“Winter Stories — Ghost Stories... Round the Christmas Fire”: Victorian Ghost Stories and the Christmas Market

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Abstract

Using the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” in the 1852 Christmas number of Dickens’s Household Words as a case study, this paper examines how the publication of Victorian ghost stories in Christmas numbers redefines the ghost story, transforming it from a modern text participating in contemporary debates on spiritualism into a social text participating in the broader cultural project of reaffirming the nation’s (religious) traditions in the face of (secular) modernity. While the themes of Christmas ghost stories explicitly address social issues and secular, middle-class cultural values, the morals and social traditions promoted by Christmas fiction cannot exist outside of the era’s contemporary conversations about the place of religion in a modern, industrial society. The ghosts and goblins of Dickens’s Christmas fiction address and attempt to correct the social ills of modern society through a secularised application of Christian values and behaviours.
Christmas ghost stories? It makes sense, if you think about it. The yuletide fills us with hope for the new year and a longing to reconnect with the people we’ve lost. That’s why, every year, people of the Victorian era gathered around the fire and told Christmas ghost stories. That’s why, every year, people of the Victorian era gathered around the fire and told Christmas ghost stories. Victorians loved scaring each other. Source: (pinterest.com). We often think of winter as a time when everything dies, and the winter solstice is when Earth is at its coldest and furthest from the Sun. The Puritans kept Christmas ghost stories from becoming a thing. Source: (pinterest.com). If something was fun in the 16th century, you can be sure that the Puritans did their best to squash it. The first key to a Christmas ghost story is a convivial atmosphere. People in these stories are well fed, they’re often hanging out in groups, you feel like you’re hanging out with them, and you do not wish to leave any more than they do. It is cold outside but warm in here, and it’s time to rediscover that sense of play that so many of us adults lose over the years, and which, when we are fortunate, we remember to rediscover at Christmas. Next, a game might be proposed, say, a game of telling stories. Then comes the terror. Cards, as it were. A brother and sister have recently taken possession of a house willed to them, and the demise of their benefactor plays out like some horrible, woebegone mummer’s act. “Christmas Re-union,” by Sir Andrew Caldecott (1912). Telling ghost stories during winter is a hallowed tradition, a folk custom stretches back centuries, when families would wile away the winter nights with tales of spooks and monsters. “A sad tale’s best for winter,” Mamillius proclaims in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale: “I have one. Of sprites and goblins.” But by then the ghost of Christmas ghost stories had taken on an afterlife of its own, and other writers rushed to fill the void that Dickens had left. By the time of Jerome’s 1891 Told After Supper, he could casually joke about a tradition long ensconced in Victorian culture. If some of these later ghost stories haven’t entered the Christmas canon as Dickens’ work did, there’s perhaps a reason.