

***The Ghost Story, 1840 – 1920*, by Andrew Smith**

**Pam Lock**

Andrew Smith's new book, *The Ghost Story, 1840 – 1920: A Cultural History*, is a predominantly Marxist view on the influence the economic crises during the long nineteenth century had on the ghost story and, conversely, the use of the language associated with the genre on economic theory of the time. In his introduction, Smith states that his aim is a 'reconsideration' of Briggs's *Night Visitors: Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* and also a study of the 'politics' of the ghost story, focussing on the issue of 'how to read the spectre'.<sup>1</sup> In a later chapter, Smith describes the book as an exploration of 'how a variety of socio-political concerns became articulated through a discourse of spectrality between 1840 and 1920'.<sup>2</sup> Upon this economic foundation, Smith builds an interesting series of discussions which extensively references Freud while also solidly engaging colonial and feminist theories. As Matt Foley states in his recent review, 'There is, then, a certain awareness of the impossibility of reading the ghost as performing just one function and a suggestion of its multifacetedness as a literary trope'.<sup>3</sup> Smith's selection of authors includes well known writers of the time such as Charles Dickens, M. R. James and Wilkie Collins, and lesser known names such as Charlotte Riddell. Some readers may question the presence of a whole chapter focussing on Henry James in a book about the British ghost story, but Smith justifies this adequately in his introduction to that chapter by anglicizing James convincingly enough.

Chapter 1 consists of a wide ranging discussion of the economics of the Gothic, including a perceptive exploration of Marx's use of Gothic language and symbolism to 'demonise capitalism'. His account of the Stock Exchange is particularly interesting in its ghostly aspects. However, much of this chapter is devoted to the Gothic in general rather than to the ghost story specifically. Smith concentrates on explaining the economic

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Smith, *The ghost story, 1840-1920: A cultural history* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> Matt Foley, 'Review: Andrew Smith, *The ghost story, 1840-1920: A cultural history*' in *The Gothic Imagination* (University of Stirling), 23. July 2012, <http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/blog/andrew-smith-the-ghost-story-1840-1920-a-cultural-history/>

theories themselves and spends very little time linking that to specific ghost stories, giving mostly general examples and little textual analysis from the literature discussed. The following textually focussed chapters slightly suffer from this tendency but the ghost story is sufficiently present in the remainder of the book.

The following eight chapters expand satisfyingly from the contextualizing overview of theories surrounding the ghost story, through a variety of textual analyses, to the conclusion. Smith's ideas on the transition to paper money being one of the many financially destabilizing changes which led to the linking of the ghost with money are particularly persuasive. His discussion of Charlotte Riddell is inspiring, particularly in the relation of her work to the writing of Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens. The differences elucidated in their critical engagement with social and economic themes, are very enlightening. Smith's rather combative discussion of M. R. James and the fascinating glimpse into the dubious world of Spiritualism of the period (Chapter 5), particularly the section on *The Book of the Golden Key* and its debt to the works of H. Rider Haggard is detailed and convincing.

It is perhaps bold of Smith to include a section on the anonymously published 'The Ghost in the Bank of England' in a chapter on Wilkie Collins when he himself confesses more than once that it has never been proved to be Collins's work. There are also a few small factual errors. For example, Smith, when discussing Hoffman's 'The Sandman', cites Nathaniel as the narrator of the story; this is a mistake which Freud too makes in his essay on 'The Uncanny' and which momentarily throws the reader into doubts over the authority of Smith's textual discussion. This, however, is a temporary feeling; the majority of the work is carefully considered and shows a wide-ranging knowledge of the texts and authors of Smith's chosen period.

Smith's structure is clear and his habit of sketching what he will be discussing at the beginning of each respective chapter and then producing a further summary at the end, although slightly repetitive for the comprehensive reader, will doubtless be very helpful to the skim reading scholar searching for something particular. This is made more valuable as the index is rather scanty, although the bibliography is extensive and helpful. The ongoing popularity of the genre, coupled with Smith's accessible and attractive style, indicates that this book is likely to appeal to a wide academic and popular audience.

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### **Bibliography**

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