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MY SISTER HAUNTS ME: SORORAL SPECTRES AND THE “OTHERNESS” OF FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY GHOST STORY

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ABSTRACT

The ghost, in its very essence, is “Other”. It sits on the boundaries between life and death, reminding the living of the actuality of their existence and challenging their perceptions of the permanence of self. Applying Hegel’s model of intersubjectivity to depictions of feminine phantoms, this essay explores women’s ghost stories as representations of, and commentary on, the “otherness” of women’s sexuality in the mid-nineteenth century. Focusing on the centrality of the sororal relationship in supernatural fiction by Elizabeth Gaskell and Eliza Lynn Linton, the paper considers sorority as a narrative device through which texts explore, reflect and possibly embed ideologies surrounding female sexual desire.

KEYWORDS Ghost story; female sexuality; sorority; Eliza Lynn Linton; Elizabeth Gaskell

I should have regarded a kiss from her as a very peculiar favour, yet I did not like to receive one as a mere matter of form in response to a request... [Minnie] ... advanced a little, stooped down slightly, our lips met firmly, a fervent kiss was recorded on the surrounding atmosphere. I was distinctly conscious of two impressions: the peculiar thrill of affection which passed through me, and the physical conformation of Minnie’s lips.¹

On 7th June 1878, British spiritualist and publisher James Burns wrote an account of his attendance at a séance hosted by the spiritualist Annie Fairlamb. The description notes kisses received by the guests: tokens of affection given not by Fairlamb herself, but by “Minnie” and “Cissy”, the spirits ostensibly materialised through the medium’s body. In a discussion

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of women and spiritualism in late Victorian England, Alex Owen uses Burns's account to note the existence of a "subterranean theme of sexuality" running through the practice of late nineteenth-century trance mediums.² By enabling the apparition of the spiritual "Other" in physical form, possession enabled the expression of sexuality in ways that countered normative definitions of feminine behaviour. Marlene Tromp makes a similar point, noting possession as a blurring of the boundary between spirit and flesh which led to an association between Spiritualism and "disruptive sexuality" and "made possible women's ability to take on new roles, particularly as they related to their intimate relationships".³ Taking this conceptualisation of Spiritualism as a means of manifesting female sexuality away from the séance room and into the pages of the ghost story, this paper examines literary depictions of the spirit world as representations of, and commentary on, the "otherness" of female sexual desire in the mid-nineteenth century ghost story.

The ghost, in its very essence, is "other". A shadow of its former being, the ghost's existence amongst its human counterparts highlights its atemporality, the ephemeral nature of its visitations and its position on the periphery of life. A Hegelian model of intersubjectivity can be useful in considering the relationship between the ghost and its human observer. In *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, Hegel suggests that awareness of "Self" is dependent on the existence of, and interaction with, the "Other". In meeting an external counterpart, the individual consciousness (the subject) "finds that it immediately is and is not another consciousness", learning that both itself and the independent object are "the mediating term to the other".⁴ At this point, the subject and the object enter into a struggle for self-liberation, a "trial by death" that can only be avoided if the self and other agree to enter into a master-slave relationship, one consciousness consenting to acknowledge itself as subordinate to the other.⁵ Applied to spectral relationships, the otherness of a phantasmal apparition reminds the human seer (the subject) of the actuality of their own existence whilst simultaneously challenging the dominance of the observer's self. The struggle between the living and the dead can then either be resolved by the sublation of one to the other, or by the permanent removal of either the visitant or the visited, as occurs in each of the stories discussed below.

The Hegelian dyad is not just useful to a discussion of the supernatural. Historically, the relationship between "Self" and "Other" has also been applied to the position of women within society. In the mid-twentieth century Simone de Beauvoir commented upon the categorisation of woman as an objective counterpart to man's subjective self, critiquing patriarchal societies for holding man as "Absolute" and "essential"; the "Subject" against which woman is defined and differentiated as "inessential" and "Other".⁶ More recently, Leila Silvana May has considered Hegelian

models of feminine “otherness” within literary depictions of Victorian siblingship, focusing on the constraints placed upon, and circumnavigated by, sisters seeking to establish a sense of self, a personal identity that can fit within, and exist outside, the traditional family unit.⁷ Applying gendered constructions of “otherness” to an exploration of work by Victorian women ghost writers, Vanessa Dickerson parallels the ghost’s position as ephemeral “Other” with the liminal place occupied by the Victorian woman, “destined to be seen but unseen” within a patriarchal society.⁸ These conceptions of woman, sister and ghost as somehow “other” are all foregrounded in Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852) and Eliza Lynn Linton’s “The Old Lady’s Story” (1854). In each tale, phantom visitors intrude into domestic life: ghosts primarily appear to women spectators, and female desire is attached to, and measured against, the needs and constraints of the patriarchy. Both stories were published as sections of longer framed narratives in Christmas editions of *Household Words*. An affordable weekly journal aimed at the family audience, which required a delicate approach to the topic of female sexuality and extra-marital attraction. The ghost story, and its implications of desire long since dead, is thus employed as a mechanism that permits its authors to explore female sexuality, a topic then otherwise deemed unseemly for feminine discussion. The genre is used, in Simon Hay’s words, as “a mode of narrating what has been unnarratable ... of making narratively accessible historical events that remain in some fundamental sense inaccessible”.⁹

“The Old Lady’s Story” is one of a handful of neglected supernatural tales by Lynn Linton,¹⁰ one of the only ones in which uncanny events are not granted a rational explanation in the closing pages.¹¹ The tale centres around an elderly spinster who tells the story of a love affair that led to the death of her sister. Talking about a Halloween party she hosted with her sister, Lucy, during their adolescent years, the narrator Lizzie recalls a ghostly apparition that presented itself after an incantation designed to prompt the appearance of a future husband. Dark haired, sneering, and with the air of dominance, the spectre strikes a sense of submission into its seer. Some months later, a mysterious Mr Felix moves into the area. Identical in appearance to the Halloween visitant, Felix’s presence has a striking effect on the young Lizzie. Despite the strength of her father’s disapproval and a series of warnings from her sister, Lizzie spends an increasing amount of time with Felix. Whilst Lizzie’s desire for the newcomer grows, Lucy becomes ill with concern. Although the effect of her actions on Lucy and her father is obvious, Lizzie is guided by the dictate of her suitor and prepares to elope. As the story comes to a close, Lizzie’s reputation is saved when a second ghostly apparition halts the couple’s flight. In a final act of sororal care, Lucy’s spirit reaches out from her deathbed to recall Lizzie from the

precipice of ruin. Soon after, Felix disappears and Lizzie lives a celibate life in the family home, devoting herself to the memory of her sister.

In “The Old Nurse’s Story”¹², Gaskell offers a similar account of the way in which female sexual desire can destroy the family unit. Hester, the elderly nursemaid of the title, recalls events that took place during her youth, and we hear of time spent with her young ward Rosamond in Furnivall Manor. Once home to the tyrannical Lord Furnivall and his daughters, Maude and Grace, at the time of Hester’s visit the Manor is inhabited by the two elderly women: Grace Furnivall and her companion Mrs Stark. The house is a shell of its former self: one wing is shut off, the grounds appear to be neglected, and the central rooms are haunted by the sounds of an organ long since destroyed. Although courageous when confronted by the ghostly music, Hester’s nerves are shaken when a phantom child almost leads Rosamond to an icy death in the fells behind the house. Terrified by the threat to her ward, Hester eventually persuades the servants to tell her the history of the Manor and we hear of historic rivalry between the Furnivall sisters. The relationship between Maude and Grace deteriorated when they sat against each other in competition for the love of a travelling musician hired by their dictatorial father. Eventually victorious over her sister, Maude married her sweetheart without anyone’s knowledge and bore the musician a child. Forced to keep the marriage secret, she lodged their daughter at a local farmhouse until her father’s increasing infirmity made it possible to secrete the child in her rooms at Furnivall Manor. Unaware of her sister’s marital bond, Grace continued to court the musician until the sororal jealousies grew too much and prompted the musician’s departure, with Maude revealing the secret marriage in a final bid to triumph over her sister. Seeking to avenge her injured pride, Grace revealed Maude’s disgrace to their father. Unsurprisingly, Lord Furnivall refused to accept a marriage conducted in mysterious circumstances and without patriarchal permission. Beaten and cast out of the house, the child froze to death on the fells whilst Maude lost her mind in despair. After hearing the servant’s story, Hester faces further terror as the spectral child returns and the events of Maude’s fateful night are performed by a phantasmal cast. Hester protects Rosamond but is unable to save the elderly Grace who, confronted by the ghosts of her father, her niece, and the sister she betrayed, falls into a paralysis and dies.

Both “The Old Lady’s Story” and “The Old Nurse’s Story” situate a pair of sisters at the heart of their discussion of female sexual desire. Writing specifically about the portrayal of sisterhood in nineteenth-century British literature, Leila Silvana May considers a series of “sororal formulas” available to Victorian writers.¹³ Female siblings, she suggests, were often paired according to physical and sentimental similarities, sororal bonds were reinforced by a shared love for a brother, whilst other sisters bonded over their despair at

not having a brother to love. The corollaries are also acknowledged in Silvana May's work: the sisters with contrasting characteristic, the sorority destroyed by rivalry and opposing perspectives on life. As argued below, both Gaskell and Lynn Linton engage with these established "sororal formulas": their stories depict sororal dyads that are, in turn, distinct in appearance and temperament; that fight for or against each other; and that share a sibling bond which is shown to remain even after the death of one of the sisters. For Silvana May, these formulas can be paralleled with Lévi-Straussian "mythemes" insofar that depictions of sisters, like mythemes, "disclose more than they know they are revealing".¹⁴ To explore the subject and purpose of these mythemic revelations, it is helpful to consider Rachel Blau DuPlessis's assertion that narrative is "a version of, or a special expression of, ideology".¹⁵ In their respective work on female friendship and sororal rivalry, Tess Cosslett and Diana Wallace explore depictions of women's relationships as devices that reveal of ideologies surrounding female identity and behaviour.¹⁶ This paper extends their arguments to consider sororal bonds that exist across the division between life and death, presenting each ghost story as relying on spectral sororal pairings as devices that explore, reflect, and perhaps work to embed mid-nineteenth century attitudes towards women's sexuality. As discussed below, in applying the sororal formula across the life-death divide, Gaskell and Lynn Linton's stories suggest literal representations of Hegel's "trial by death" in order to highlight the incompatibility of conflicting ideologies of female desire. Moreover, in using female siblingship to engage with ideologies of desire, Gaskell and Lynn Linton foreground the impact of societal ideals on women, prioritising the reality of the "Other" over the experience of man, the dominant "Subject" around which patriarchal structures are organised.

Whilst establishing female sexual desire as constrained by the structures of patriarchal society, each of the stories centralises women's experience by focalising events through a female lens. Although the male-female duality is present in each ghost story, the balance is subtly redressed through the narrative's prioritisation of sororal relationships and women's observations on life. Female desire, the driving force in the destruction of familial life, is depicted from the woman's perspective, conveying the experiences and consequences of physical attraction through a female narrator. Drawing on the trope of the wise old woman, a feminine counterpart to Jung's *Senex*, Gaskell and Lynn Linton both utilise elderly spinsters to present their tales. As Jungian archetypes, these wise old women symbolise the "mana" personality, offering a "vital force" and the "power of growth" to guide their audience through each protagonist's traumatic first encounter with sexual desire.¹⁷ Each unmarried and childless, the narrators' advanced age and personal circumstances rely on models of older women as detached from their own sexuality in order to proffer advice from a perspective that

sits beyond the impulses of youthful female desire. It is notable that these supernatural tales are relayed to younger listeners: ungended “dears” in Gaskell’s story, and the speaker’s “dear nieces” in Lynn Linton’s tale. The trope of the elderly narrator and the youthful audience is not, of course, uncommon in the ghost story: a similar relationship exists between the mature housekeeper and the party of young girls in E. Nesbit’s “The Shadow” (1910), a tale that also hints at the potentially fatal impact of sexual desire.

The narratives under discussion are therefore controlled by the female elder and aimed at the adolescent listener. Moreover, the communities depicted within each story are gynocentric: sororal relationships become focal points within the plots, passions are felt by young women, and phantoms appear to a predominantly female audience. Men, when they appear in the narratives, are reduced to stereotypes: fathers are either violent and controlling or ineffective in their offerings of paternal protection, and lovers are charismatic but ultimately villainous. Neither story offers the male as a reassuring presence, and in each the female narrator reveals situations in which women must rely on members of their own sex when threatened in any way. One would be forgiven for assuming that the narratives might be read as women writers’ assertions of the female self over the patriarchal restraints within which she must live. Such a reading would comply with Vanessa Dickerson’s suggestion that the writing of ghost narratives is essentially a feminist act – the text providing the writer with a platform through which she might make herself, and her fictional phantoms, more visible. Certainly, “The Old Nurse’s Story” and “The Old Lady’s Story” use the ghost story genre as a mechanism for the discussion of female sexuality, a topic otherwise unsuitable for feminine discussion. However, rather than using the fiction as a platform to promote female desire as a natural and positive force, each narrative employs the supernatural to reiterate the dominant male narrative that female desire ought to be socially restricted and constrained by the patriarchal structure of heterosexual marriage. Each spectral tale uses the spirit world to position female desire as pernicious to the self and to society as a collective. As discussed below, both stories depict women’s desire as both a cause of socio-familial trauma, and an impediment to the individual’s psychological growth.

The Ghost Story and Desire as a Cause Of Socio-Historic Trauma

The ghost story is often conceived as a means of addressing socio-historic concerns. In a detailed history of the British ghost story, Simon Hay acknowledges the historic tendency to foreground psychoanalytical readings of supernatural occurrences, but positions haunting as a narrative device for the exploration of wider moments of social trauma. For Hay, ghost literature

is concerned “with suffering, with historical catastrophe and the problems of remembering and mourning it”.¹⁸ This remembrance of suffering is twisted towards the female experience in Melissa Edmundson Makala’s exploration of the “social supernatural” in women’s ghost literature in the nineteenth century. Highlighting the “otherness” of the Victorian female experience, Makala’s focus on women as socially liminal leads to an assertion of women writers’ use of the supernatural as a subversive means of “exposing the social tensions and inequalities” of Victorian society.¹⁹ The points made by Hay and Makala are directly relevant to this paper’s consideration of “The Old Nurse’s Story” and “The Old Lady’s Story”, which explores the supernatural as a means of approaching female sexuality as a cause of social tension during the mid-nineteenth century.

Whilst the stereotype of the Victorian woman as asexual and repressed is long established, the trope is almost certainly an historical fallacy. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault famously noted the twentieth-century misconceptions of Victorian sexuality and their dependence on a model of heterosexual conjugality that confined sexual activity to a reproductive function.²⁰ Even during the nineteenth century, some medical textbooks were refuting the notion of the passionless female silently submitting to her husband’s desire. For instance, in an 1850 account of the Diseases of Menstruation and Ovarian Inflammation, English physician Edward Tilt asserted the strength of sexual “passions and feelings” in healthy women, noting the potentially detrimental effect of the “privation of sexual stimulus” on the female sex.²¹ Writing for a medical audience, Tilt draws analogies between male and female desire, highlighting similarities in the physical responses of each sex to certain modes of excitation and demonstrating a mid-century interest in female sexuality. As Carl Degler noted in 1974, a survey conducted by Dr Clelia Mosher at the end of the nineteenth century explored the issue of women’s perceptions of physical desire, with participants reporting feelings of sexual attraction and an appetite for intercourse independent of their husband’s requirements.²² Tilt’s bio-medical text and the results of Dr Mosher’s study clearly conflict with the notion of the Victorian woman as an asexual being, a stereotype which Degler traces back to a conceptualisation of woman’s sexuality offered by Doctor William Acton in 1865. Noting Acton’s assertion that “the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind”²³, Degler argues that a mid-twentieth century critical reliance on Acton’s work perpetuated the image of the sexually disinterested Victorian woman. Through a detailed exploration of conflicting nineteenth-century literature, Degler proposes a revised view of Acton’s writing as ideologically motivated and more prescriptive than descriptive.²⁴ Judith Walkowitz echoes this sentiment in her exploration of Victorian attitudes to prostitution. Noting multiple understandings of sexual behaviour,

Walkowitz argues that critical adoption of one dominant, prescriptive, and predominantly male narrative by twentieth-century critics has led to a reduced understanding of the nature of nineteenth-century conceptualisations of female desire.²⁵

Contrasting accounts of female desire also appear in nineteenth-century literature, within and against which these ghost stories sit. Drawing on a broad range of portrayals of women's desire, Jill Matus's detailed survey of fictionalised accounts of female sexuality and maternity highlights the unstable and contrasting nature of the depictions. For Matus, the literary depictions show the nineteenth-century women as sexually transgressive, *and/or* conjugally dutiful, *and/or* passionless and asexual.²⁶ Applying a Foucauldian reading, Christine Sutphin explains these tensions by reference to the underlying gender power dynamic and suggests that "the sexuality of respectable women was accepted" but noting that this tolerance co-existed alongside a desire "to contain it within marriage and to draw a clear line between respectable and disreputable women".²⁷ To this end, sexual desire can be viewed as "Other" when it leads a woman outside the conjugal and maternal roles assigned to them by patriarchal social structures. The sororal pairings in the Ghost stories under consideration in this paper certainly note the presence of this ideology, each presenting female sexual desire as existing alongside, and in spite of, paternal prohibition. This leaves the young women who experience desire as confronted with a tension between, as Edward Tilt put it in 1850, "the headlong impulse of passion and the dictates of duty".²⁸

The protagonist narrator in Lynn Linton's "The Old Lady's Story" finds her younger self faced with this conflict, trapped between familial duty and the influence of sexual desire. Positioned as a "painful confession", Lizzie's story speaks of the "secret" in her past as a sin she hopes to have "expiated" through her tears and "repentance".²⁹ Embedding the supernatural occurrences within a frame that relies on the language of Christian redemption, the reader is conditioned to expect a story of transgression and personal sorrow. As the elderly narrator continues, the narrative recounts events from her past. She begins with the first supernatural episode on All Hallows' Eve, recalling how she and her sister Lucy gathered with a party of friends to entertain themselves with fortune-telling games and incantations. Lynn Linton draws on a typical sororal formula from the start: the sisters are depicted as "entirely different". Drawing on a recurrent trope, from the physical differences between the siblings in Grimm's "Snow White and Rose Red" to the contrasting temperaments of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, the story depicts Lucy as "quiet, and fair" whilst Lizzie is "full of life and spirits".³⁰ As in Grimm's fairy story and Austen's novel, the sororal difference is an early hint towards contrasting approaches to duty.

The evening described by Lizzie is one of “fun and mischief”, full of the “innocence and thoughtlessness” that come with youth.³¹ As the evening progresses, the girls’ youthful dares build to a crescendo and it is proposed that Lizzie, the self-confessed “foolhardy girl” of the party, enter into a remote room to perform an enchantment designed to reveal the face of her future husband.³² Performing the ritual in front of a mirror, the young speaker feels a change in the atmosphere and sees the face of a man reflected over her shoulder. The phantasmal appearance marks the shift away from childish innocence. The incantation requires the young girl to eat an apple whilst wishing for a glimpse of her future love. The speaker’s allusion to “Eve’s forbidden fruit” suggests not only temptation and female transgression, but also a desire for knowledge that will end in some form of punishment. Moreover, the narrator’s younger self moves outside the comfort of the domestic parlour in order to perform her secretive act. Drawing on architecture typically associated with hauntings, Lynn Linton situates the visitation in an isolated room in a disused end of their “rambling old manor-house”. Enveloped in the dark, the speaker recalls her younger self carrying a “*bed-room candle*” (my italics) to light her way as she moves away from the homely fireside of the drawing room and the frivolous games she played therein.³³ In implicit anticipation of the desire she does not yet expect to feel, she moves towards the abandoned room aware of a “certain nameless feeling of attraction”, her “heart beating with excitement” and her “foolish head dizzy with hope”.³⁴ As the speaker journeys from the childish environment of the party to the deserted room where her future husband will appear, she experiences physical reactions often associated with desire. The supernatural apparition, when it appears, is a phenomenon that further affects the young lady’s body: she feels “pressed on from all sides” by “shadowy faces”, “eyes and hands”; the air feels heavy and “filled with life” as “Things pressed up” close and “checked the breath on my lips with the clammy breath from theirs”.³⁵ Embedded in the description of the speaker’s experience is a suggestion that the “sin” to follow is not one for which she ought to be held solely accountable. When the phantom lover appears in the mirror, he seethes with danger. His smile is one of mockery and contempt, a sneer of “victory” that strikes the young girl into “a sense of submission”.³⁶ The visitation suggests the dominance of the spirit over the seer, of the “Absolute” man over the “subjective” woman, of unconstrained adult desire over childish entertainment.

As the supernatural visitation comes to an end, the speaker recalls how “something flowed out with me” as she leaves the isolated room. The implication of a desire roused and not doused sits within the suggestion of an unstoppable spiritual force released to follow the young girl as she moves back towards the innocent space of the family parlour. From that moment in, she is haunted by the unspeakable feeling she experienced on All

Hallow's Eve. The desire remains a secret one: others cannot see "The Presence" that stays with her, "never absent"; nor can they hear the "whispering voice" that wakes her from "wild dreams" and remains "busy" at her brain and heart.³⁷ The otherness of the spiritual visitation echoes the otherness of the young girl's desire: "Other" because it sits outside the constraints of a paternally authorised marital transaction. Attaching the sensations of sexual attraction to the spiritual world rather than a tangible male suitor, Lynn Linton is able to explicitly describe physical reactions without offending the sensibilities of the audience. Such delicacy was of particular importance given the publication was aimed at the family audience. Alongside the suggestion that such feelings of temptation are sinful, the narrator emphasises the experience of female passion and illicit male dominance as one that must be kept to herself.

The effect of this indescribable and invisible passion is the dissolution of previous bonds: the spirit as metaphor for unfettered desire threatens to separate the young speaker from her birth family, inserting itself "like a cold cloud" between the speaker and her sister, and drowning out the authority of her father's voice.³⁸ As the speaker grows older, the spiritual representation of female desire gives way to a tangible human attraction: an exotic stranger moves into the neighbourhood, his appearance uncannily similar to the supernatural apparition of her youth. Like the spirit in the mirror, his expression subdues; his presence bears her "away in a torrent", and his eyes thrill "through every nerve and fibre".³⁹ The language implies domination and physical sensation, and the effect of the speaker's desire is a rift with her family. With no mother to guide her moral growth, Lizzie is overcome by her feelings of desire. In spite of her sister's dislike for the stranger, and her father's refusal to allow the relationship, the young speaker follows the newcomer's commands to meet him in secret. Situating the protagonist between the family and the lover, the narrative mimics the tension potentially caused by female desire. The emotions and sensations experienced by Lizzie suggest a shift from the familial to the conjugal, although, in each unit, the young woman is under the influence of the male: she will always be the "Other" to a male "Self".

It seems that the problem for Lizzie is that this shift from child to adult, from daughter to wife, is not authorised by the structures that govern patriarchal society. The stranger makes a claim, asserting that "there are ties which are stronger than a father's commands; ties which no man has the right, and no man has the power to break", but the meetings are illicit and no marriage bond is discussed.⁴⁰ She has not received permission to move from the family unit to the marital pair, and is thus situated at the centre of a conflict between two men. As Eve Sedgwick notes, "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial [...] desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal

power”.⁴¹ Drawing on Gale Rubin’s articulation of marriage as the objectification of woman as an article of exchange⁴², Sedgwick construes the typical marriage plot as a triangular relationship which permits social arrangements between men. Female sexual desire can have no part in these social arrangements: as an article of exchange, the woman is considered desireless and her preference is not considered. Indeed, the prize placed on her purity enhances her value as an object of exchange. In “The Old Lady’s Story”, the exotic stranger is not considered a suitable match for Lizzie: there is no social convenience to be gained by the construction of a marriage contract. Unfettered by the restraints of androcentric social arrangements, Lizzie’s desire creates tension and threatens to disrupt the family unit.

For Lynn Linton, the tension caused by female desire is brought to a close by means of a second haunting. Lucy’s sororal concern is such that her health declines. She succumbs to death as Lizzie is leaving her father’s house to set up life with Felix. Poised by the window, the opening to her new, illicit, life of desire, Lizzie sees “a pale figure clothed in white”.⁴³ With a “face more pale than the linen round it”, the apparition looks mournfully at Lizzie, silent but enshrined with “deathless affection” as she beckons her away from the window.⁴⁴ Recognising the phantom as her sister, the speaker leaves her lover outside the window and runs to Lucy, finding her dead on the floor, “one hand stretched out as it in supplication”.⁴⁵ Motherless, and lacking effective paternal protection, Lizzie’s sister assumes the role of defender, dying to save her sibling from “ruin”. Throughout the narrative, the sisters are contrasted in order to reflect the tension between the virginal maid and the sexually awakened lover; between obedience and rebellion; between the familial bond and the desire for conjugal union. Lizzie’s unspeakable feelings of physical attraction are juxtaposed against her sister’s talk “of the sacred things of heaven and the earnest things of life”.⁴⁶

Sarah Brown suggests that the sororal relationship is an ideal vehicle for the exploration of womanhood: with each sister possessing “both an individual and a collective identity, variety and contrast are given special significance and piquancy by the ballast of shared heredity and upbringing”.⁴⁷ As Brown asserts, sisters’ shared parentage renders divergences in character more pertinent: Austen’s heroines often demonstrate the range of attributes that can be possessed by the sisters of one family. In “The Old Lady’s Story”, Lizzie and Lucy present contrasting ideologies about female desire. Lizzie’s wild passion leads her to act on a physical attraction despite her father’s distaste for the object of his daughter’s desire. Her character acknowledges female desire as a potent force that exists outside the authorised procreation of the conjugal unit. In contrast, Lucy’s commitment to the family unit emphasises the potential trauma that Lizzie’s desire could cause if not fettered by the restraints of an authorised marriage bond. Prompted by the

old lady's opening remarks about sin, the reader is invited to choose between the two sisters and the ideologies they represent.

Prefiguring the noble courage of Lizzie in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862), a text which also posits desire as a supernatural, fantastical force, the old lady's depiction of her younger self as saved by a sister's act of selfless sacrifice further shapes the readers' response. As Helena Michie notes, such juxtaposition works to embed the notion of female desire as troublesome: for Lynn Linton's Lucy and Rossetti's Lizzie, protection of their respective sisters reinforces the patriarchal "system that allows for the opposition between *pure* and *fallen*" (Michie's italics).⁴⁸ The "*fallen*" remains so because she is continually judged against the authorised purity of her sister: her desire is "Other" because it sits outside the bounds of patriarchal permission. For Lynn Linton and Rossetti, the familial bond between sisters can save a woman from the unutterable otherness of unrestricted physical desire in a society which prizes women's purity as a valuable asset in the marriage contract between men. However, in Lynn Linton's story, the cost of one sister's redemption is the destruction of her saviour: like the competing ideologies they represent, the two sisters cannot simply co-exist: one must be consumed by the other in order for the situation to be resolved.

In Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story", the sororal relationship is less benign. Situating the object of sexual desire within a house inhabited by two sisters, Gaskell creates a tri-partite relationship. As with Lynn Linton's tale, female sexual desire is depicted as occurring without paternal consent, an illicit force that therefore threatens to destabilise the family unit. In contrast to "The Old Lady's Story", Gaskell does not use the spiritual world to demonstrate the physicality of the protagonist's desire, or the sacrificial nature of the sororal bond. Instead, the supernatural apparitions present themselves as part of a revenge narrative designed to expose the destruction that womanly desire can wreak on familial relations. Positioned as a nurse on the periphery of the family unit, Gaskell's speaker is able to offer an account that is not only void of personal feelings of desire, but that is also detached from the bond of personal kinship.

Thus better placed to comment on the sororal rivalry, the old nurse offers an account of a sisterly relationship turned sour. As Brown notes, "the close affinity between sisters may produce a uniquely affectionate relationship" but it can also provide "a breeding ground for bitter jealousy and competition".⁴⁹ In "The Old Nurse's Story", Gaskell's sororal spectre can be read as a manifestation of the competitive nature of female sexual desire, as well as a commentary on the pernicious effect that extramarital desire can have on the original family unit.

Recounting a stay at the ancestral home of her young charge, Rosamond's, distant relations, Hester tells of the Furnivall sisters and their simultaneous desire for a young male musician. During the visit, two hauntings repeatedly

occur: music comes from a decaying organ on stormy winter evenings, and a young girl wanders around the grounds of the manor house, attempting to lure Rosamond to an icy death. In contrast to Lynn Linton's tale, there is no supernatural metaphor for the physical sensations of desire. Instead, the hauntings demonstrate the destructive impact of illicit desire on the family unit: the phantasmal music reflects the father's rage at his daughter's inappropriate and unauthorised marriage, and the ghostly child is a manifestation of the tragic results of the sisters' rivalry. Whilst the hauntings speak of prior destruction, the reason for the apparitions are withheld until Hester convinces the housekeeper to reveal details of the family's history. Delivering the experience and context of the hauntings through working class women's voices, Gaskell draws on nineteenth-century beliefs that women and the lower classes were more susceptible to visitation from the spirit world.⁵⁰ Indeed, the craze for spiritualism in mid-nineteenth-century England can be traced to women, via the arrival of Mrs Hayden and Mrs Roberts: two prominent American women mediums.⁵¹ Echoing the contemporary belief that women were able to channel the spirit world more effectively than men, the narrative is structured to award control of the story to women and, as in Lynn Linton's story, the female voice becomes the medium through which supernatural occurrences are laid out for the reader to interpret.

In her discussion of the negotiation of female identity, Michie notes a nineteenth-century tendency to "assert [female] identity in opposition to ... other women".⁵² In "The Old Nurse's Story", Gaskell identifies each of the Furnivall Sisters in relation to, and in contrast with, the opposing sibling. Whilst Hester's viewing of ancestral portraits reveals the elder sister, Miss Maude, to beat her sister for "beauty, and ... scornful pride", the dominance of the younger is shown in the removal of Maude's likeness from display, its position with "face turned to the wall".⁵³ In a scenario that suggests Hegel's "trial by death", the assertion of Grace's beauty comes through the removal of her sister: the "self" must overcome the "other" in order to triumph. A further opposition is evident in the locational displacement that comes from the sisters' feud for the heart of the "dark foreigner".⁵⁴ As Grace moves to the west wing, Maude occupies the rooms in the east. The mirrored occupation reflects the segregation of family that occurs when sexual desire leads to sororal rivalry. Upon Maude's death, the east wing is shut off, erasing her existence and leaving Grace without a sororal "Other" against which she must identify herself.

As events become clear towards the end of Hester's narrative, the reader is able to experience the terror of the hauntings as they are relayed for the ears of Hester's juvenile charges. The final apparition replays the moment at which the family unit was shattered. In a re-enactment of the scenes following Grace's betrayal of her sister, a phantasmal representation reveals Lord Furnivall striking Maude's child before casting both daughter and

granddaughter out of the house and into the snow. Discussing the forbidden spaces in Furnivall Hall, Emma Liggins notes the “irruption of the supernatural into the domestic space” as the doors of the East Wing burst open and reveal the secrets of the past.⁵⁵ As a forbidden space, Liggins suggests that the East Wing “is organised around rejection and denial ... the threat of illegitimacy and female passion”.⁵⁶ In releasing its secrets, the East Wing reveals the spectral sister against whom Grace must be judged. No longer able to assert her superiority by the avoidance of comparison suggested by the hidden portrait, the younger sister’s truths are laid bare. As the spectral tableau unfolds, the young Maude appears in “fierce and proud defiance”, reflecting her belief in the propriety of her desire within the covert marriage contract.⁵⁷ As the paternal ghost descends, Maude’s bold facade melts into a wild and piteous attempt to save her child, while the spectral reincarnation of Grace’s younger self looks on “with a look of relentless hate and triumphant scorn”.⁵⁸ The impact of Grace’s illicit desire for her sister’s husband becomes startlingly clear: by informing their father of Maude’s child, she brought about the death of both sister and niece. The scene is an important commentary on the sisters’ inability to co-exist. Confronted with the ghost of her sister, the elderly Grace is forced to enter once again into a battle for dominance with her sororal “Other”. Where the youthful Grace overcame her sister by evoking the rage of the family’s patriarch, the older version is overcome by guilt when faced with her sibling’s phantom. The horror of the re-enactment causes Grace to fall into a stricken paralysis from which she never awakes. The rivalry between the two sisters is resolved, once again, by a fight to the death.

Female desire, occurring outside the social norms of a patriarchal society, is thus shown to have ruined the lives of women across generations. Sisters stand against each other, a mother and child are murdered, and the surviving sibling removes herself from society to live as a childless spinster haunted by spectral manifestations of her guilt. Gaskell’s depiction of the Furnivall sisters reveals not only the effects of the enduring rivalry between sisters, but also the destructive nature of desire occurring outside the conjugal relationship. In considering the story through the lenses of historic trauma and the “social supernatural”, the spiritual apparitions can thus be read as commentaries upon female sexual desire as “Other”; a negative force that ruins familial bonds when not legitimised by compliance with the dominant patriarchal social norms. In a letter dated 27 July 1855, Gaskell tells her unidentified recipient that she considers her stories “moral and sensible”, including “The Old Nurse’s Story”, an “unexplained ghost story” that “might not do so well for young people”⁵⁹, a description that implies an intended morality within the ghostly tale, and perhaps suggests the need to shield young ears from any discussion of female desire.

Desire as an Impediment to Psychological Growth

Of course, the ghost story is a multivalent genre, and offers itself up to a reading that crosses various modes of interpretation. Simon Hay, for instance, situates his focus on the ghost as a means of articulating moments of socio-historic trauma against a recognition of the psychoanalytical reading as a more dominant mode of reading ghost stories. Freud's spectral metaphors demonstrate how such an understanding lends itself to an exploration of the construction of identity in relation to past versions of self. For the ghost and the haunted, the self is assessed in relation to the moment of apparition and by reference to some form of "other" self, existing at another time. Existing across temporal zones, ghostly appearances can be read as shadows of their former beings, unable to fully participate in life but continuing to assert themselves on their surroundings. As Andrew Smith notes, the liminality of the spectral presence "compromises models of a coherent, self-conscious and self-present, conception of identity".⁶⁰ Lynn Linton's old lady spends a lifetime repenting for the actions of her younger self, her inability to move on reflected in the need to relay the story to her young nieces. In contrast, the surviving sister in "The Old Nurse's Story" appears to have detached from her younger self. However, in presenting the final apparitions as extra-temporal versions of their former beings, Gaskell highlights a construction of identity that occurs in relation to the "Other", not just as a Hegelian counterpart to the individual consciousness, but in reference to past actions or past versions of the self. Accordingly, the repeated appearances of the child-spectre and Maude's ghost can be read as psychological re-enactments of Grace's prior actions and as a sub-conscious manifestation of her continuing guilt. Grace must not only overcome her sister as an alternate consciousness but, as Emma Liggins notes, must "confront the ghost of her former self" in order to move forward and bring an end to the haunting.⁶¹

Consideration of Hegel's conceptualisation of desire further adds to our reading of the stories' depiction of the potential psychological effect of desire on the woman experiencing the passion. In *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, Hegel writes that "Self-consciousness is *desire*", commencing a conceptualisation of desire as a means of affirming identity.⁶² For Hegel, desire is dependent on the existence of an object of desire that is situated outside the subject, desire is felt *for* or *of* the external "Other". Noting the difference between *Self* as *desirer*, and *Other* as *desired*, the subject is able to expand its own understanding of self: Hegelian desire is about the subject's need to transcend the difference between "Self" and "Other". As Judith Butler explains, for Hegel, "human desire articulates the subject's relationship to that which it is *not* itself, that which is different, strange, novel, awaited, absent, lost. And the satisfaction of desire is the transformation of difference

into identity: the discovery of the strange and novel as familiar, the arrival of the awaited, the re-emergence of what has been absent or lost”.⁶³ Accordingly, suggests Butler, “desire is *intentional* in that it is always desire of or for a given object or Other, but it is also *reflexive* in the sense that desire is a modality in which the subject is both discovered and enhanced”.⁶⁴

The dialectic nature of the relationship between the desiring Self and the desired Other is revealed in the opening sentences of Hegel’s chapter on “Lordship and Bondage” in *The Phenomenology of the Mind*.⁶⁵ “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’”.⁶⁶ To this end, the desiring self becomes objectified through the gaze of the desired other, losing a sense of its subjective selfhood. The only possible solution is through mutual recognition, the state where “one consciousness recognizes itself in another, and in which each knows that reciprocal recognition”.⁶⁷ For Hegel, the solution is problematically hetero-normative: the husband-wife relationship is proposed as the “primary and immediate form” in which such recognition can occur. Situating Lizzie and Grace’s desire as occurring outside any possibility of a marriage contract makes it impossible for either to enjoy the personal growth achieved through such mutual recognition. In prohibiting their marriage, Lizzie’s father denies his daughter and her lover the recognition and personal enrichment that would accompany a sanctioned union. Although seemingly legitimised by marriage, Maude is unable to enjoy the recognition of her husband because of the attention he pays to her sister. For each of these women, the socially unacceptable nature of her desire means she will lack the formal recognition of her desired “Other” despite losing a sense of her subjective self. Compliance with patriarchal constraints is the price that must be paid if desire is to be mutually recognised and lead to an enhanced understanding of “Self”. When women act on an attraction that sits outside these authorised boundaries, they are shown to cause harm to themselves as well as to the family unit to which they originally belonged.

* * *

For Gaskell and Lynn Linton, the ghost story genre is used to construct a means of entering into discussion about the unspeakable nature of women and sexual desire in the nineteenth-century. As discussed above, each author uses sororal relationships to explore competing ideologies of female sexuality. Whether reading the supernatural as socio-historic commentary or as psychological observation, the two authors offer essentially conservative takes on female sexuality. Drawing on Hegelian models of intersubjectivity, women’s desire is shown to be “Other” when placed outside the social constraints of a marriage contract arranged between two men. The rivalry of Gaskell’s sisters and the salvation narrative of Lynn Linton’s sororal pairing both demonstrate that the unrestrained sexual desire of women can cause trauma

to the family unit and, ultimately, to the woman herself. Women may control the text as writers and narrators, but Gaskell and Lynn Linton ultimately use the power of their authorial position to reassert patriarchal narratives about the need to contain female sexual desire within an authorised conjugal space. Like the ghosts that haunt them, the narratives re-assert the position of woman as “Other”, her physical and emotional self assessed by reference to a morality imposed by the dominant “Subject”, the Victorian man.

Notes

1. James Burns, “Interviews with Physicalised Spirits at Newcastle”, *The Medium and Daybreak* (June 7, 1878), 362.
2. Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 220.
3. Marlene Tromp, “Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage and Victorian Spiritualism”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (2003), 67–81, 72–3.
4. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1961 (5th impression)), 231.
5. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Mind*, 233.
6. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (London: Random House Vintage, 1997), 16, 29.
7. Leila Silvana May, *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, (London: Associated University Press, 2001), 34–7.
8. Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 11.
9. Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, (London: Palgrave, 2011), 4.
10. I note, but choose to reject, the custom of referring to the writer subject as “Linton”, a name not attached to any of her publications. Instead, I refer to her throughout this paper as “Lynn Linton”, a name which acknowledges Eliza Lynn’s determination to retain her maiden name upon marriage to William J. Linton, and a name under which a large proportion of her work was published.
11. Eliza Lynn Linton, “The Old Lady’s Story”, *Household Words*, February 18, 1854, 581–5. For other neglected supernatural stories see Eliza Lynn Linton, “The White Witch of Combe Andrew” *All The Year Round*, December 23, 1871, 79–84 and Eliza Lynn Linton, “Galloping Dick”, *All the Year Round*, February 17, 1873, 342–8.
12. Elizabeth Gaskell, “The Old Nurse’s Story”, *Household Words*, December 25, 1852, 583–92.
13. Leila Silvana May, *Disorderly Sisters*, 25.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Writers*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), x.
16. Tess Cosslett, *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1988) and Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women’s Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000). Cosslett

explores female friendship as a narrative means of exploring concepts of female identity, whereas Wallace focuses on literary depictions of women's rivalry.

17. Carl G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 33.
18. Hay, *Modern British Ghost Story*, 4.
19. Melissa Edmundson Makala, *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 5.
20. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1–15.
21. Edward John Tilt, *On the Diseases of Menstruation and Ovarian Inflammation, In Connection with Sterility, Pelvic Tumours, and Affections of the Womb*, (London: John Churchill, 1850), 54.
22. Carl Degler, "What Ought to Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 5, (December 1974), 1467–90.
23. William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life: Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations*, 4th ed. (London: John Churchill, 1865), 112.
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25. Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5.
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27. Christine Sutphin, "Human Tigresses, Fractious Angels, and Nursery Saints: Augusta Webster's 'A Castaway' and Victorian Discourses on Prostitution and Women's Sexuality", *Victorian Poetry*, Vol.38, No. 4, (Winter 2000), 511–32.
28. Tilt, 57.
29. Lynn Linton, "The Old Lady's Story," 581.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 582.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 583.
40. Ibid., 584.
41. Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*, 2nd ed., (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1992), 25.
42. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In Reiter, R. (ed) *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.
43. Lynn Linton, "The Old Lady's Story," 585.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 583.
47. Sarah Annes Brown, *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature*, (London: Ashgate, 2003), 2.
48. Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.
49. Brown, *Devoted Sisters*, 2.
50. For more on public conceptions of women, class and mediumship, see Owen, especially 5, 49.
51. Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11.
52. Michie, 17.
53. Gaskell, “The Old Nurse’s Story,” 586.
54. Ibid., 590.
55. Emma Liggins, *The Haunted House in Women’s Ghost Stories: Gender, Space and Modernity, 1850–1945*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 58.
56. Liggins, 58.
57. Gaskell, “The Old Nurse’s Story,” 592.
58. Ibid.
59. Letter from Elizabeth Gaskell to unknown recipient, July 27, 1855, in J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (eds). *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), 365.
60. Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 2.
61. Liggins, *The Haunted House*, 59.
62. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Mind*, 225.
63. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, reprint edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 9.
64. Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 25.
65. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Mind*, 229.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 74.

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Fiona Snailham was recently awarded her PhD by the University of Greenwich. Her doctoral thesis re-evaluates the work of Eliza Lynn Linton, investigating the social and textual networks within which Lynn Linton wrote in order to re-establish her reputation as an actor of note in the nineteenth-century literary market. Wider research interests include popular Victorian fiction, nineteenth-century spiritualism, gender studies and women in the periodical press.