversation in ways that engaged everyone. She started telling ghost stories, particularly about the ghosts in some of the houses she had lived in. I quickly realized two things. First, ghost stories are a form of *lingua franca*; most people have their own ghost story, and everybody is fascinated by others' ghost stories. Second, ghost stories facilitate conversation, because most of them end with ambivalence about what happened, and that uncertainty opens a space for the next story. People attend to ghost stories because they are genuinely unsure: unsure about their own experience, unsure about how others will react to their storytelling, and unsure about the boundaries of life and what this world might actually contain.

Catherine Belsey is a British literary scholar best known for her studies of post-structuralist theory and of Shakespeare. Her prime example of the troubled dead who return is the ghost in *Hamlet* whose message to his son sets the tragedy in motion. Old Hamlet desires revenge for having been murdered. Ghosts almost always desire, and Belsey's earlier work on post-structuralism may be most evident in her interest in ghost stories as an intersection of multiple desires: those of the ghost, the narrator who is generally the one visited by the ghost, and the listeners. The troubled dead want various things: sometimes they want revenge, but also they want to comfort those who grieve for them, they want to warn

of impending disaster, and some want “restitution of property or the execution of their wills” (p. 206). What ghosts desire varies in different historical periods, reflecting “what a culture values and fears most to lose” (p. 206). But in any culture, ghosts most often want what any storyteller desires: “The dead want their stories to be heard” (p. 207). Old Hamlet readily makes himself heard, but the dramatic tension of many ghost stories is built around the ghost’s frustrated attempts to communicate.

Belsey tells a lot of ghost stories in chapters that progress chronologically. She looks back to a few of the famous ghosts in classical Greek and Roman literature, but her story about these stories begins in the mid-17th century, when official church teaching denied the existence of ghosts, but people believed in ghosts, and religions required spirits, so the compromise was that spirits might take the form of ghosts. “It followed,” she writes, “that an apparition was either angelic or devilish, and more likely to be providential” (p. 71). Belsey focuses on what was at stake: “These debates [over angelic or devilish spirits], esoteric to our ears, concerned nothing less than what it meant to be human” (p. 71). By the late seventeenth century, philosophers like Thomas Hobbes were arguing for a new form of materialism that challenged religious orthodoxy. Against this materialism, “the divines insisted [humans are] souls first and foremost, sharing our air with millions of providential spirits placed there to sustain us” (p. 71). Throughout the book, Belsey keeps this and other questions open, which is what ghost stories ask their listeners to do. “However strenuously science takes possession of dark corners, it seems that intense experiences—bereavement among them—can bring us up against what we don’t know for sure. Ghosts offer one way of giving a form to what still eludes rational definition” (p. 71).

What need not elude us, however, is the marked regularity in the conventions of how ghost stories are told, and the willingness of ghosts to follow conventions, mostly. For example, by the 18th century, the ghosts of virtuous women wore white and returned on benevolent missions, while evil female ghosts, predictably, wore black (p. 87). Ghosts may be unpredictable, but ghost stories follow narrative conventions. “In practice,” Belsey writes, “the unknown gradually accumulates its own repeated patterns, varying with time and place” (p. 218). The period during which ghosts troubled religious belief morphs by the later 18th century into Gothic novels’ concerns about the market economy and the boundaries of reason (p. 120). But periodization is never neat: literary ghost stories complemented but did not displace “winter’s tales” told in

an oral, folk tradition, often by the fireside (pp. 145, 216). This review, punctuated by selective quotation, risks making Belsey's argument seem more straightforward and didactic than it is. If ghost stories tell us anything, it's that the past is always returning unexpectedly. New conventions of storytelling are haunted by earlier ghost stories.

One of Belsey's most important lessons for narrative scholars is how to make inconclusiveness into the acceptable conclusion. In many ghost stories, the motive of the ghost is inconclusive (p. 89). Throughout the book she emphasizes that "ghosts defy categories" (p. 14); "In the end, the only safe generalization about ghost stories is that no generalizations hold" (p. 53; see also p. 185); and "if there is such a thing as ghost lore in general, its only rule is that beliefs about the walking dead are not consistent" (p. 197). These are expressions of Belsey's profound respect for stories themselves and for storytellers; her analysis exemplifies knowing the boundaries of analyzing.

Maybe what most of us want most from a book about ghost stories is an answer to the question Belsey puts succinctly: "Do ghosts belong in the world or in our heads?" (p. 233). She asks that question in the course of possibly her most sustained discussion, which is about Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. The closest Belsey comes to answering this question may be her repeated observation that "Ghosts belong in stories, whether these announce themselves as true or fictitious" (p. 88). That's not to say ghosts exist only in stories, but I do read Belsey saying that we know ghosts through storytelling. Many of these stories are written, but primarily ghost stories are *heard*, as winter's tales are heard by firelight. When Shakespeare puts the ghost of Old Hamlet on stage, audience response depends on his voice: "Voices matter," Belsey argues; "In their materiality, they link us to others at a visceral level" (p. 198). One of the most interesting issues in the book is the relation between aural listening and reading.

Reports of apparitions in churchyards may be less prevalent today, but Belsey concludes by attending to our modern troubled dead, which include the "ghosts of past injustices" (p. 245) that haunt the present. By the time she gets to one of her biggest questions—"Isn't all writing haunted?" (p.251)—Old Hamlet stands beside Jacques Derrida, and the world is filled with spectres in multiple forms. Only a scholar of Belsey's experience could organize—yet resist synthesizing—the breadth of material in this concise and entertaining book. Belsey knows too much about haunting to claim any definitive conclusions about ghosts or their

stories. Returning spirits are most successful at demonstrating the false illusion of finality.

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