Considers the ways ghost stories appeal to our uneasy relationship with conventional good sense

What do they want, the ghosts that, even in the age of science, still haunt our storytelling? Catherine Belsey’s answer to the question traces Gothic writing and tales of the uncanny from the ancient past to the present – from Homer and the Icelandic sagas to *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Taking Shakespeare’s Ghost in *Hamlet* as a turning point in the history of the genre, she uncovers the old stories the play relies on, as well as its influence on later writing. This ghostly trail is vividly charted through accredited records of apparitions and fiction by such writers as Ann Radcliffe, Washington Irving, Emily Brontë, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, M. R. James and Susan Hill. In recent blockbusting movies, too, ghost stories bring us fragments of news from the unknown.

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Prelude

The Changing Shapes of Dorothy Dingley

Strange news from Cornwall

Ghosts don’t stay put. Seen by glimpses, they come and go unpredictably. And so, it seems, do their stories. The tale of Dorothy Dingley, due to evolve as time went on, first entered the written record in the seventeenth-century memoir of the Reverend John Ruddle.

On 20 June 1665 Parson Ruddle was unexpectedly drawn into a ghost story, when an elderly gentleman and his wife appealed to him for help with their son. The lad, once full of promise, was now in a serious decline. His parents suspected the boy of malingering. His reluctance to go to school might be the effect of laziness; perhaps he was in love; alternatively, it might be that he wanted an excuse to join his elder brother in London. But the youth himself maintained that he was haunted and they counted on the minister to talk him out of such fancies.

Left alone with the boy, the parson found him open and frank. For a year or so on his way to school, he claimed, a woman had passed him, sometimes more than once in the same field. At first, he had paid no attention, supposing her to be a local resident, but when he looked more closely, he recognised Dorothy Dingley, dead
these eight years. He often spoke to her but she never replied. When he changed his route, she changed hers and met him in the lane.

To the boy’s relief, Rev. Ruddle agreed to walk with him the next morning. And there, in a field well away from human habitation, was the woman, just as the boy had described. The minister had meant to address the ghost but somehow could not bring himself to do so, nor to look back at the departing figure.

Puzzled, but thoroughly enlisted in the adventure, he returned to the field alone as soon as other matters permitted, and there she was again, only ten feet away. A third time, the boy and his parents came too. On this occasion, she seemed to move faster. Ruddle and the boy turned to follow her but she crossed the stile and then vanished. He now noticed that she appeared to glide rather than walk. And a spaniel that had joined the company barked and ran away. The terrified parents, who had attended Dingley’s funeral eight years before, had no wish to encounter the apparition a second time.

In the end, the clergyman resolved that he must speak to the ghost. At five the next morning he crossed the stile into the field. He spoke authoritatively to the dead woman and gradually, reluctantly, she replied. They met again an hour after sunset and, in the light of their exchanges, the spectre vanished for good. The testimony, committed to writing by Mr Ruddle himself, concludes with an assertion of its veracity. ‘These things are true, and I know them to be so, with as much certainty as eyes and ears can give me.’

Ruddle dated his manuscript 4 September 1665, adding that, since he was young and new to the area, he thought it best to keep the story to himself. It appeared in print even so, but not until 1720, when ‘A Remarkable Passage of an Apparition’ was included, somewhat incongruously, in a pamphlet about a deaf fortune-teller, and then reprinted in a more substantial volume that same
year, the second edition of *The History of the Life and Adventures of Mr Duncan Campbell*.

What prompted publication over fifty years on? In the early eighteenth century, accredited ghost stories had become highly saleable. For half a century or more, the Anglican Church had felt itself threatened by materialist Enlightenment philosophies that allowed no special place for the supernatural. If there were no ghosts, or no possibility of suspending the laws of nature, the way was open to declare that there was no God. In defence of religion, a number of divines took to promoting the apparitions that a century earlier Protestantism had denied as delusions of the devil. Stories of attested encounters with spirits, always popular, became exceptionally marketable.

So, at the same time, did anything written by Daniel Defoe. For many years, it was believed that the Ruddle memoir was actually the work of Defoe, master impersonator of other fictional storytellers, including the prostitute Moll Flanders, as well as the largely imaginary castaway Robinson Crusoe. Defoe was already known as the author of *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs Veal*. Why not add, then, the record of an obscure Cornish clergyman’s encounter with the supernatural? But that attribution is no longer secure and John Ruddle’s authorship remains a distinct possibility.

**The tale evolves**

Ghosts exist in their stories, and Dorothy Dingley’s did not end with publication in 1720. Instead, it was to survive as the theme of speculation and debate. Her tale would be variously defended as fact or enhanced as fiction, and would develop as time went on to accommodate new modes of storytelling. Dorothy’s spectre
slipped from memoir to history, and from there to romance, short story and, eventually, folklore, shifting in line with these distinct genres.

The narrative also changed with the times, marking new ways of understanding what it was to be a ghost. In addition, it came to focus more specifically on what might trouble a woman in the grave. As her tale was taken up, explained, embellished and elaborated, the matter that drove Dorothy to walk, unspecified in Ruddle’s memoir, was gradually sexualised.

While her changing shapes demonstrate the power of ghost stories to seduce successive generations of writers and readers, they also throw into relief some of the difficulties we meet in engaging with the troubled dead. In 1817, nearly a century after its first appearance in print, the haunting made its way into local history. C. S. Gilbert reproduced the story in his *Historical Survey of the County of Cornwall*, adding that the boy’s father, unnamed by Ruddle (now Ruddell), was Mr Bligh of Botathen. Seven years later, Fortescue Hitchins and Samuel Drew summarised the story in their own *History of Cornwall*. They too named the Bligh family but this time the ghost was identified as Dorothy Durant.

These historians evidently found the story sufficiently credible to merit such supplementary information. Drew, who edited *The History of Cornwall*, adds a note of personal scepticism: ‘On this strange relation, the editor forbears to make any comment.’ But he did not delete the narrative from the historical record. Gilbert, on the other hand, was inclined to take the matter seriously, as, from a different perspective, was T. M. Jarvis, who in 1823 included the tale among his *Accredited Ghost Stories*, a work designed to support the religious case for the immortality of the soul.

If the story proved attractive to local historians and defenders of the supernatural, it was even more seductive to writers of
fiction. What mattered in 1720 was that a dead woman genuinely walked and the supernatural was real. In the epoch of the novel, however, the pressing question was *why* she walked. What so troubled Dorothy Dingley that she could not sleep in her grave? In 1845 Anna Eliza Bray took Ruddell’s account from Gilbert’s history and included it in her romance, *Trelawny of Trelawne*. Mrs Bray was more alert than Hitchins and Drew to the nuances of the record. In Gilbert, as in the Ruddle memoir he repeated, the boy’s mother was a ‘gentlewoman’, the ghost a ‘woman’. Bray’s novel makes Dorothy a servant. Her guilty secret, revealed at last in the field to the minister, is that she once concealed documents proving that the haunted boy was in reality the true heir to a landed estate. Years later, the dead nursemaid walks the field to meet her former charge. Eventually, she tells Mr Ruddell where to look for the papers and justice is finally done.

This avowedly fictional explanation was not to be the last, however. In 1867 R. S. Hawker published what has since become a canonical Victorian chiller. ‘The Botathen Ghost’ first appeared in Charles Dickens’s journal *All the Year Round*. There Hawker claims to have had access to the original ‘diurnal’ of Parson Ruddall, as the vicar has now become. On the basis of this journal, Hawker resets the story in winter, the appropriate time for apparitions. He also reduces the interval between the funeral and the sighting to three years, within the likely reach of a schoolboy’s memory. The allusion to tradition, along with increased probability of detail, brings the tale into line with the conventions of nineteenth-century ghost stories.

Moreover, since ghosts are dedicated followers of fashion, the spectre now adjusts her appearance accordingly. The solid revenant that the lad initially mistook for a local woman has here taken on the wraithlike features of a properly Gothic ghost.
Dorothy (now Dinglet) has a ‘pale and stony face’ with ‘strange and misty hair’. ‘She floated along the field’, the minister records in Hawker’s version, ‘like a sail upon a stream, and glided past the spot where we stood, pausingly. But so deep was the awe that overcame me’, he continues, ‘as I stood there in the light of day, face to face with a human soul separate from her bones and flesh, that my heart and purpose both failed me.’ Hawker’s ghost is a phantom, visible but not to be mistaken for a living body, at once perceptible and insubstantial, of a different composition from her material surroundings.

_A sexual secret_

As this development implies, the supernatural has a history. Ghosts change their nature from one epoch to the next. And that differential history also redefines the nature of the trouble that wakens the dead. While any kind of unfinished business might keep male ghosts from resting in peace, by the nineteenth century what had come to trouble women most was their sexual past. Hawker’s fictional parson notes that, on recognising Dorothy Dinglet, the boy’s elderly father, Mr Bligh, shows signs of anxiety. When the clergyman finally persuades the ghost to speak, she confesses to ‘a certain sin’, although the minister does not name it. Since ‘Pen and ink would defile the thoughts she uttered’, those thoughts remain veiled. At evensong, the minister has a long talk with ‘that ancient transgressor’ Mr Bligh, who shows ‘great horror and remorse’. Satisfied with his penitence, the ghost is duly laid to rest.

Whose was the unspeakable sin? Mr Bligh’s, evidently. But was Dorothy his victim, or his willing partner? The story does not say. We are invited to construe that the sin was sexual – and our guess may be a good deal more lurid than anything that could be
The Changing Shapes of Dorothy Dingley

spelt out in a Victorian journal for family reading. In the story the facts remain elusive, shadowy and uncertain – like ghosts, perhaps. If sex has now become the female secret, it remains undefined, suggested in hints for imagination to work on.

Oddly enough, however, part of Hawker’s fiction resurfaced in the twentieth century as popular local legend and, in the process, Dingley’s story acquired a more specific sexual core. In 1940 Christina Hole incorporated ‘The Botathen Ghost’ into her *English Folklore*. This book, claiming the story as Cornish belief, actually reproduced word for word Hawker’s description of the apparition, complete with the stony face and misty hair. But it omitted the guilty secret. Thirty years later, when the renowned folklorist Katharine Briggs repeated Hole’s account in her four-volume *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*, she tentatively adduced a different cause for the dead woman’s restlessness. Briggs stated in a footnote that, according to ‘Hunt’, Dorothy had had an affair with the elder brother of the boy she haunted.

But it turns out that Robert Hunt, author of *Popular Romances of the West of England*, published in 1865 and frequently reprinted, had made no such claim. On the contrary, he abridged, with acknowledgement, the account given by the historian, C. S. Gilbert, which matches the first printed version of 1720, and makes no reference whatever to a troubled past for Dorothy. What could have prompted the scholarly Briggs to suppose he did? By this time, there were in circulation several versions of the earliest printed account. Was the affair between Dorothy and the elder brother a creative misreading of John Ruddle’s memoir? Romance, after all, came into that story, however obliquely. The worried parents thought love might be to blame for the boy’s decline. He also had an elder brother who had gone to London. Had these two pieces of information somehow been elided?
Indeed they had, but not, in the first instance, by local legend. Instead, they were brought together in ‘The Woman in the Way’, a short story by Oliver Onions and published in 1924 in a collection called *Ghosts in Daylight*. Here the tale is presented as fiction and the storytelling is as ingenious as the sexual politics are misogynist. ‘The Woman in the Way’ begins with John Ruddle’s memoir. It pays close attention to the particulars of the narrative, points to the gaps there and fills them with what it explicitly calls conjecture. It inventively coaxes the memoir to reveal that the boy’s mother ‘wears the breeches’ in the household. When her elder son shows signs of wanting to make his fortune in the big city, what would she do but find him a nice local girl to marry instead? But suppose he had already contracted a relationship of his own with Dorothy Dingley? And what if Dorothy, scorned by the family as not good enough for their son, chose in anger to lead him on? We cannot be sure, the story continues, whether the elder son left for London teased but rejected, or whether, on the contrary, he prevailed with the young woman and departed in triumph. Either way, Dorothy died but, after seven years, returned to set about a vengeful seduction of the younger boy in his turn. No wonder the parents were frightened when they recognised her in the field.

**Truth**

In the fiction of the roaring twenties, then, the ghost has become a vamp – and half a century later Dorothy’s sexual relationship with the elder brother has entered Briggs’s *Dictionary* as folklore. In the three hundred years since 1720, a tale that, in the first instance, may or may not have been invented passes into history and, from there, back into fiction, which then reappears as local
legend. The story of Dorothy Dingley/Durant/Dinglet is still told in the neighbourhood of Launceston and in some current versions she died in childbirth, after a sexual relationship with the boy’s brother, who abandoned her and disappeared in London.

Where, if anywhere, does the truth lie? Is there anything here that we can safely believe? Did Dorothy Dingley ever live? If so, did she walk after her death? Did John Rudden/Ruddell/Ruddall lay her ghost to rest and record the encounter but not what she said? At the heart of this evolving story is a spectral woman who cannot rest until she tells her secret. Her motive for walking might or might not be a troubled sexual past. But her existence, real or imagined, depends on a memoir, itself conceivably genuine, but possibly not. All we have is the version of it printed in 1720. The original manuscript of this memoir, dated 1665, remains as spectral, as uncertain, as the ghost herself.

What do we know for sure? It turns out that the Reverend John Ruddle existed – and the variations in the spelling of his name are not out of the ordinary. He was vicar of Launceston at the date of the haunting until his death in 1698. But did he write about the ghost, and was his record put into print in 1720? Dingley was a common name in the neighbourhood. The topographical accuracy, such as it is, remains remarkable: the author seems to have known the neighbourhood.

But it remains a puzzle that the Cornish manuscript should have come into the possession of a London publisher so long after the events in question and in defiance of the secrecy Ruddle had thought prudent. On the other hand, by 1720 John Ruddle had been safely dead for more than two decades, and the hauntings had taken place over thirty years before that. No one was likely to complain at the release of his secret; equally, no one was likely to be in a strong position to challenge the veracity of the published tale.
During the nineteenth century, various respectable people claimed that others, equally impeccable, had seen the original memoir. Evidence for the truth of the record, stoutly declared incontrovertible, was in practice thin, and no manuscript has been produced. In the event, when it comes to apparitions, it may be that the truth is not an option. Facts are elusive; too much is lost in the telling and retelling.

Fabrication, on the other hand, belongs to a distinct category. That the truth is out of reach or uncertain does not mean that there is no difference in principle between attested narratives and stories that are simply made up. It is too easy to assume that, if truth cannot be guaranteed, ‘it’s all fiction’, as they say. Even if the line between the two is not always hard and fast, there is a distinction between accredited stories and inventions. The difficulty, however, as Dorothy Dingley’s story demonstrates, is to tell one from the other.

While truth remains an object of desire, it does not necessarily lie waiting for us on the other side of writing or speech. The troubled dead walk in their stories, and perhaps only there. Those tales have a history and, as the consecutive revivals and rewritings of this one imply, a strong and continuing appeal to readers and listeners. That history and that appeal are the main concerns of this book.
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by Catherine Belsey

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