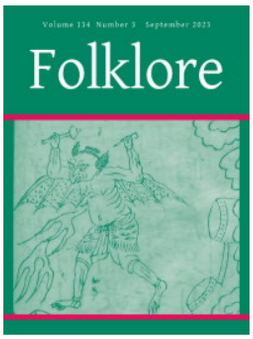

Folklore

ISSN: 0015-587X (Print) 1469-8315 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfol20

‘He Could Raise and Lay Ghosts at His Will’: Victorian Folklorists and the Creation of Early Modern Clerical Ghost-Laying

Brendan C. Walsh

To cite this article: Brendan C. Walsh (2023) ‘He Could Raise and Lay Ghosts at His Will’: Victorian Folklorists and the Creation of Early Modern Clerical Ghost-Laying, Folklore, 134:3, 281-303, DOI: 10.1080/0015587X.2023.2187157

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2023.2187157

Folklore 134 (September 2023): 281-303
https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2023.2187157

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'He Could Raise and Lay Ghosts at His Will': Victorian Folklorists and the Creation of Early Modern Clerical Ghost-Laying

Brendan C. Walsh

Abstract

Folk legends of brave clergymen confronting terrifying apparitions in fields and houses can be heard all throughout rural England. Situated in the early modern period, these tales establish the archetype of the 'conjuring parson' and perpetuate the spiritual tradition of 'ghost-laying': the exorcism of ghosts. Clerical ghost-laying, however, is a spiritual tradition without a well-founded historical or theological precedent. The few extant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary depictions of this practice are largely satirical or polemical in nature. Tales of early modern clergymen exorcising restless spirits actually originate from the pens of Victorian authors who developed the sensationalist folkloric exploits of conjuring parsons to fulfil their own literary or political agendas. Through a comparison of early modern and Victorian literary accounts—focusing on the Botathen Ghost haunting—this article illustrates that the genre of clerical ghost-laying lacks any substantial claim to historical, literary, or theological legitimacy.

Introduction

The early modern figure of the 'conjuring parson', a clergyman able to command and put to rest wandering spirits, is a familiar one in English folklore. Tales of skilled spiritual men confronting terrifying apparitions in fields and houses can still be heard in villages throughout England, perpetuating the tradition of 'ghost-laying': the exorcism of ghosts (Young 2018, 59). Clerical ghost-laying, however, is a spiritual tradition without a well-founded historical or theological precedent; predominantly derived from a small corpus of satirical and polemical depictions. While the practice was recognized in medieval England, it was not a prominent clerical rite. The first literary portrayal of ghost-laying enacted by an English clergyman is difficult to discern, but one memorable satirical entry in Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Colloquies* series (*c*.1518–33) provides a rough milestone. Vernacular representations, on the other hand, were not as forthcoming, only appearing intermittently throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During this period, exorcism (including ghost-laying) was openly derided by Protestant theologians and the ecclesiastical authorities, thereby shaping how this practice was depicted in literature. The notion of a well-defined

spiritual tradition of clerical ghost-laying in early modern England can thus be dismissed, as it was not endorsed by the episcopacy nor sufficiently represented in the extant literature. Rather, tales of early modern clergymen exorcising restless spirits originate from the pens of Victorian authors who developed the sensationalist folkloric exploits of conjuring parsons into their own genre. The elaborate ghost-laying ceremonies attributed to the early modern Protestant clergy are actually more aligned with the quasi-magical ceremonies performed by folk-healers and recusant Catholic priests. Owen Davies argues that there is little concrete evidence, apart from folklore, that English clergymen enacted elaborate rituals to exorcise ghosts (Davies 2007, 74). Francis Young provides a similar verdict (Young 2018, 63). The creation of this clerical tradition thereby reveals far more about Victorian-era spirituality than it necessarily does about early modern ghost beliefs, demonstrating a clear intention by these authors to establish a sense of cultural and ceremonial continuity with the past.

In particular, these Victorian stories of early modern ghost-laying demonstrate an over-reliance on folk belief and an ignorance of early modern ecclesiastical attitudes towards exorcism. The exorcism of 'any deuill or deuills' was regulated in 1604, with every case now requiring the explicit permission of a bishop.[1] There are few to no records of approval being given following this, as the episcopacy expressed uncertainty towards the efficacy of this spiritual rite and held serious reservations about the manifestation of demonic possession. Ghost exorcism was technically not prohibited by this legislation as English theologians never fully resolved the question of whether spirits were the remnants of dead people or demons, yet the prevailing theological and cultural trends of the period did not produce a supportive environment (Young 2018, 59). This questionable legality further complicates the notion of an early modern clerical tradition of ghost-laying. Conversely, it is probable that folk-healers, recusants, and nonconformist Protestant clerics dealt with restless spirits during this period, as the persistence of the 'fraudulent exorcist' literary motif into the eighteenth century does suggest a sustained cultural relevance (see Figure 1). Ghost-laying may have hence survived on the margins of English society as a genuine folk practice that appeared to be legitimized by an oral tradition of clerical spirit exorcism. Even if this is the case, the efforts of Victorian authors to establish ghost-laying as a clerical duty and locate the origin of it in the early modern period are highly problematic. As this article demonstrates through an exploration of the extant historical records, the sensationalist depiction of clerical ghost-laying perpetuated by Victorian writers does not align with the broader early modern attitudes towards spiritual intervention in ghost encounters.

Folkloric Intentions

Victorian-era England exhibited a profound fascination with folklore, and the tradition of clerical ghost-laying emerged from this vein. While ghost-laying folk stories can be found across the English counties, the most evocative examples are centred in the West Country and involve Cornish Anglican ministers (see Brown 1979). In this instance, it is possible that Victorian antiquarians and collectors were projecting broader folk beliefs onto the 'enchanted' landscape of Cornwall. The region's rich collection of legends and

Figure 1. '*Laying a Ghost!!*' The caption reads: 'He donna half like it—give un a little more Maister Parson and he'll vanish!' Hand-coloured etching and aquatint by Richard Newton, 1792, after George Moutard Woodward (two-shilling satirical print, Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, no. 2001,0520.37. Used with permission).

distinctive cultural identity certainly provided fertile ground for this process. Robert Hunt, an esteemed scientist and antiquarian, was instrumental in introducing Cornish folklore to a wider audience in 1865 with his two-volume collection *Popular Romances of the West of England, Or, The Drolls, Traditions and Superstitions of Old Cornwall* (Hunt 1865). One of the contributors to Hunt's collection, William Bottrell, proceeded to write at length on ghost-laying clergymen in his *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall* (Bottrell 1870). R. S. Hawker, vicar of Morwenstow, must be singled out here as he proved to be a pivotal figure in developing the conjuring parson genre. Hawker asserts in his 1870 *Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall* that isolation gave rise to the proliferation of ghost-laying pastors: 'Hence it came to pass that the Cornish clergyman,

insulated within his own limited sphere … became developed about middle life into an original mind and man, sole and absolute within his parish boundary, eccentric when compared with his brethren in civilised regions' (Hawker 1903, 159). This remark also speaks to the cultural perception of the Cornish, frequently exoticized by Victorian antiquarians as 'ignorant' and 'primitive' Celtic peasants. Even Hawker was regarded as especially superstitious by his contemporaries and, according to his editor C. E. Byles, was also a ghost-layer in his own right: 'It is on record that he once exorcised a rebellious vestry' (Hawker 1903, 175 n.1). Figures such as Hawker exemplify this archetype of the eccentric Cornish clergyman and in his writing there is indeed a sense of ghost-laying as a genuine clerical practice.

M. A. Courtney, in her *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore*, also attributes the tradition of ghost-laying to these regional beliefs: 'Well-educated people are still to be met with in Cornwall who are firm believers in apparitions, pixies … omens, and other supernatural agencies. Almost every parish has a legend in connection with its patron saint, and haunted houses abound' (Courtney 1890, 56). Rounding out this list is Reverend R. Wilkins Rees, who provided a brief yet comprehensive survey of early modern ghost-laying in *The Church Treasury of History, Custom, Folk-Lore, etc.* (Rees 1898). His chapter in this 1898 collection established the central tenets of ghost-laying folklore and summarized the spiritual practices that this tradition is predicated on. This work expresses a clear sense of continuity in this practice, with Rees remarking: 'Even in these days the clergy are not supposed to have lost this power over the spirit world, and quite recently there have been cases in which they were implored to exercise it' (Rees 1898, 241). He does qualify this point somewhat, however, and 'does not suppose … that any present occupant of the episcopal bench has received an application for a faculty [exorcism], notwithstanding the fact that we live in an age of Mahatmas, second-sight, visions, clairvoyance, astral planes, and other wonders' (Rees 1898, 267–68). While the work of these authors is indeed valuable, their reliance on folklore as a legitimate source for historical information is fraught with difficulties.

These writers are largely responsible for developing the genre of early modern clerical ghost-laying narratives. Their exact motivations can only be speculated upon, yet two (not mutually exclusive) motives emerge as probable. In both cases, it is difficult to parse out the extent to which they were simply recording oral stories versus 'creating' folklore of their own. The first motivation is literary sensationalism, as the more dramatic elements of ghost legends proved especially appealing, thereby producing a heightened depiction of the rural clergy grappling with restless spirits. This process, as Karl Bell has argued, was profoundly shaped by a 'Gothic modality'. Folklore certainly provided a foundation for many Gothic motifs that, once coalesced into a literary genre, were projected back onto the source material (Bell 2020, 16–17). This has the effect of emphasising the more lurid elements and superimposing generic narrative structures onto individual legends.

The second motivation is a reaction to waning ecclesiastical influence during the Victorian period—marked by a decline in church attendance and the growth of nonconformist institutions. Antiquarians like Hawker and Rees can be seen as advocating a conservative agenda aimed at reinforcing spiritual authority through romanticized

depictions of the clergy. On this point, Davies posits that ghost-laying stories 'reflect the continued rural perception of the Anglican clergy as a protective, unifying parochial force' (Davies 2007, 77). These individuals may have also been responding to sneering urban dissenters and liberals who dismissed rural customs as harmful 'superstition'; a curious reversal from earlier in the century when Anglicans were the 'rationalists'. Their efforts were surely encouraged by the rise of spiritualism in this period and a move towards recognizing village ghost tales as repositories of 'traditional' English culture (Waters 2015, 651). Accordingly, Hawker and Rees seemed entirely earnest about their beliefs in supernatural visitations. They were not alone in this. A few of their predecessors in the West Country were even reputed to be skilled in ghost-laying. During the early nineteenth century rumours circulated that one North Devon clergyman, known as 'Parson Joe', owned a black book of occult knowledge, while Reverend Hudson of West Harptree (Somerset) was said to have banished a ghost by putting a door key in a Bible and reciting the Lord's Prayer backwards (Davies 2007, 76–77). Such exploits are not backed up by any substantial textual records, but they do point to the practice of, or at least a belief in, ghost-laying in rural areas during this period (Young 2018, 63). The persistence of ghost-laying folklore may have thus implied a legitimate early modern origin to those Victorian writers examining it. The works of figures such as Bottrell, Hawker, Courtney, and Rees exemplify how such oral narratives were translated onto the page to create the conjuring parson genre.

In exploring the divergence of early modern and Victorian ghost-laying accounts, this article examines a collection of sources from each period. The article builds on the scholarship of Davies and Young by examining the broader early modern attitudes towards ghost-laying as established through the available literature; specifically, 'popular' texts from the latter half of the seventeenth century. These works provide an insight into ghost beliefs outside a learned context and illustrate that hauntings were often resolved without clerical intervention. Curiously, the few cases of ghost-laying in this corpus are largely the subject of ridicule and satire. Despite this, they seem to have been influential, forming the basis of folk legends that would define the pastoral duties of the early modern clergy for later audiences. The elaborate quasi-magical rituals attributed to conjurors and cunning-folk in these texts thus became the foundation for sensationalist Victorian-era stories of early modern ghost-laying clergy. A comparison of different versions of the 1665 Botathen Ghost haunting illustrates this point. What begins as an earnest early modern account of an encounter between a young parson and a spectre is transformed by Victorian authors into an elaborate portrayal of ritualistic ghost-laying and spiritual authority. The source material emphasizes the doctrinal recourse of devotional prayer, revealing the absence of an established liturgical tradition of ghost-laying. Later interpretations ignore this aspect completely, reflecting a dramatic shift in the genre, purpose, and form of English ghost-laying stories from the early modern to the Victorian period. Finally, this study surveys the fantastical tales of early modern ghost-layers that appear in the works of prominent Victorian folklorists and collectors. The powerful individuals featured in these works indicate that the literary genre of clerical ghost-laying is a Victorian construct, thereby serving an entirely different function from its early modern counterpart.

Reforming the Ghost

Conceptions of death and the afterlife underwent a dramatic re-evaluation during the first century of the Reformation. Driven by a reforming zeal, the English ecclesiastical authorities were determined to stamp out 'popish' beliefs in the restless dead, as seen by the introduction of a new Prayer Book in 1552 that removed the funeral mass and any direct address to the deceased. This approach was laden with difficulties, requiring theologians to discredit centuries of popular perceptions of spirits and reinterpret biblical examples of ghostly encounters such as the Witch of Endor (see Davies 2023). These efforts, along with the broader shifts taking place in English spirituality, reconceptualized the nature and function of spirits. Pre-Reformation theology attributed three different origins to a ghostly apparition: a demon, come to inflict its malice on humanity; an angel, delivering a divine message; and the spirit of a recently deceased person, returning from Purgatory with a specific purpose. The dismissal of Purgatory by Protestant theologians, at least from the doctrinal perspective, thereby eliminated the notion that ghosts were the wandering souls of the dead and reconfigured such entities as either angels or demons (Thomas 2003, 703). As miraculous angel visitations were deemed rare in these times, apparitions were primarily designated as demonic: evil spirits sent by the Devil to torment humanity. Ghosts did not disappear, though, with reports of hauntings and encounters persisting unabated. These ghostly encounters were subsequently configured within a providential schema, enacted by God to serve a specific purpose. This Reformed Protestant reading was established by treatises like Ludwig Lavater's 1569 *De Spectris, Lemuribus et Magnis Atque Insolitis Fragoribus*—translated into English by Robert Harrison as *Of Ghostes and Spirites, Walking by Nyght* in 1572. *Of Ghostes and Spirites, Walking by Nyght* asserted that 'all appearings of Soules and Spirites have quite vanished away' (Lavater 1572, 183). As such, any ghostly entity that contacted an individual was likely demonic in origin. Yet Lavater also allowed for the possibility of providential visitations; angelic beings that appeared in the guise of a departed soul with a revelatory message. This caveat was significant and allowed for some accommodation with popular considerations of ghostly hauntings.

Lavater's conception of ghosts was hugely influential on King James VI & I, one of the few native English-speakers to write at length on ghosts in the sixteenth century. In his influential 1597 *Daemonologie*, James designates all spirits as demonic in origin and categorizes them into four groups:

> they are in effect, but all one kinde of spirites, who for abusing the more of mankind, takes on these sundrie shapes … The first is, where spirites troubles some houses or solitarie places: The second, where spirites followes vpon certaine persones, and at diuers houres troubles them: The thirde, when they enter within them and possesse them: The fourth is these kinds of spirites that are called vulgarly the Fayrie. (James I 1597, 57)

In this schema, generic ghosts map to the first type and incorporate some of the second. Furthermore, spirits that appear 'in diuers and horrible forms, and making greate dinne' are called '*Lemures* or *Spectra*'. 'If they appeared in likenesse of anie defunct to some friends of his', James continues, 'they wer called *umbra mortuorum*' (James I 1597, 57). This was akin to the medieval concept of a wraith or revenant: corpses animated by a spirit. Protestant typologies of the demonic apparition

perpetuated by demonological authorities like James seem to be greatly shaped by traditional expectations of the ghostly revenant (Marshall 2002, 254). To this effect, the 1604 Witchcraft Act stipulated that the use of corpses for any form of sorcery or attempts to 'take any dead man woman or child out of his her or their grave' were capital offences.[2] Ghosts had evidently undergone a significant transformation in the sixteenth century and would continue to do so in the ensuing one.

The nature and function of spirits was subject to further change during the second half of the seventeenth century, as the original reformist position became diluted. In this period the pendulum swung back the other way and it became entirely respectable for learned Protestants to conceive of ghosts as something other than demons in human shape (Bath and Newton 2006, 3). While miracles were considered rare at the time, it was not beyond God to send back a human soul if it served a divine purpose. Some intellectuals simply dismissed ghosts altogether, opposing the prevailing Neoplatonist paradigm and advocating for a world composed entirely of matter. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, proposed such a mechanical materialist view in his controversial 1651 treatise *Leviathan* (Hobbes 1651). Scepticism towards witches, demons, ghosts, and other supernatural entities developed into an established theological position, drawing a response from other learned individuals concerned with this growing 'atheism'. The best known of these was Joseph Glanvill, who defended the infamous 1662–63 Drummer of Tedworth haunting in his *Saducismus Triumphatus* (Glanvill 1681), which inspired treatises like George Sinclair's *Satans Invisible World Discovered* (1685). Similarly, scholars like Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth argued that the denial of apparitions was tantamount to a denial of God (Thomas 2003, 706). At this point spirits had finally gained serious intellectual and theological currency in English society, opening the floodgates for further exposure in the country's booming print industry.

This lively debate consequently spilled into the popular press, which encompassed a wide spectrum of ghost beliefs. It is only with these texts that ghost-laying received any sustained focus. Ghost tales, according to Young, defied neat categorization and were thus somewhat ambiguous about whether the ghost was a demon or a returned soul (Young 2018, 60). Even if one subscribed to the belief that ghosts could either be the souls of departed humans or demons masquerading as spirits, one was still confronted by a serious diagnostic problem. There was certainly no infallible test that one could apply, as even the most convincing apparition could be constituted as the Devil, deploying his treachery (Davies 2007, 108–109). The anonymous pamphlet *A Narrative of the Demon of Spraiton* (1683), for example, features both sorts of spirits: one the remnant of a deceased individual requiring assistance from the living to settle unfinished business; the other a vengeful demon intent on causing harm. The exact meanings of ghostly apparitions were open and uncertain, both at the level of official theology and among those who actually found themselves confronted in the night with an inexplicable phenomenon (Marshall 2002, 2). Evidently, the status of spirits in the mid-to-late seventeenth century was far from settled and this uncertainty profoundly shaped ghostly encounters in the textual record.

The ghost fulfilled a wide variety of roles in popular English print: a vehicle for miracles; the propagandist of religious laws; evidence against witches; and empirical evidence for the existence of God (Bath and Newton 2006, 11). Tales of hauntings and dramatic encounters with spirits were a favourite subject of anonymously authored pamphlets, broadsides, and chapbooks during the latter half of the seventeenth century. They spanned multiple popular literary genres, including the 'prodigy', 'wonder', and 'true relations' variations, while also drawing on murder, romance, or treasure-hunting stories. The tales were didactic, establishing spirits as a providential vehicle and aligning them with Reformed doctrine. Ghost-laying was not a primary or consistent element of these stories, as the providential meaning of the apparition was given precedent over the duty of the clergy to intercede. Spectres usually appeared with a request or objective and once this revelatory meaning had been communicated, they disappeared. Readers were usually provided with the exact meaning of the haunting, such as in *A True Relation of the Horrid Ghost of a Woman*, which warns readers 'to let this fearful Precedent, as it hath been an unfeigned Spectacle, so let it be your real Example, and thereby so moderate your Deeds and Actions in this life' (*True Relation* 1673, 8). In other instances, ghosts were used to prove the existence of an afterlife and a divinely infused moral order (Butler 2011, 255). In *A Narrative of the Demon of Spraiton*, the author challenges disbelievers in the introduction with these powerful words: 'How long shall your Impious Incredulity Brave the Power of the Almighty, and shamefully shut your Eyes against the evident demonstrations of an Omnipotent Creator?' (*Narrative* 1683, 1). This approach can be taken as emblematic, illustrating a form of engagement between popular beliefs and doctrinal orthodoxy.

Murder pamphlets comprise the bulk of surviving print ghost literature from this period, situating their accounts of crime within a moralizing framework of both secular and spiritual order (Butler 2011, 253). The spirits in these works did not compete with ordinary methods of law enforcement and reserved their intervention for cases wherein an offence was undiscoverable by normal means (Thomas 2003, 713–14). The 1675 pamphlet *The Rest-less Ghost* exemplifies the ghost's primary role as an avenger. It outlines a haunting at the farmhouse of William Clark that became progressively more terrifying over time until the offending spirit materialized before Clark's eyes, 'at first in a very horrid, but immediately after in a more familiar and humane shape'. Clark challenges it to speak, and it replies: 'I am the disturbed Spirit of a person long since Dead, I was Murthered neer this place Two hundred sixty and seven years, nine weeks, and two days ago' by a man coveting his estate (Clark 1675, 5). The spirit cannot find peace until its earthly affairs are settled. Travelling to its original home in Southwark (London) and uncovering a cache of buried possessions, Clark is able to lay it to rest. Evidently, ghosts served many purposes in early modern England and exorcism was rarely the stipulated resolution. Clerical intervention was seldom required in these generic ghost tales, as the haunting was often resolved after God's revelatory message had been conveyed. Consequently, the existence of an established clerical tradition of ghost-laying is difficult to identify in the extant textual record.

Early Modern Ghost-Laying

In medieval England, there were only a few ceremonial practices that could offer protection against spirits. Such beings could be warded off with relics or sacred objects, along with the sign of the cross. Ghostly intruders could also be placed under oath with the word *conjuro*, requiring them to answer questions in similar fashion as exorcists did with demons (Young 2016, 90). However, the Reformation nullified many of these ceremonial protections. Reformed Protestant doctrine in confronting supernatural entities was relatively straightforward: faith and earnest prayer. This approach identified ghosts as demonic in origin, manifestations of diabolic power. Every Christian possessed the ability to ward off ghostly intrusions, depending on the strength of their faith. As was the case in popular ghost traditions, spirits needed to be addressed directly with the appropriate form of words. Invoking God's name or voicing the Lord's Prayer was usually enough to drive away the ghostly entity. King James outlines two methods of cleansing haunted houses that neatly encapsulate the Reformed Protestant perspective:

> The one is ardent prayer to God, both of these persones that are troubled with them, and of that Church whereof they are. The other is the purging of themselues by amendement of life from such sinnes, as have procured that extraordnarie plague. (James I 1597, 60)

If the individual's faith was not sufficient or the ghost did not declare its intentions, then seeking clerical mediation was advised. The 1674 pamphlet *Strange and Wonderful Nevvs from London-VVall* outlines the usual form that this mediation took. After reports of strange happenings at a London abode, a local clergyman was called upon for assistance. The minister arrived in the evening with 'several other able persons … and went to prayer'. He then provided the occupants with 'Encouragements from Gods word to strengthen their Faith, to resist the Tempter, and to prayer earnestly to be delivered from his snares and delusions' (*Strange and Wonderful Nevvs* 1674, 4). This clergyman does not offer any unique ghost-laying solution, only providing spiritual encouragement. Ultimately, the deliverance of the spirit was entirely dependent on God's will and would only take effect when the target of the haunting had reflected sufficiently on the purpose behind it. This was a typical English Protestant position that placed emphasis on earnest prayer and challenged the need for clerical intervention.

While there are very few early modern textual examples of clergymen laying ghosts to rest, this duty was well within their ministerial remit. The exact form of ghost-laying permissible for the clergy was never qualified, though. It ranged from the Protestant ordinance of prayer and spiritual reflection to an exorcism. Ghost-laying is predicated on the demonic interpretation of spirits and often functioned as a form of exorcism, designating the spirit as the remnant of a deceased person under the Devil's control (Young 2016, 60–61). The approach to ghost-laying was likely aligned with 'dispossession' exercises: prayer and fasting. Dispossession in the Protestant tradition is based on Christ's proclamation to his disciples in Mark 9:29: 'And he saide vnto them, This kinde can by no other meanes come foorth, but by prayer and fasting'. In opposition to ritualized 'magical' Catholic exorcisms, dispossession was postulated as the only means by which to expel unclean spirits in the Reformed Protestant tradition. It was also wide-ranging in its application. Prayer and fasting were both effective and

innocuous spiritual exercises, each fundamental to the broader Christian traditions of self-reflection and sanctification. The very nature of this recourse also worked against it, providing openings for individuals—clergy or otherwise—to step in and devise specific rites. It is in this vacuum that more esoteric rituals emerged, marking points of departure from the official doctrinal position.

Further complicating the application of exorcism to ghostly apparitions is the overall status of exorcism in England. There was no established tradition of clerical exorcism in medieval England and its rise to prominence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was heavily contested. During this period, exorcism became a powerful vehicle for proselytization, profoundly shaped by confessional rivalries and ecclesiastical politics. Catholics clearly had a distinct advantage in the propaganda war, as was evident by controversies such as the 1585–86 Jesuit-led exorcisms at Denham (Buckinghamshire). Following the conviction of Puritan exorcist John Darrell for fraud at the High Commission in 1599, the English ecclesiastical authorities heavily suppressed exorcism. Fearing the use of dispossession to undermine their authority, the bishops legislated Canon 72 (Church of England 1604) and committed substantial resources to denouncing the practice. A succession of demonic possession cases were dismissed as fraudulent in the ensuing period and many polemics were published against exorcism. *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, penned by churchman Samuel Harsnett—one of the key figures in this campaign—is characteristic of this. Harsnett associated ghost-laying with exorcism, sardonically casting exorcists as minions of the Pope 'raked together out of old doating heathen Historiographers, wisardizing Augurs, imposturizing South-sayers, dreaming Poets, Chimaerial conceiters, & coyners of fables', intent on deceiving the masses. These Catholic legions

> worke their wonders, making Images to speake, vautes to sound, trunks to carry tales, Churchyeards to swarme, houses to rush, rumble, and clatter with chaynes, high-waies, old graues, pittes, and woods ends to be haunted with lights, owles, and poakers … (Harsnett 1603, 135)

Harsnett also attributed ghost belief to medieval romances such as 'the booke of *Lancelot du Lake, Guy of Warwicke, The Mirrour of Kinghthoode, Amadis de Gaule*'. From these legends charlatans 'conceit their monstrous shapes, vgly bug-beares, hydeous apparitions of ghosts: out of these they conforme, their charmes, enchauntments, periapts, amulets, characters, wast coates, and smockes of proofe' (Harsnett 1603, 135–36). Clearly, exorcism was a fraught issue at this time and this placed further pressure on textual depictions of ghost-laying.

Outside the English Church's spiritual jurisdiction, many Catholic and folk remedies for laying ghosts were available. There was a persistent folk belief that the English clergy had lost their spiritual powers to exorcise restless spirits, thus requiring others to step in (Davies 2007, 74–75). Writing in 1725, Newcastle curate Henry Bourne noted that ''tis common for the present Vulgar to say, none can lay a Spirit but a *Popish Priest*' (Bourne 1725, 90). A few Catholic exorcists, such as Italian Franciscan friar Valerio Polidori, included rituals in their exorcism manuals for dealing with ghosts and haunted houses, but such specific methods were seldom seen in England (Young 2018, 62). Cunning-folk were also thought to be able to conjure

and control spirits, yet such activities risked being labelled as witchcraft. Erasmus of Rotterdam's 1524 satirical piece, *The Exorcism: Or, the Apparition*, republished in a 1689 English translation, provides a glimpse into the mix of orthodox and quasi-magical rituals employed by some of the Catholic clergy at this time (Davies 2007, 73). This account outlines the efforts of an English priest attempting to exorcise a spectre, comically performed by a trickster named Pool. The priest Fawn uses a wide array of tools such as 'a great Vessel, full of *Holy Water,* and the *Holy Stole* (as they call it) about his Neck; upon which hung the beginning of the Gospel of St. *Iohn*' and 'a little Piece of *Wax,* which the Bishop of *Rome* us'd to Consecrate once a Year, commonly call'd an *Agnus* Die'. Erasmus jests that Fawn 'added some new ones, as by the *Bowels* of such a *Saint,* the *Bones* of St. *Winnifrede*'. Approaching the haunted location, the naïve priest 'draws ye a Circle, a very large one, with several *Crosses* in it, and a phantastical Variety of *Characters;* and all this was perform'd in a *set Form of Words*' (Erasmus 1689, 188–89). The story continues with Pool appearing before Fawn in increasingly elaborate spectral guises, employing all manner of theatrics to deceive the priest. Young argues that 'Erasmus's comic tale was intended to ridicule popular superstitions of the day', focusing on the idea that souls from purgatory returned, and it was highly unlikely that his satirical observations on superstitious folly were intended to 'become acerbic anti-Catholic propaganda' (Young 2016, 103–104). Nevertheless, this text indicates that ghost-laying was the subject of satire from the very beginning of the early modern period.

A few decades after the English publication of this account, politician and playwright Joseph Addison also produced a satire of ghost-laying with his 1715 comedic play *The Drummer* (in reference to the Drummer of Tedworth haunting). One early scene sees a pair of servants discussing the appearance and talents of the ghost-laying conjuror: 'This Man must be a very great Master of his Trade. His Beard is at least half a Yard long, he's dress'd in a strange dark Cloak, as black as a Cole, your Conjurer always goes in Mourning'. He wields a wand, usually made from witch's elm, and uses it 'to make a Circle, and if he once gets the Ghost in a Circle, then he has him—let him get out again if he can. A Circle, you must know, is a Conjurer's Trap' (Addison 1715, 22). Once trapped, the conjuror can deal with the spirit as they please:

> If he can once compass him, and get him in Lobs-Pound, he'll make nothing of him, but speak a few hard Words to him, and perhaps bind him over to his good Behaviour, for a Thousand Years … If the conjurer be but well paid, he'll take pains upon the ghost, and lay him, look ye, in the Red Sea-and then he's laid for ever. (Addison 1715, 22)

As Addison's comedy illustrates, England clearly has a long literary and theatrical tradition of fraudulent exorcists. William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson also feature such archetypal characters in their later plays, conjuring up imagery of fraud and religious enthusiasm. These negative connotations profoundly shaped subsequent literary depictions of ghost-laying and further limited authentic historical depictions of this spiritual practice.

Conformist Protestants largely viewed conjuration and Catholic ghost-binding methods as ineffective, not having the lasting effect of a dispossession or otherwise powerless altogether. The apparition in *The Rest-less Ghost* pamphlet, for example, explains that it

was previously 'laid, and bound down by the Magical Art of a certain Fryer' for two hundred and fifty years 'during which time he was confined from appearing on earth', rather than being properly exorcised (Clark 1675, 6). In similar fashion, the 1661 pamphlet *Strange and True News from Long-Ally in More-Fields, Southwark, and Wakefield in Yorkshire* also undermines conjuring practices in favour of a more orthodox Reformed Protestant approach. The second story in this text involves the spirit of Mr Powel, who descends upon the family estate to make amends to his granddaughter 'who he had by some way dealt unjustly by before his departure, being rich, and leaving it unprovided for, as it ought to have been' (*Strange and True News* 1661, 7). Mr Powel manifests before a maid 'in the likeness of a black Cat' and then 'in the likeness of a Goat', evoking demonic imagery. The brave maid responds to this first appearance by throwing a 'bed-staff' (a wooden pin that holds bedcovers in place) at the spirit and then on the second occasion 'very confidently said, *In the Name of God, avoid Satan*; at which words she cast another Bed-staff' (*Strange and True News* 1661, 6). After talking to the spirit and realizing that it was her late master, she hastily vacates the house and is soon struck down by an inexplicable illness. A local minister arrives at the estate and converses with the spirit, ascertaining that it is unable to rest because of an unpaid legacy, yet he does not take any further action on the matter.

The haunting thus continues for some time, forcing Mr Powel's son to flee and leaving care of the house to a group of 'Artists (by some called Conjurers)' who 'remain there day and night using all possible means they can to lay this troubled Spirit'. The conjurors employ all manner of ghost-laying methods, 'continually reading and making of Circles, burning of Wax Candles, and *Juniper-wood*'. This effort 'proves unfeasible' until they 'made a great Circle in the Garden' and attempt to trap the spirit within. One of the magicians speaks to it: '*We Conjure thee to depart to they* [*sic*] *place of Rest*. He answered, *Wo be to those that were the cause of my coming hither*'. This failing, one of the conjurors goes to prayer, uttering the words, 'The Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the Devil', which results in the spirit vanishing 'like a flash of fire'. The pamphlet reports that some of the conjurors remain to finally 'aliay [*sic*] the spirit, if they can', by discovering the enormous quantities of money believed to be hidden 'in the Garden or about the House' (*Strange and True News* 1661, 7). Mr Powel's spirit remains bound to the earthly plan and awaits a true deliverance. *Strange and True News* thus dismisses the conjuring practices of laypeople, as the only reprieve from the haunting is attributed to the traditional Protestant recourse of devotional prayer.

In some English ghost tales, the need for spiritual intervention—clerical or otherwise—was dismissed outright. The infamous 1649 haunting at the royal manor of Woodstock (Oxfordshire) demonstrates this. Unfolding during the final turbulent years of the English Civil War, this haunting involves a group of parliamentary Commissioners surveying the King's Woodstock manor. The group was residing at the house for a few weeks while they performed an inventory, during which time they were plagued by strange phenomena. After hearing unsettling noises, witnessing terrifying apparitions, and even being assaulted by an unseen force, the Commissioners sought out clerical assistance. Procuring this assistance, however, proved difficult. This ordeal is outlined in

two contemporary works: *The Woodstock Scuffle* (1649) and *The Just Devil Of Woodstock* (1660). *The Woodstock Scuffle* is a satirical ballad, written in rhyming verse by an anonymous author, and appears to be the earliest textual record of this ghostly phenomenon. In this work, the spiritual activity at Woodstock is framed as God's judgement against the Commissioners and intended as a providential warning for all: 'That men are ev'n at their wits end;/God, Judgements, ev'ry where doth send' (*Woodstock Scuffle* 1649, sig. A2r).

The Just Devil Of Woodstock subscribes to this same sentiment, yet is far more polemical in nature. This ghost story is attributed to Thomas Widdows, minister and schoolmaster of Woodstock, but the pamphlet is edited by an anonymous individual with strong Royalist sympathies. The editor uses Widdows's account to denounce the Parliamentarian cause, casting the haunting as a righteous reactionary force to the contempt of the Commissioners involved in the drama. Writing in the preface, *The Just Devil Of Woodstock*'s editor exclaims that this harrowing experience '*so plainly shews, the Devil himself dislikt their doings*, (*so much more bad were they then he would have them be*)' and adds '*Heaven is always just, the party is repriv'd, and do acknowledge the hand of God in it, as is rightly applyed, and as justly sensible of their deliverance*' (Widdows 1660, sig. A2r). Both *The Woodstock Scuffle* and *The Just Devil Of Woodstock* present a typical Protestant reading of supernatural phenomena that forgoes the need for spiritual intervention, emphasizing the divine agency of spirits and the revelatory messages that they carry. Ghost-laying is thereby framed as unnecessary and even counterproductive, a practice steeped in *superstitio*. *The Woodstock Scuffle* remarks that this practice is now greatly diminished: 'But those, that had or Art or Skill. / are Outed, / And those to whom the Pow'r was giv'n / Of driving Spirits, are Out-driv'n; / Their Colledges dispos'd, and Livings, / to Grout-heads' (*Woodstock Scuffle* 1649, sig. A2r). The resolutions to the haunting presented in these texts are indicative of broader early modern attitudes towards clerical intervention concerning ghosts. Such intervention was not required in every instance, as the haunting often resolved on its own after the revelatory message had been communicated. God's providence was always in motion, with extraordinary phenomena such as spirit manifestation functioning as a clear directive for Christians to heed.

The Woodstock Scuffle revels in comically detailing the Commissioners' many attempts to drive out the ghostly presence. The ballad jests that they are unable to find someone skilled or willing enough to purge the estate of spirits:

> Rake Oxford o're, there's not a Man
> That Rayse or Lay a Spirit can.
> Or use the Circle or the Wand,
> or Conjure;
> Or can say (Boh!) unto a Divell,
> Or to a Goose that is uncivill,
> Nor where Keimbolton purg'd out evill,
> 'tis sin-sure;
> There were two Villages hard by,
> With Teachers of Presbytery,
> Who knew the House was hideously
> be-pestered;

> But ‘lasse! Their new Divinity
> Is not so deep, or not so high;
> Their Wittes doe (as their meanes did)
> lie sequestered: (*Woodstock Scuffle* 1649, sig. A3r)

The Commissioners next approach the renowned Minister of Wotton, Mr Hoffman, for assistance, yet the task proves too daunting:

> But Master Hoffman was the Wight
> Which was to Exorcise the Spright;
> Hee’ll preach and pray you day & night,
> at pleasure;
> And by that painfull-gainfull-Trade
> He hath himself full wealthy made;
> Great store of Guilt he hath, ‘t is said.
> And Treasure:
> But no intreaty of his Friends,
> Could get him to the house of Fiends,
> Hee came not over for such Ends
> from Dutch-land. (*Woodstock Scuffle* 1649, sig. A3v)

In *The Just Devil Of Woodstock*, Mr Hoffman is presented in a more favourable light. Comprehending the divine message being communicated through the haunting, Hoffman tells the Commissioners ‘That he would not lodge there one night, for 500 l. and being askt to pray with them, he held up his hands and said, That he would not meddle upon any terms’ (Widdows 1660, 10).

The Commissioners also implement folk remedies, such as having ‘A Woman, great with Child’ stay in the house and bringing in a ‘Spay’d-Bitch’, yet both strategies are unsuccessful. During the night, the pregnant woman flees the house in terror after antagonizing the spirits, which the Commissioners blame on her Catholic upbringing. The dog proves equally ineffective, encountering the spirit and howling in terror before befouling the ‘stately Rooms, where kings once lay’ (*Woodstock Scuffle* 1649, sigs A3v–A4r). Unable to rest or find resolution, the Commissioners abandon their mission. *The Just Devil Of Woodstock* notes that when they leave, other ‘diverse persons of severall qualities’ stay overnight in the manor ‘yet none have had the least disturbance, or heard the smallest noise for which the cause was not as Ordinary as apparent’ (Widdows 1660, 11). *The Woodstock Scuffle* concludes, ‘No man can tell the cause of these / So wondrous dreadfull outrages’, ruminating that spiritual reflection and repentance are the only means of deliverance (*Woodstock Scuffle* 1649, sig. A4r). Consequently, it is not through any form of spiritual mediation that the haunting at Woodstock is resolved. Both texts dismiss the efficacy of ghost exorcism and explain that the spiritual activity in the manor subsides once the contemptuous Parliamentarians are driven out. Ghost-laying was seldom the first response to hauntings, or even necessarily the last one, as early modern audiences were conditioned to expect resolution through two primary means: fulfilling the spirit’s objectives or heeding the divine message that it conveyed. Thus, a well-defined spiritual tradition of clerical ghost-laying can be dismissed, as it is not sufficiently represented in the extant literature, nor does it align with the primary cultural or theological role that the ghost fulfilled in early modern English thought.

The Botathen Ghost

John Ruddle, vicar of St Mary Magdalene in Launceston from 1663 to 1698, is credited with one of the few known cases of clerical early modern ghost-laying. The involvement of a Cornish minister may explain the later proliferation of ghost-laying legends in this region, with this account functioning as a literary and folkloric origin point. Notably, this form of ghost-laying is entirely predicated on devotional prayer and eschews any elaborate ceremonies. Contrary to contemporary ghost tales published for consumption by a general audience, the spectre in this account appears with no specific objective and utters only a few words that are not revealed to the reader. Based on its plain style and forthright content, this tale represents a typical clerical approach to dealing with spirits in English Protestant spirituality that stands as a stark counterpoint to elaborate Victorian retellings.

This 1665 episode is first recorded in 'An Account of a most surprising Apparition: sent from *Launceston* in *Cornwall*', which appears in the anonymously authored 1720 book, *Mr. Campbell's Packet for the Entertainment of Ladies and Gentlemen*. Authorship of 'An Account of a most surprising Apparition' is attributed to Ruddle, but it does not seem to have been published during his lifetime. Perhaps this was due to his wishes to avoid any drama, as can be taken from this statement: 'But I being a Clergy Man, and young, and a Stranger in these Parts, doe apprehend silence and secrecy to be my best security' (Ruddle 1720, 32). This account outlines a haunting at the Bligh family's Botathen (South Petherwin) estate involving the youngest son Sam who, once a bright prospect, is in decline and reluctant to attend school. The author explains that the 'poor Boy believes himself to be haunted with Ghosts, and is confident that he meets with an Evil Spirit' on his way to school (Ruddle 1720, 22). This apparition is identified by Sam as their former neighbour Dorothy Dingley, dead these past eight years. Sam usually encounters her in the 'Higher-Broom Quartlis' field adjoining their property, yet even when he deviates from this route, she still follows him. The spirit does not address or act aggressively towards the boy, simply observing him silently. Her continued presence begins to wear on Sam: 'Night and Day, sleeping and wakeing, the Shape was ever running in my mind'. The boy prays 'that God would either free me from it, or let me know the meaning of it', but no reprieve is granted (Ruddle 1720, 25). Noticing their son's mental state slowly deteriorating and determined to ascertain the reason for this, the Bligh parents approach the outsider Ruddle for spiritual counsel.

The matter of belief is central to this tale. Ruddle exclaims that the existence of ghosts substantiated by his account is a counter to the 'prevailing of *Somatism* and the *Hobean* Principle in these Times; which is a Revival of the Doctrine of the Sadduces' (Ruddle 1720, 33). The spectre of Dingley thereby haunts the field as a means of providing irrefutable evidence: 'the strongest Inducement to believe the *Christian Religion*' (Ruddle 1720, 31). 'An Account of a most surprising Apparition' emphasizes how Sam's tales of ghostly visitations are dismissed by his parents and friends, leaving him despondent. A neighbouring minister opines that the boy's 'ill Humour should so incredibly subdue his Reason', with his parents wishing Ruddle to 'undeceive him, as to the fancy of Ghosts and Spirits' (Ruddle 1720, 23–24). Conversely,

Ruddle is more open to the existence of spirits and agrees to visit the site of the haunting before forming an opinion. While walking in the fields Ruddle sees the ghost for the first time and exclaims: 'I was a little surprised by it; and though I had taken up a firm Resolution to speak to it, yet I had not the power, nor indeed durst I look back, yet I took care not to shew any fear to my Pupil and Guide, and therefore only telling him, that I was satisfied in the Truth of his Complaint' (Ruddle 1720, 27). The parents eventually join them in the fields, and after seeing the spirit swiftly glide across the land are 'clearly convinc'd' by this 'occular Evidence' (Ruddle 1720, 30). They too recognize the apparition as that of Dingley and subsequently place their faith in Ruddle to address this phenomenon.

The deliverance of the wandering spirit is achieved by means of devotional prayer. Ruddle performs no elaborate ritual nor uses any specific liturgical approach in dealing with the spirit. Early one morning, after spending hours in prayer, the parson travels to the 'disturbed Field' and briefly speaks to the ghost 'in some such Sentences as the way of these dealings directed me':

> But the Work could not be finished at this time; wherefore the same Evening an Hour after Sunset, it met me again near the same Place, and after a few Words of each side it quietly vanished, and neither doth appear since, nor ever will more, to any Man's disturbance. (Ruddle 1720, 30–31)

The ghost-laying ends in this fashion. After divulging his tale, Ruddle ponders the dearth of knowledge concerning apparitions. He states that there is an 'ignorance of Men in our Age, in this peculiar and Mysterious Part of Philosophy and Religion, namely the Communication between Spirits and Men. Not one of ten Thousand (though otherwise of excellent Learning) knows any Thing of it, or the way how to manage it' (Ruddle 1720, 32). Further, Ruddle regards the scepticism towards ghosts as a result of Catholic impostures: 'To the infinite abuses of the People, and impositions upon their Faith by the cunning *Monks* and *Friars*, &c. in the Days of Darkness and Popery. For they made Apparitions as often as they pleased, and got both Money and Credit by quieting' such illusions (Ruddle 1720, 31). Content with the evidence of spirit manifestation contained within this narrative, Ruddle signs off with the date 4 September 1665.

The Botathen Ghost story was greatly elaborated upon in the Victorian period. Appearing largely unchanged in earlier collections of Cornish folklore, it eventually underwent a dramatic retelling at the hands of Reverend Hawker who claimed to have uncovered Ruddle's 'diurnal' (journal): the 'general facts' contained within 'are to this day matters of belief in that neighbourhood' (Hawker 1903, 175). First published without credit in an issue of Charles Dickens's *All the Year Round* magazine ([Hawker] 1867), the diurnal was later reprinted in Hawker's *Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall*. This diurnal is clearly an imaginative construct 'which fell by chance into the hands of the present writer', as it offers a fantastical first-hand account of Ruddle as a ghost-layer (Hawker 1903, 161). In a footnote, the book's editor (C. E. Byles) quips, 'It is a question whether these documents ever existed outside Hawker's brain' (Hawker 1903, 161 n.2). The diurnal provides many details not present in the 1720 account and significantly alters the personalities of the characters involved. Ruddle, for one, is described as 'a powerful minister … highly honoured at college for natural gifts and knowledge of learned books which nobody else could read'

(Hawker 1903, 160–61). The ghost of Dingley is also provided with a rationale for wandering the earth. She is unable to rest because of an implied illicit relationship with the Bligh patriarch that the author dares not reveal: 'but it is *sub sigillo*, and therefore *nefas dictu*' (Hawker 1903, 173). Dingley is described as a '*demonium meridianum* [midday demon], the most stubborn spirit to govern and guide that any man can meet, and the most perilous withal' (Hawker 1903, 168). Under questioning from Ruddle, she explains that she haunts the boy because it 'is the law: we must seek a youth or a maiden of clean life, and under age, to receive messages and admonitions' (Hawker 1903, 173).

The changes to this account also introduce several inconsistencies and historical fallacies. For one, the dates do not match: the original account details the incident taking place over June and July, while the later one is set in the dreary month of January. Dingley is also said to have died eight years previously in the 1720 text, whereas it is three years in this version. Furthermore, Hawker explicitly states that Ruddle was given episcopal approval to perform an exorcism (albeit in secrecy). In his imaginative version, Ruddle petitions the bishop in Exeter for an exorcism licence 'so I might, ministerially, allay this spiritual visitant, and thus render to the living and the dead release from this surprise'. Hawker describes this meeting in detail:

> Hereupon did our wise and learned bishop, sitting in his chair, condescend upon the theme at some length with many gracious interpretations from ancient writers and from Holy Scripture, and I did humbly rejoin and reply, till the upshot was that he did call in his secretary, and command him to draw the aforesaid faculty, forthwith and without further delay, assigning him a form, insomuch that the matter was incontinently done … (Hawker 1903, 170)

This audacious claim is without precedent and is not verified by any extant ecclesiastical records. But for this the diurnal provides some explanation—that it was owing to the bishop's discretion. Ruddle exclaims: 'When I knelt down to receive his benediction, he [the bishop] softly said, "Let it be secret, Mr. R. Weak brethren! weak brethren!"' (Hawker 1903, 171). Having obtained episcopal permission, Ruddle returns to the Botathen estate to perform the ghost-laying.

The diurnal reports that on 12 January Ruddle rode out to the disturbed field at first light and prepared the exorcism ritual: 'First, I paced and measured out my circle on the grass. Then did I mark my pentacle in the very midst, and at the intersection of the five angles I did set up and fix my crutch of raun [rowan]. Lastly, I took my station south, at the true line of the meridian, and stood facing north' (Hawker 1903, 172). Ruddle waited and watched for some time, poised to unleash the magical binding as soon at the ghost was within distance:

> At last there was a kind of trouble in the air, a soft and rippling sound, and all at once the shape appeared, and came on towards me gradually. I opened my parchment-scroll and read aloud the command. She paused, and seemed to waver and doubt; stood still; then I rehearsed the sentence again, sounding out every syllable like a chant. She drew near my ring, but halted at first outside, on the brink. I sounded again, and now at the third time I gave the signal in Syriac—the speech which is used, they say, where such ones dwell and converse in thoughts that glide. She was at last obedient, and swam into the midst of the circle, and there stood still, suddenly … I knew that the pentacle would govern her, and the ring must bind, until I gave the word. (Hawker 1903, 172–73)

Ruddle then proceeds to question her at length, determining the reason for her visitation. Once the spirit divulges this information, Ruddle releases her and spends the evening at the Botathen manor in conversation with the patriarch. The 'ancient transgressor' is struck with 'Great horror and remorse' at the revelations, eventually offering 'entire atonement and penance' for his previous actions (Hawker 1903, 174). With this obtained, Ruddle retires for the night.

At sunrise the following day, the diurnal details Ruddle's final confrontation with Dingley. The spirit approaches the minister without hesitation, and they begin:

> Then I rehearsed the penitent words of the man she had come up to denounce, and the satisfaction he would perform. Then said she, 'Peace in our midst.' I went through the proper forms of dismissal, fulfilled all as it was set down and written in my memoranda; and then, with certain fixed rites, I did dismiss that troubled ghost, until she peacefully withdrew, gliding towards the west. Neither did she ever afterward appear, but was allayed until she shall come in her second flesh to the valley of Armageddon on the last day. (Hawker 1903, 174)

These passages encapsulate the dramatic transformation that this ghost legend underwent over the centuries. The sentiments of belief and combatting scepticism present in the 1720 text are largely disregarded in Hawker's version, giving way to extravagant magical rituals and hints of a scandalous backstory for the apparition. Consequently, Ruddle no longer appears as a humble young clergyman called upon to provide spiritual comfort to a boy plagued by a restless spirit, but is now cast as a powerful ghost-layer with profound arcane knowledge. Hawker's treatment of the Botathen Ghost is therefore emblematic, indicating that he and his contemporaries were far more concerned with crafting sensationalist tales to establish a continuity in spiritual practice over the course of two centuries than they were with exploring the historicity of early modern ghost encounters.

Ghost-Laying in Victorian Folklore

The ghost-laying clergy, as depicted by Victorian writers such as Hawker and Rees, evidently have no direct early modern precedent. The form of exorcism they carried out in nineteenth-century works was far more dramatic, resembling the magical practices attributed to Catholic priests, folk-healers, and charlatans in early modern literature. More likely than not, these methods would have been viewed as witchcraft by the early modern clergy; barring exceptional individuals such as John Dee and Richard Napier. The Victorian interpretation of early modern ghost-laying clergy consequently points to an engagement with the folkloric record rather than with any historical source.

Rees provides an overview of ghost-laying parsons and their rituals in his study on the subject. He writes: 'The clergyman was supposed to conduct the ghost-laying ceremony, as a rule, in Latin, a language that struck the most audacious spirit in all the world with terror' (Rees 1898, 266). The cleric could banish the spirit to a magic circle, often marked out in chalk or with iron from barrels, and then proceed with the exorcism. Another option was to extinguish the ghost with consecrated graveyard earth, a substance believed to absorb its spiritual body. In many of these

cases the ghost was not completely expelled to the afterlife, but confined to a prison of the exorcist's making. Consequently, a spirit could be 'read down' into a vessel or confined to a certain location. Courtney notes that 'A ghost at Pengelly, in the parish of Wendron, was compelled by a parson of that village after various changes of form to seek refuge in a pigeonhole, where it is confined to this day' (Courtney 1890, 61). Ghosts could likewise be cast into a body of water, the Red Sea being the preferred destination, according to Rees:

> But of all places, as it has been already hinted, that which a ghost least liked was the Red Sea; it being related that ghosts have prayed their exorcists not to continue them in that place. It was nevertheless considered an incontestable fact that there was an infinite number laid there, perhaps from its being, somehow, a safer prison than any other nearer at hand; though neither history nor tradition gives us any instance of ghosts escaping or returning from this kind of transportation before their time. (Rees 1898, 267)

A common tactic was to set the spirit to complete a Sisyphean task, such as counting grains of sand or blades of grass (Young 2018, 60). The ghost of early seventeenth-century magistrate Jan Tregeagle—'the Cornish Bluebeard'—for example, was laid by pastors and 'doomed to do many impossible things, such as to empty Dosmery pool, near Bodmin Moor, with a limpet shell that had a hole in the bottom' (Courtney 1890, 72). Any number of methods could be applied in dealing with apparitions and this led to a myriad of legends that perpetuated the image of a heroic pastor blessed with inordinate spiritual abilities.

The most famous ghost-layers are all cast from a similar mould, with many details of their sensationalist exploits blurring together in the folkloric record. This aspect carried over to printed works. Extracting folk narratives from a communal cultural context and transforming them into a literary summary for national consumption often has the effect of smoothing out any rough narrative edges (Bell 2020, 15–16). Many of these ghost-layers are historical figures who administered various parishes throughout Cornwall, yet there are few contemporaneous accounts of their ghost-laying activities. Rather, their fantastical ghost exorcisms have their basis in folklore and the oral tradition. Thomas Flavell, vicar of Mullion from 1633 to 1683 and a possessor of 'second sight', is amongst the best known. Rees's survey of ghost-laying posits that 'Flavel was credited with possessing to a remarkable degree the power of "laying" ghosts, and all advances in intelligence have utterly failed to throw discredit on his marvellous skill or the stories told in connection with its exorcise' (Rees 1898, 251). The parson carried a book in one hand and a horsewhip in the other, cracking the ground in between reciting Latin passages (Courtney 1890, 96). Likewise, the demon-rider Robert Jago of Wendron is one of the most dramatized ghost-laying parsons of the late seventeenth century. Jago, also credited with second sight, is best remembered for laying to rest the spirit of a suicide victim buried at a crossroads outside Wendron. Local legends established that he 'used to ride far and wide over the moorland of his parish, he never took a groom with him, for the moment he alighted from his horse he had but to strike the earth with his whip to summon a demon-groom to take charge of his steed' (Rees 1898, 260–61). By this description, Jago is evidently no mere country magician, but a conjuror of the highest order.

The image of the whip-wielding ghost-layer also accurately describes Richard Dodge, vicar of Talland, from 1713 to 1747. Dodge's entry in *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore* reads: 'He had such command over the spirit-world that he could raise and lay ghosts at his will, and by a nod of his head banish them to the Red Sea' (Courtney 1890, 98). One story involves Dodge working in tandem with fellow ghost-layer Abraham Mills, vicar of Lanreath, to expel a phantom coach drawn by headless horses. At Blackadon Moor the pair are confronted by the coachman, described in some versions as the Devil, who knocks Mills senseless to the ground: 'Such a sight was enough to shatter even the iron nerve of Parson Dodge; but, notwithstanding all alarm, the sense of duty so possessed him that he quickly began the words of exorcism'. At the moment Dodge began his prayer, Rees concludes, the coachman fled in terror exclaiming, '"Dodge is come, I must be gone," and, springing to his box, drove the phantom team away like the wind, and nevermore returned' (Rees 1898, 254). The spiritual powers that these clergymen wield are so great that even the Devil fears them, with every successful deliverance a testament to the supremacy of the Anglican Church over supernatural incursion.

Parson Corker of Lamorna is at the centre of one particularly dramatic tale. Corker, in the words of William Bottrell, was noted for 'having strange intercourse with the invisible world; or rather, the primitive people of the west believed him to possess the supernatural powers required to exorcise the evil one, to drive the night wanderer back into his grave, and so to bind the poor ghost that he could never get loose again' (Bottrell 1870, 241). The tale unfolds at an area in Lamorna known as Bosava with a cobbler who offered his soul to a devil, in the form of a master-mason, in exchange for a fine house. The house stood for decades, the envy of all, yet the cobbler lived with a persistent fear of the torment awaiting him in the next life. At the moment of his death, however, the cobbler reneged on the deal by defending himself with a Bible when the fiend came to collect. Unable to pass on, the cobbler's spirit remained confined to the house, which became the site of supernatural activity—both ghostly and demonic. A nearby miller, fearing the terrifying phenomena emanating from the house, called for Parson Corker. He arrived at the house and began to conduct the exorcism ritual. In response, the demon summoned a tempest that Corker soon overcame. Following his banishment of this demonic creature,

> the brave parson then tried his power on the cobbler, who might still be heard beating his lapstone louder than ever. The parson, after summoning him to appear, and after much trouble in chasing the obstinate spirit of the old miser from place to place, at last caught him in the pulrose under the mill-wheel. Then the ghost threw his hammer and lapstone at the parson's head, at the same time crying out, 'Now, Corker, that thee art come I must be gone, but it's only for a time.' Luckily the parson was too well acquainted with spiritual weapons to let ghostly tools do him any harm. The night was passed. The parson's power had compelled both demon and cobbler to depart. (Bottrell 1870, 242)

Even this brief survey of ghost-laying parsons in Victorian collections reveals that such depictions are the product of sensationalist literary conventions superimposed onto folk narratives. These early modern clergy were largely removed from their historical context and imbued with spiritual abilities that they themselves would have understood to be witchcraft. Victorian audiences had no such quarrels with this

sensationalism, though, and the writers responsible for establishing the fantastical legacies of these clergymen clearly had their own agendas in doing so.

Conclusion

The figure of the early modern conjuring parson and the spiritual tradition of clerical ghost-laying are evidently not early modern in origin. Village legends involving ghost-laying parsons developed into a new genre during the Victorian period, as antiquarians and collectors seemed to have interpreted these stories as representative of a legitimate clerical spiritual tradition. These fantastical legends paint a romanticized image of the rural clergy as exemplars of spiritual authority and protectors against the supernatural—roles that Victorian clergymen like Hawker and Rees were seeking to uphold in the present. Cornish folklore, owing to its unique character, therefore became the focus of these authors, with the most sensationalist elements proving especially appealing. Overall, these embellished tales do not accurately reflect early modern attitudes towards ghostly apparitions in England, and neither do they provide evidence of ghost-laying as an established spiritual tradition.

As this article has demonstrated, spirits performed multiple roles in English society and clerical intervention was only one means by which to resolve a haunting. The few examples of early modern ghost-laying that exist in the textual record are largely satirical or shaped by confessional rivalry. For this reason, elaborate quasi-magical ghost-laying rituals were attributed to folk-healers and recusant Catholic priests as a means of demarcating superstitio from enlightened Protestant devotional spirituality. Such literary depictions, along with an analogous folk practice that may have existed on the margins of English society, appears to have sustained the cultural relevancy of ghost-laying over the early modern period and beyond. Lacking appropriate historical context and placing too much stock in rural folk beliefs, Victorian folklorists gravitated towards these exciting stories of ritualistic ghost-laying supposedly enacted by the early modern clergy. This characterization ignores the providential function that ghosts fulfilled in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century textual accounts, while also disregarding the wide spectrum of spirit beliefs encompassed within English Protestant spirituality. Thus, Victorian-era stories of early modern ghost-laying clergy are largely the product of historical misrepresentation (be that intentional or otherwise), implying that their authors were using these accounts to forward their own literary projects and political agendas.

Notes

[1] Canon 72 1604, sigs M4r–M4v (Church of England 1604).

[2] An Act against Conjuration, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits 1604, 1 Jac. 1, c.12 (Eng.).

References Cited

Addison, Joseph. *The Drummer; Or, the Haunted House. A Comedy. As it is Acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane, By His Majesty's Servants.* London, 1715.

Bath, Jo, and John Newton. '"Sensible Proof of Spirits": Ghost Belief During the Later Seventeenth Century'. *Folklore* 117, no. 1 (2006): 1–14.

Bell, Karl. 'Gothicizing Victorian Folklore: Spring-Heeled Jack and the Enacted Gothic'. *Gothic Studies* 22, no. 1 (2020): 14–30.

Bottrell, William. *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall.* Penzance: W. Cornish, 1870.

Bourne, Henry. *Antiquitates Vulgares; Or, The Antiquities of The Common People. Giving An Account of several of their Opinions and Ceremonies. With Proper Reflections upon each of them; shewing which may be retain'd, and which ought to be laid aside.* Newcastle, 1725.

Brown, Theo. *The Fate of the Dead: A Study of Folk Eschatology in the West Country after the Reformation.* London: The Folklore Society, 1979.

Butler, Todd. 'The Haunting of Isabell Binnington: Ghosts of Murder, Texts, and Law in Restoration England'. *Journal of British Studies* 50, no. 2 (2011): 248–76.

Church of England. *Constitvtions and Canons Ecclesiasticall, Treated vpon by the Bishop of London, President of the Conuocation for the Prouince of Canterbury, and the Rest of the Bishops and Clergie of the said Prouince: And Agreed Vpon with the Kings Maiesties Licence in their Synode begun at London anno Dom. 1603* [. . .]. London, 1604.

Clark, William. *The Rest-less Ghost: Or, Wonderful News from Northamptonshire and Southwark. Being a most true and Perfect Account of a Persons Appearance that was Murdered above Two Hundred and Fifty Years ago, First about three weeks since, to One William Clarke at Hennington in Northhampton-Shire, whom it appointed to meet in Southwark, and did there appear to him again, and several others on Sunday last, the 10th of this instant January: where it discovered a great parcel of money, and some writings buried in the ground, which were disposed off by his order, and then seeming satisfied it disappeared* [. . .]. London, 1675.

Courtney, Margaret A. *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore.* Penzance: Beare & Son, 1890.

Davies, Owen. *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

———. 'The Witch of Endor in History and Folklore'. *Folklore* 134, no. 1 (2023): 1–22.

Erasmus, Desiderius. 'The Exorcism: Or, the Apparition'. In *Twenty Two Select Colloquies Out of Erasmus Roterodamus; Pleasantly Representing Several Superstitious Levities That were Crept into the Church of Rome in His Days*. Translated by Roger L'Estrange, 185–97. London, 1689.

Glanvill, Joseph. *Saducismus Triumphatus: Or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches And Apparitions. In Two Parts. The First treating of their Possibility, The Second of their Real Existence.* London, 1681.

Harsnett, Samuel. *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, to with-draw the harts of Her Maiesties Subiects from their allegeance, and from the truth of Christian Religion professed in England, vnder the pretence of casting out deuils.* London, 1603.

[Hawker, Robert S.]. 'Botathen Ghost'. *All the Year Round* ser. 1, 17, no. 421 (1867): 501.

———. *Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall.* Edited by C. E. Byles. London and New York: John Lane, 1903. First published 1870.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan, or, the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common Wealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civil.* London, 1651.

Hunt, Robert. *Popular Romances of the West of England, Or, the Drolls, Traditions and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*. 2 vols. London: John Camden Hotten, 1865.

James I. *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Diuided into Three Bookes.* Edinburgh, 1597.

Lavater, Ludwig. *Of Ghostes and Spirites, Walking by Night And of Straunge Noyses, Crackes, and Sundrie Forewarnings, Which Commonly Happen Before the Death of Men: Great Slaughters, and Alterations of Kingdom.* Translated by Robert Harrison. London, 1572.

Marshall, Peter. *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

A Narrative of the Demon of Spraiton. In a Letter from a Person of Quality in the County of Devon, To a Gentleman in London, With A Relation Of An Apparition or Spectrum Of An ancient Gentleman of Devon, who often

Appeared to his Sons Servant. With the strange Actions and Discourses happening between them at divers times. As Likewise The Daemon of an ancient Woman, Wife of the Gentleman aforesaid. With Unparalell'd Varieties of strange Exploits performed by her: Attested under the Hands of the said Person of Quality, and likewise a Reverend Divine of the said County. With Reflections on Drollery and Atheism: And a Word to those that Deny the Existence of Spirits. London, 1683.

Rees, Wilkins R. 'Ghost-Layers and Ghost-Laying'. In *The Church Treasury of History, Custom, Folk-Lore, etc.*, edited by William Andrews, 241–74. London: William Andrews & Co., 1898.

Ruddle, John. 'An Account of a Most Surprising Apparition: Sent from *Launceston* in *Cornwall*'. In *Mr. Campbell's Packet for the Entertainment of Ladies and Gentlemen*, 20–33. London, 1720.

Sinclair, George. *Satans Invisible World Discovered; Or, A choice Collection of Modern Relations, proving evidently against the Saducees and Atheists of this present Age, that there are Devils, Spirits, Witches, and Apparitions, from Authentick Records, Attestations of Famous Witnesses, and undoubted Verity.* Edinburgh, 1685.

Strange and True News from Long-Ally in More-Fields, Southwark, and Wakefield in Yorkshire. London, 1661.

Strange and Wonderful Nevvs from London-VVall being a Full and True Relation of a House Miserably Disturb'd Ever since Fryday the Third of this Instant April, Where Bedding, Linnen, Apparel, and Houshold-Stuff of Great Value, have at several Times, both in the Day and Night, been Cut to Pieces by Invisible Means; Knives Removed Out of a Drawer in the Kitchin, and Scattered in the Chambers and Garret; and Things Fast Lock't Up in Trunks and Chests, Cut and Spoiled in an Unheard of Manner. As also how the Minister of the Parish, and several Other Worthy Persons, being at Prayer there on Munday the Sixth Instant, the Cloaths of a Child in the Room with them, were on a Sudden Taken Off Invisibly to their Great Amazement, and several Other Admirable Particulars there Transacted, of the Truth of which You may be further Satisfied by the Inhabitants. London, 1674.

Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. First published 1971.

A True Relation of the Horrid Ghost of a Woman, which Hath Frequently been seen in various Habits, in the House of Nicholas Broaday, at the Three Mariners in Depthford upon the Third, Fourth, and Sixth of this Instant April, 1673 [. . .]. London, 1673.

Waters, Thomas. 'Magic and the British Middle Classes, 1750–1900'. *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 3 (2015): 632–53.

Widdows, Thomas. *The Just Devil Of Woodstock. Or, A True Narrative Of The Several Apparitions, the Frights and Punishments, inflicted upon the Rumpish Commissioners Sent thither, to Survey the Mannors and Houses belonging to His Majestie.* London, 1660.

The Woodstock Scuffle. Or, Most Dreadfull-aparitions that Were Lately Seene in the Mannor-House of Woodstock: Neere Oxford, to the Great Terror and Wonderfull Amazement of All There, that Did Behold Them. London, 1649.

Young, Francis. *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

———. *A History of Anglican Exorcism: Deliverance and Demonology in Church Ritual.* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018.

Biographical Note

Brendan C. Walsh is an independent researcher based in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales, Australia. His research interests lie primarily in the area of early modern Reformed English Protestant demonology, focusing on the themes of demonic possession, exorcism, spiritual healing, diabolic witchcraft, and ghostly visitations. He is the author of The English Exorcist: John Darrell and the Shaping of Early Modern English Protestant Demonology *(Routledge, 2021).*