January 1999

Review: Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead and Cultural Transformation by R. C. Finucane

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Recommended Citation
Young, Bailey K., "Review: Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead and Cultural Transformation by R. C. Finucane" (1999). Faculty Research & Creative Activity. 47.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/history_fac/47

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We all know that ghosts have a story to tell--Shakespeare's Hamlet and Henry James's The Turn of the Screw are built around them--but now, thanks to R. C. Finucane, we can discover that ghosts have a history as well. The pale shades wandering, helpless and forgotten, around Homer's underworld are in striking contrast to the medieval phantom knight who sallies from a ruined Iron Age camp to do baffle with an intrepid living adversary, or to the mesmerized spirits summoned up by such Victorian mediums as the Fox sisters to reveal secrets to the living, or answer their inquiries and, in general, give reassurance that there is a life after death. As the author avows on the first page of his introduction, his true subject is how perceptions of the dead evolved in Western European traditions, and even this scope narrows, once we get beyond the Renaissance, as English and Anglo-American examples increasingly dominate. Some justification for a restricted focus at the modern end can be advanced; so keen was the Victorian enthusiasm for ghosts and spiritualism that in 1882 the Society for Psychical Research was founded and set about, in (dead) scientific earnest, collecting and evaluating reports of "sightings," making a "census of hallucinations" between 1889 and 1892, and two years later publishing the results based on some 17,000 answers to the "census" questionnaire.

Some typical ghost stories and themes can be found in Classical times: the Roman writer, Pliny, describes a house haunted by a spectre rattling his chains, for example. The "unquiet dead" appear to demand redress (wrongful death or failure to provide proper burial rites are often to blame). Living family members are regarded as responsible for the well-being of their deceased kin in the afterlife. Classical ghosts can see into the future, and from time to time one will offer advice or prophesy, as in the famous episode in the Aeneid in which Anchises, the dead father of Aeneas, forsees the future greatness of Rome. But dealing with Classical ghosts was usually a sad and vapid business; moved by the sight of his dead friend Patroclus, Achilles tries to embrace him, only to hug thin air. In this respect, Christianity wrought major changes in attitudes toward the dead that were much more dramatic than R. A. Finucane depicts in chapter two. Although the author cites Peter Brown's biography of Saint Augustine, he neglects this same author's The Cult of the Dead, which is vital to the subject. The "Very Special Dead," as Brown calls martyrs and other deceased saints, not only became the objects of regular veneration, thanks to their powers of intercession for the salvation of the living, but also intervened most vigorously in the affairs of the world to reward the good and to punish the bad. One deceased saintly bishop of Lyons appeared to his successor in a dream to admonish him for some neglect; then, when the fault was not promptly corrected, he returned to beat him black and blue. Finucane puts more emphasis on how the new, twelfth-century concept of Purgatory, by redefining the topography of the afterlife, led to a new, Christian-didactic role for ordinary (sinner) ghosts, who might appear to the living to illustrate with their own story some religious truth. Thus, late-medieval ghosts helped to reinforce Church teachings about punishment and reward after death, and particularly to underline the reality of Purgatory.

It is in regard to this dogma that the Reformation sundered, Finucane holds, European attitudes toward the unquiet dead. Catholics on the whole stuck with the medieval attitudes, accepting the reality of spectres and arguing for the doctrine of Purgatory. Protestants, having denied Purgatory as a popish error, were more challenged. Some identified ghosts as demons. Others promoted a more skeptical attitude toward claims of sightings, looking for signs of fraud, error, or both. This latter trend would eventually lead to "Enlightenment and Atheism," which is discussed in chapter six. Deists, like John Toland, ridiculed popular beliefs in ghosts and miracles as mere superstition. But the great merit of Finucane's book is to demonstrate how fascination with the supernatural has been a tenacious and perennial feature of Western culture, despite or sometimes because of the complexities and ambiguities involved. Take the ghost in Hamlet. In origin a Classical revenge-ghost such as one might find in Seneca, the intense suffering of Hamlet's father would suggest to some the pains of Purgatory and lead others to sniff the smoke of the demon. "Be thou a spirit of heath or goblin damn'd...." Hamlet, himself unsure, cries out. Shakespeare has again anticipated and summed up the modern dilemma: what is one to believe?

This dilemma is brought home in the last chapter, "The Thirst for Immortality" with its evidence of the great, middle-class vogue for ghosts, apparitions, Gothic horror stories, seances, table-rapping, mesmerism, and so forth, coinciding with the high tide of the scientific-materialist attack on religious faith altogether. The body of data provided by the Society for Psychical Research suggests that more women than men reported apparitions (61
percent to 39 percent), many more of these involving figures known to be alive (44 percent) than known to be
dead (16 percent) (192). A large number of sightings (40 percent) were of total strangers; this in itself is a telling
change from the days when ghosts were usually part of the family. The twentieth century appears to be quite
unoriginal; the variety of notions and scenarios perfected in the nineteenth century are endlessly replayed. What,
then, is Finucane's conclusion? "In a Christian society assailed by skepticism and science, but influenced too by
romantic hopes and visions, Victorian apparitions satisfied the thirst for immortality" (212). His book offers an
entertaining introduction to deeply embedded notions of the supernatural in the Western world that will perhaps
whet the appetite to learn more.

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