Migrating M.R.James' Christmas Ghost Stories to Television
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The best way to introduce this paper also allows me to pay brief tribute to a Gothic icon who passed away earlier this year:

CLIP: Introduction to Ghost Stories for Christmas with Christopher Lee

'Every Christmas Eve has its ritual. Those invited make their way for the appointed time. Out of the darkness. While the Master waits. Montague Rhodes James, Provost of King's, scholar, antiquary and writer of ghost stories.'

That was part of the opening titles to a BBC series of lightly-dramatised adaptations of M.R.James' ghost stories from 2000. As the narrator stated, James presented his ghost stories as a part of each year's Christmas celebrations during his tenureses at Eton and at King's College, Cambridge. Some of these stories have been adapted for television, particularly in a BBC set of productions which ran throughout the 1970s, with one adaptation a year. This series was then revived in 2005 and 2006, then again in 2013. [Slide: Ghost Story for Christmas episodes]

These productions therefore form part of an ongoing chain of adaptations and migrations, part of what Sarah Cardwell refers to as 'the extended development of a singular, infinite meta-text: a valuable story or myth that is constantly growing and developing, being retold, reinterpreted and assessed' (Cardwell, 2002, p. 25). In writing his Christmas ghost stories, James was taking part in a literary tradition which we can trace back through Dickens, and Washington Irving. Where James originally wrote his stories for oral delivery to students and friends, Dickens, Irving and others were themselves adapting an oral form, the traditional supernatural 'winter's tale', into a literary form. In turn, James' literary products, like those of others, were migrated from oral presentation, to print form, then on to radio and television. While these were not exclusively seasonal adaptations, they were used as part of the migration of existing traditions into these new media as they developed. By echoing existing traditions in new forms broadcasting could demonstrate how it was part of people's lives and celebrations, rather than a threat to them, at the same time bringing traditional festivities to those who were, for whatever reason, unable to take part in them otherwise. And so the pantomime became a regular part of the British television Christmas, as did a circus show and the Royal Variety Show, bringing traditional seasonal entertainment into the homes of more people than would otherwise experience them.

However, in doing so, these migrations perpetuate a particular culture, the one that selects what makes a 'traditional' Christmas or whichever season is under consideration. This can be based on nothing more than what the broadcasters are themselves used to. This can be seen in the case of the Christmas ghost story, which is a primarily English rather than Scottish, Welsh or Irish tradition. Indeed, the Scots and Irish tradition seems to have been more for having tales of the supernatural at Halloween, which was not celebrated in the same way in England. It is the Scots and Irish tradition which spread into North America through emigration, and itself mutated and developed into the modern American Halloween.

But for those who came from the upper and middle-classes that formed much of the initial BBC management, then it was the English tradition that dominated, and in particular a London or South-East English tradition. They thus chose and developed programming based on those practices, which were then broadcast to the whole of Britain, regardless of local traditions. Where alternative practices were picked up on, they were usually presented as being rural, quaint, and dying out, as is the case with Halloween. For example, in 1924, an article in the BBC's listings magazine the Radio Times stated that [SLIDE] 'Hallowe'en observance, to a great extent, has now fallen into disuse, but was believed by the superstitious in Scotland to be a night on which the invisible world had peculiar power' (Anon. 1924a, p.207). Meanwhile, Christmas ghost stories were simply taken for granted despite themselves being only a regional variation.
For the rest of this paper, I want to focus on these adaptations of M.R. James' stories as a way of understanding and interpreting this migration of traditions from oral delivery to literary text, then to broadcasting, then to the broadcasts themselves becoming traditions.

As Sarah Cardwell has suggested, one of the key issues with using the metaphor of adaptation in the genetic sense in relation to cultural adaptation is that genetic adaptation typically results from a process of many generations, while cultural adaptation always goes back to the sole original text. However, this is not exactly the case, as adaptations frequently draw upon and refer to other adaptations of the original text. In other words, there are multiple 'parents' and mutations which lead to the particular individual expression.

In the case of the M.R. James adaptations, one key 'parent' is Jonathan Miller's version of James' 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' for the arts programme Omnibus in 1968. This was, in some ways, an essay on James, and particularly Miller's interpretation of what James' ghost stories are about. For Miller, these are psychosexual tales conjured up by a repressed bachelor fearful of what may cause the bedclothes to stir and rise in the night. This version ends with an elderly academic reduced to infantilism, sucking his thumb and moaning.

This is quite a step from the young golfing protagonist of James' original, but Miller's interpretation has had a significant influence on subsequent versions of James' stories on the BBC. In particular, the conception of the protagonist as an uptight, obsessive and probably sexually repressed bachelor has persisted. However, it was not picked up immediately by the adaptations by Lawrence Gordon Clark which appeared in the 1970s. This is despite the Miller adaptation being accredited as inspiring the Ghost Story for Christmas adaptations of James and demonstrating that the stories could be effectively adapted for television. Instead, Clark and his writers drew more closely upon James' original narratives, taking the atmosphere and use of landscape from Miller but not his Freudian interpretation.

However, when the series returned in the mid-2000s it not only drew upon the 1970s adaptations but also included Miller's adaptation directly in its lineage. This is despite the fact that the original screening of Miller's 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' was not at Christmas, but in May, and the episode is not part of the Ghost Story for Christmas strand at all. Nevertheless, the protagonists of both A View From a Hill and Number 13 both become rather pernickety, possibly obsessive-compulsive figures, a habit of precision demonstrated by each carefully laying out their belongings in their lodgings in nice, squared-off patterns. Both adaptations feature a montage of the protagonists laying out their belongings, and the screenshot from Number 13 shows Anderson re-arranging the books on his table so that they are in ascending order of thickness.

Anderson in Number 13 is also clearly sexually repressed to some extent, a characteristic not helped in this presentation by the bizarre inclusion in his lodgings of a copy of Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights, which you can see to the side of the first picture and projected onto the bed curtains in the second, and by the way that his fellow guest, Jenkins, is clearly flirting with a female guest, which even leads to Anderson having a mildly erotic dream about that female guest. This image is as erotic as Anderson's imagination gets, although 'she' does actually touch him! This despite James' own statement that 'sex is tiresome enough in the novels; in a ghost story, or as the backbone of a ghost story, I have no patience with it.' James does describe Anderson as 'a methodical, accurate-minded man' (James, 1992a, p.85), but this is only to emphasise his reliability as a witness of these strange events, and the character has none of the prickliness of Greg Wise's portrayal. Similarly, the original of the lawyer, Jenkins, is a 'staid man' (James, 1992, p.90) rather than a drinker and pursuer of young women, and there are no female guests mentioned by James. Meanwhile, in James' 'A View From a Hill', Squire Richards is 'a burly man' (James, 1992b, p.534) who is already friends with Mr (not Dr) Fanshawe before the story begins.

These repressed figures were seen as being somewhat essential ingredients of the Ghost Story for Christmas formula by the 2000s. Sarah Dempster characterised the productions thus:
There are the powdery academics hamstrung by extreme social awkwardness. There is the bumbling protagonist bemused by a particular aspect of modern life ... There are stunning, panoramic shots of a specific area of the British landscape ... There is the determined lack of celebrity pizzazz ... There is tweed. And there is, crucially, a single moment of heart-stopping, corner-of-the-eye horror that suggests life, for one powdery academic at least, will never be the same again. (Dempster, 2005, p. 6)

This usefully picks out the key aspects of the adaptations: characterisation, setting, casting and the approach to horror. And these characteristics help us in analysing what happened when M.R.James’ stories migrated to television.

As mentioned, the ‘powdery academic hamstrung by extreme social awkwardness’ is largely Miller’s invention, although James does take the opportunity in his stories to gently mock various academic figures that he and his original audience would have been familiar with. His writing style can come across as dry, in his adaptation of a detached academic tone and use of untranslated quotations from the Latin, and the way that he draws upon documentary evidence, like a scholar laying out his argument for other scholars. Indeed, James’ characters have been described as cardboard, as no more specific than they need to be, allowing the reader to place themselves more readily in the protagonists’ place and to allow the narrative to unfold without characterisation getting in the way. Yet actors and television audiences require somewhat more rounded characters, or at least somewhat more specific, and so Miller, and his later emulators, picked up on James’ dryly humorous academic tone and applied it to the characters. Clark and his collaborators are rather better at developing that dry humour within the characters and narratives, rather than making the characters the butt of the joke. We also have to consider the narratives’ migration through time as well as medium and audience; when the adaptations were made in the later half of the twentieth century, they were presented to a different and wider audience than their initial group of early twentieth-century students and scholars, and so attitudes to the figures presented and to the approach taken would have drawn upon ideas of the scholarly and of appropriate behaviour which were different from those of James and his original audiences.

The switch to television also brought with it a greater emphasis on the visual rather than the oral. As Dempster indicates, one particular result of this was an emphasis on the representation of the British, specifically the English rural landscape. Accompanied by constant birdsong, no matter how horrific at a human level the events which are taking place within it, the landscape is seen as ancient, enduring, unconcerned with human activity, but possibly concealing horrors. Miller’s representation of the Suffolk coast in ‘Whistle and I’ll Come to You’ set a tone of bleak beauty which Clark and his successors continued. The landscape effectively works to indicate the isolation of the characters, and so their vulnerability. James himself rarely called upon the landscape to any great extent, although there is a brief description of the lovely English landscape’ in ‘A View From a Hill’ as the title indicates, is significant to the narrative (James, 1992b, p.539).

But what is central to these adaptations, and arguably to any horror story, is that it contains horror, and here the horror is delivered through sound and vision more than words. But this leads to the problem of adapting narratives that are largely suggestive rather than bluntly descriptive. Yes, there is the description in ‘Lost Hearts’ of the ghost boy with ‘fearfully long’ nails and a ‘black and gaping rent’ in the left side of his chest. Paxton’s fate in ‘A Warning to the Curious’ is described this way by James: ‘His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits. I only glanced once at his face.’ These nastinesses are replicated with those moments of terror and visual horror in the adaptations which Dempster mentioned, often brief, shrouded in darkness, and aided by the canny use of sound: the wet thud of Ager’s billhook, the squelching of the thing of slime that pursues Somerton in the The Treasure of Abbot Thomas, the haunting sound of a hurdy-gurdy in Lost Hearts. As mentioned before, in Clark’s adaptations and those of his successors, the sound of birdsong is a constant part of the daytime...
rural landscape, emphasising how the protagonist and what is happening to them are insignificant and of no concern to the rest of nature.

The importance of the style of James’ stories can be seen in their popularity for readings on television. The series presented by Christopher Lee has already been mentioned, but there have also been lightly dramatised or lightly illustrated readings by [SLIDE] Robert Powell and Michael Bryant. But Miller and Clark demonstrated how that tone and style could be translated to television in terms of visuals and sound, adapting character and narrative while still retaining the elements of restrained behaviour, the gradual revelation of the past that explains the horrors of the moment, and those moments of briefly seen physical horror, as well as a touch of dry humour, particularly in Clark’s adaptations.

The success of these adaptations continued the interest in James and his stories, and the association of those stories with Christmas. He was not the only author adapted for the strand labelled *A Ghost Story for Christmas*, [SLIDE] which also included an adaptation of Dickens’ ‘The Signalman’ and two original stories in a modern setting. Nor have all adaptations of James been Christmas broadcasts. But James’ dominance of the original 1970s strand was emphasised by his stories being selected for the new adaptations of the 2000s, reinforcing the idea that James’ stories belong as part of the British Christmas, that they are part of a narrative tradition. And so what was once a private Christmas tradition for a small group of students and scholars at Eton or at King’s College, Cambridge became a wider Christmas tradition for millions of British television watchers. At times there was a lone storyteller, at others a full dramatisation to present the narrative, but the migration of the tradition from scholar’s study to domestic living room presented a shift in the audience and the interpretation of the stories.

The 1970s adaptations of these stories drew upon this tradition of winters’ tales, of Christmas ghost stories, and on a nostalgia for Victoriana that can be seen throughout the 1970s in Britain. The appeal of the Victorian and Edwardian period at the time may lie in the appeal of an apparently stable historical period at a time when Britain was in the throes of social and economic change. However, with the revival of the *Ghost Story for Christmas* in the 2000s, the nostalgia was more for the 1970s programmes than their setting. Indeed, *A View From A Hill* was updated to a 1930s or 1940s setting, and *The Tractate Middoth* to the 1950s, while *Number 13* was relocated from Denmark to England; the 1970s productions may have moved county, but only *A Warning to the Curious* moved time frame with its relocation to the 1930s. Perhaps this nostalgia for the 1970s should be unsurprising, as the people making the new programmes had seen the earlier productions in their youth, so the nostalgia was now for the 1970s, and the apparent stability of childhood, when we can allow ourselves to be scared by television ghosts.

So maybe this is what observing these migrations of M.R.James’ tales tells us: that ghost stories at Christmas are part of a nostalgic appeal. After all, no less than Charles Dickens wrote nostalgically of the Christmases of his youth, in which ‘we are telling Winter Stories - Ghost Stories, or more shame for us - round the Christmas fire’ (Dickens, 1850, p. 293). James’ Christmas tradition of telling ghost stories to his students and friends was an extension of this, as was the nostalgic transferral of James’ stories to television, and then the nostalgia for the television productions themselves. But it is also about the way that traditions can begin in one place, and be migrated not just between media - from the tale told at the winter fire to television - but also across and between cultures.

Thank you.

**Works Cited**

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