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"Winter Stories — Ghost Stories... Round the Christmas Fire": Victorian Ghost Stories and the Christmas Market

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Abstract

Using the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" in the 1852 Christmas number of Dickens's Household Words as a case study, this paper examines how the publication of Victorian ghost stories in Christmas numbers redefines the ghost story, transforming it from a modern text participating in contemporary debates on spiritualism into a social text participating in the broader cultural project of reaffirming the nation's (religious) traditions in the face of (secular) modernity. While the themes of Christmas ghost stories explicitly address social issues and secular, middle-class cultural values, the morals and social traditions promoted by Christmas fiction cannot exist outside of the era's contemporary conversations about the place of religion in a modern, industrial society. The ghosts and goblins of Dickens's Christmas fiction address and attempt to correct the social ills of modern society through a secularised application of Christian values and behaviours.

In his first full-length novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), Charles Dickens introduces readers to the Christmas traditions prevalent in his youth. Our host, Mr. Wardle, informs the Pickwickian crowd, "[o]ur invariable custom [is to have everyone sit] down with us on Christmas Eve, as you see them now—servants and all; and here we wait, until the clock strikes twelve, to usher Christmas in, and beguile the time with forfeits and old stories."[1]

1 Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*. ed. David Ellis (Hertfordshire:

Wardle then proceeds to tell "the story about the goblins that carried away old Gabriel Grub" on Christmas Eve.[2] Only two short chapters in length, Dickens's tableau of Pickwickians seated around the fire sharing ghost stories on a snowy Christmas Eve encapsulates the complex relationship that exists between the Victorian ghost story, its Gothic predecessor, and the Victorian Christmas market. Published in the 1852 Christmas number of Charles Dickens's *Household Words*, Elizabeth Gaskell's ghost story, "The Old Nurse's Story," is typical of the era's seasonal narratives: it appears as part of a Christmas story-telling narrative (constructed by Dickens), and it was published for the modern Christmas market, which was dominated by gift books and seasonal publications designed for gift giving. The transformation of the older storytelling tradition into a modern product provides material evidence for the Victorian ghost story evolution from the Gothic into a 'new' genre that negotiated the cultural divide between the superstitions of the past and the rational scepticism of modernity. As my paper will suggest, the publication of Victorian ghost stories in Christmas numbers ultimately repositions the function of the ghost story by transforming it from a modern text participating in contemporary debates on spiritualism into a social text participating in the broader cultural project of reaffirming the nation's (religious) traditions in the face of (secular) modernity. While the themes of Christmas ghost stories explicitly address social issues and secular, middle-class cultural values, the morals and social traditions promoted by Christmas fiction cannot exist outside of the era's contemporary conversations about the place of religion in a modern, industrial society. The ghosts and goblins of Dickens's Christmas fiction address and attempt to correct the social ills of modern society through a secularized application of Christian values and behaviours.

Though several critics observe that Dickens's Christmas publications "forged the cultural association of ghosts and Christmas,"[3] few consider why Victorian editors and readers viewed the ghost story as the ideal genre for Christmas publications.[4] Tara Moore's recent

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Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000), 369.

2 *Ibid*., 371.

3 Louise Henson, "Investigations and Fictions: Charles Dickens and Ghosts," in *The Victorian Supernatural*. eds. Nicola Brown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44.

4 For further criticism on Dickens's Christmas publications and ghost

work on print culture and the Victorian construction of Christmas begins to address this gap. For Moore, the Christmas ghost story is a "ubiquitous" part of Victorian culture, becoming the ideal genre for the Christmas literary market because of its complicated history as part of the gift-giving culture associated with the seasonally published literary annuals. However, as E.J. Clery notes, the rise of supernatural fictions must "be understood in relation to the contemporary rise of consumerism, which has been described as the 18th-century 'consumer revolution.'"[5] This transmission of supernatural fiction through commercial venues continued well into the 19th Century as early women's magazines and eventually the literary annuals took over the popular publication of gothic short stories, the ghost story's precursor.[6] The practice of gifting literature at Christmas ultimately represents the era's interest in developing a national tradition based on a nostalgic remembering of the previous centuries' oral traditions.[7] As such the ghost stories published in periodicals such as *Household Words* often appeared as part of a frame narrative with the family gathered around the hearth to hear tales of haunted manor homes and spectral visitations. The first ghosts of Victorian Christmas, such as the ghosts of Past, Present, and Future in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (first published in 1843), acted as supernatural agents that entered the reality of the narrative "to bring about a Christmas utopia of reunion and spiritual redemption."[8] According to Moore, these supernatural narratives of redemption and charity mediated the increasing materialism of the holiday season—an ironic consequence of a genre born and disseminated through the machinations of contemporary

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story, see Eve M. Lynch, "Spectral Politics: The Victorian Ghost Story and the Domestic Servant," in *The Victorian Supernatural*. eds. Brown, Burdett, and Thurschwell, 67-84; Tara Moore, *Victorian Christmas in Print*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and David Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens*. (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2005).

5 E.J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 5.

6 For further information on the early ghost story market, see Robert D. Mayo, *The English Novel in the Magazines 1740-1815: with a Catalogue of 1375 Magazine Novels and Novelettes*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

7 See Moore, 85.

8 *Ibid*., 83.

consumer revolutions.[9] After all, the continuing popularity of the ghost story genre was a result of the expansive growth in the periodical market of mid-century Victorian Britain following the abolition of the stamp tax (one of the most restrictive taxes on knowledge), which made periodical publishing a more affordable product for readers and an enticingly profitable venture for publishers.

The ghost story's allegorical position as a genre responsible for contributing to the construction of a Victorian Christmas allows gloss over any potential link between the Victorian ghost story and the religious culture of the era. For example, Moore repeatedly refers to the implicit nation-building project of Christmas literature (including the ghost story). Thus, she simultaneously acknowledges and then dismisses Dickens's assertion that "the gospel dripped from every Christmas text he wrote," when she states that "the values appearing in his holiday novels... depicted English values rather than gospel message."[10] While this is undoubtedly true, limiting the ghost story and Christmas novel to a purely secular and social narrative ignores that fact that the English values of Dickens's Christmas stories are intimately bound up in the Christian values of the period. One only has to look at the religious poetry of the era to confirm this connection.

There are several features that link the practice and ideology of the Victorian ghost story to the religious poetry published in the era. Most obvious is the proliferation of seasonal poems and hymns produced for the Christmas market.[11] The seasonal production of devotional poetry resonates with the era's shifting understanding of time and its desire to cultivate a space for family (and devotional) reading.[12] Christmas ghost stories participate in this trend by

9 *Ibid*., 84.

10 *Ibid*., 124.

11 For further information, see *Ibid*., 121-140.

12 The practice of publishing Christmas ghost stories became part of British Christmas, using the cyclical publication format of the periodical to establish a space for the habit to form. Similarly, devotional poets aimed to bring religious thought into the familial circle by making it a part of a weekly reading practice. The periodical *Good Words*, for example, used poetry to create a devotional space for readers, reminding them of the power of language and the message of God. The most popular devotional text of the era, John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827), linked poetry to the liturgical calendar, including "poems for all special services and procedures in the

referring to the remembered tradition of telling ghost stories around the fire in December. The ghost story often links such activities to rural and aristocratic life. Indeed, one of the features Moore isolates as belonging to the Christmas ghost story is "the idealization of the country house."[13] As we will see, the return to the country and the traditions of an older England is part of the era's nostalgia for what the industrial world imagined was an uncomplicated, more wholesome past. I am focusing on the ghost stories (re)turn to its rural roots because religious poetry from the era expresses both a similar desire to reclaim tradition and an anxiety over the effacement of traditional religious practices by the industrial world.

Dora Greenwell's 1860 periodical poem "Railway Station" (published in *Good Words*) implicitly speaks of poetry's role in mediating the modernity of the literary press through its poetic form and its references to established traditions of religious thought. The speaker asserts the presence of this spiritual nostalgia: despite the era's rapid pursuit of modernity and technology "soft, above the noontide heat and burden / Of the stern present, fleet those melodies."[14] Unlike several other poems in the periodical which retreat to nature for spiritual rejuvenation, Greenwell brings faith into the city "far remote from Nature's fair creations, / Within the busy mart and street."[15] The poem concludes with the speaker's assertion that those who stay behind, remembering the traditions of faith displaced or compromised by modernity, will be blessed. The periodical as a product of modernity, including the rise of the railway, participated in the broader cultural shift noticed in the poem. In the periodical *Good Words*, the poetry

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Prayer Book, omitting only poems on purely utilitarian and undevotional prayer Book inclusions" G.B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode*. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Univerity Press, 1981), 79. Such poetry supplemented more conventional devotional sources, encouraging family reading and reflection. Thus, both devotional poetry and the Christmas ghost story shared the era's preoccupation with creating a space for Victorian readers to gather as a family and read literature that promoted the specific religious and cultural values of the Victorian middle class. For more information about the Victorian's shifting relationship to time, see Mark Turner, "Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century," *Media History* 8.2 (2002): 183-96.

13 *Ibid*., 89.

14 Dora Greenwell, "The Railway Station," *Good Words*. I: 438.

15 *Ibid*.

and spiritual content disrupts this trend, reintroducing "the traditions of [society's] youth" through the modern product of the periodical.[16] Arguably, a similar effect is present when we consider the periodical contexts of the Christmas ghost story. The tales published in urban periodicals such as *Household Words* mediate the modernity of the medium by encouraging (and recreating through frame narratives) the traditional, romanticized practice of oral storytelling around the hearth. Both genres, then, encouraged the reader to reclaim the pre-industrial traditions of familial reading and reflection, albeit through decidedly different formats. My paper will now turn to a close examination of the features of the Victorian ghost story and its role in reasserting traditional English, and Christian, practices amidst an increasingly sceptical and secular culture.

The Victorian Ghost Story: Spectres of Modernity

Typically published in ephemeral venues such as literary annuals, weekly periodicals, and the sensational 'penny dreadfuls' of the 19th Century, the "distinct, anti-Gothic character of the Victorian ghost story began to emerge" in the 1850s.[17] This new genre rewrote the "indulgently heroic and ostentatiously fictitious" Gothic tale of terror by transposing its ghosts and themes onto the domestic spaces of Britain.[18] This movement from the foreign to the local blurred the "boundaries between fact and fiction."[19] Victorian ghost stories seemed more factual even as authors introduced inexplicable supernatural phenomena into their texts. There are key formal elements that constitute the Victorian ghost story: the spectacle of the returning dead (or agents of the dead); a dramatic interaction between the living and the dead that unsettles or frightens the reader by removing the distancing narrative and thematic elements of earlier Gothic fiction; the story must have a clear literary quality; the story must demonstrate a clear sense of 'Englishness'; and the story must

16 *Ibid*.
17 Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert, "Introduction," *Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology*. eds. Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), x.
18 *Ibid*.
19 *Ibid*.

be relatively short in length.[20] Located in England, relatively short in length, and containing ghostly figures that wander through the halls of a British country home interacting with its occupants, Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" conforms to all the elements traditionally associated with the ghost story. It is a paradigmatic example of the Victorian ghost story acting as one of the foundational texts of the genre, emphasizing the generic innovations of the Victorian ghost story through its complex treatment of ghosts and the resultant episodes of terror.

The ghosts of Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" appear as sinister characters who interact with the occupants of Furnivall manor disturbing the privileged sanctity of domestic and psychological space. The first significant interaction occurs when the nurse describes how she saw a phantom child "out-of-doors on a bitter night—crying, and beating against the window-panes, as if she wanted to be let in. She seemed to sob and wail, till Miss Rosamond could bear it no longer."[21] The attempt of the "spectre-child" to enter the home threatens to disrupt the boundaries between the external world and the domestic spaces of the home.[22] This disruption destabilizes popular theories of separate public and private spheres and the sanctity of domestic space by positioning the home as penetrable by external (and preternatural) forces. Even when the shutters are pulled tight Rosamond can still hear the cries of the spectre-child.[23] However, only Rosamond can hear the child's cries. The nurse remembers how "even in the stillness of that dead-cold weather, I had heard no sound of little battering hands upon the window-glass... no faintest touch of sound had fallen upon my ears."[24] The lack of sound disturbs both the nurse and the reader because it challenges our experiences of reality and suggests that the spectre-child can affect some kind of psychological control over Rosamond. For example, the spectre-child influences

20 *Ibid*.
21 Elizabeth Gaskell, "The Old Nurse's Story," *Household Words*. 6 (1852): 17. The page numbers refer to the Christmas issue appended to this particular volume. While the volume edition of the periodical provided continuous pagination throughout, the Christmas issue retained its original, separate, pagination.
22 *Ibid*., 17.
23 *Ibid*., 18-19.
24 *Ibid*., 17.

Rosamond's behaviour by luring her outside in the middle of the night. Rosamond explains to the nurse how "this little girl beckoned to me to go out... I could not choose but to go."[25] The spectre-child compels Rosamond to join her. Though this haunting of Rosamond seems random, the psychological haunting of Miss Furnivall is more deliberate and complex.

Miss Furnivall's first interaction with the manor's ghosts occurs when she hears terrible voices screaming. However, like Rosamond's experience with her "poor little girl," no one but Miss Furnivall hears these tormenting screams.[26] Then, as the snow falls around Furnivall manor on a cold night in January, the manor's ghostly figures confront Miss Furnivall by re-enacting her rumoured complicity in her father's fatal banishment of her sister and her niece.[27] The nurse's description of "the terrible phantoms [who] moved on, regardless of old Miss Furnivall's wild entreaty" reminds the reader of the spectres projected through the phantasmagoria.[28]

As previously mentioned, the Victorian era marked the beginning of an increasingly technological and secular society. The introduction of the railway, the telegraph, the laying of the transatlantic cable, and, most importantly for our purposes, the development of new visual technologies such as the phantasmagoria all signal the era's aggressive modernization. Yet, as Terry Castle notes, embedded within these narratives of progress and technological innovation was the phantom of the spectre. In particular, Castle locates the spectre within the technology of the phantasmagoria, a late 18th- and early 19th-century visual technology "in which 'specters' were produced through the use of a magic lantern."[29] As with other visual technologies from the Victorian era (such as the diorama and the magic lantern), as the century progressed writers began to identify a "symbolic

25 *Ibid*., 16.
26 *Ibid*., 19.
27 *Ibid*., 19-20.
28 *Ibid*., 20.
29 Terry Castle, "Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie," *Critical Inquiry*. 15 (1988): 24. The magic lantern projected images painted on transparencies onto a wall or screen. Through a controlled application of light from gas lamps, the images were made to dissolve into one another. When adapted for the phantasmagoria, the images projected by the magic lantern came to represent the spirits of the dead.

connection between phantasmagoria and the alienating power of the imagination."[30] The move to associate visual illusions with the cognitive processes of the mind occurs throughout Victorian literature from the realist fiction of Charles Dickens and George Eliot (who both use the diorama as a metaphor for the cognitive processes of memory) to the era's supernatural tales. In the Victorian ghost story, the spectacle of the phantasmagoria becomes an implicit metaphor for the "so-called ghosts of the mind" (Castle 45) haunting the genre.[31] Read within this historical context, the final scene becomes a psychological projection of Miss Furnivall's guilty conscience. Upon the scene's conclusion she exclaims, "Alas! alas! what is done in youth can never be undone in age!" and falls to the ground stricken with palsy.[32] The physical and emotional reaction experienced by Miss Furnivall suggests the story's identification with the modern theories of the spectral that were circulating throughout Britain at this time.

The fact that the nurse is narrating the events complicates this reading. The nurse's ability to see the ghosts contradicts sceptical theories of psychological projection and positions the ghosts as purely supernatural phenomena. However, this contradiction is an inherent feature of the Victorian ghost story, which "manage[d] to appeal both to the skeptic [sic] and the believer, courting rational explanations and drawing upon contemporary scientific theories only to show that these do not suffice to solve the mystery of the spectral."[33] Following this pattern, Gaskell's short story introduces the modern psychological theories of the spectral only to ultimately displace them with the supernatural. The consequence of this narrative strategy is a reinsertion of the inexplicable into a rational society. It is this complex use of the ghost figure that distinguishes Gaskell's ghost stories from the Gothic ghosts haunting novels like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

In Walpole's novel, the ghost acts as the narrative's *deus ex machina* affecting the climactic conclusion of the novel even though it never directly engages with the novel's characters. Walpole's ghost exists simply to block passages in the castle, spook the servants, and fulfil

30 *Ibid*., 43.
31 *Ibid*., 45.
32 Gaskell, "The Old Nurse's Story," 32.
33 Srdjan Smajic, "The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story," *ELH*. 70 (2003): 1128.

the novel's prophecy in a literal manner. For example, the prophecy in *Otranto* states "[t]hat the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it."[34] By the end of the novel, Alfonso's spectral form outgrows the castle walls reducing it to ruin. In contrast, Gaskell's innovation of familial ghosts is far subtler. Her ghosts do not fulfil a stated prophecy nor do they act as literal embodiments of the story's main theme; rather, they function to alter the human world through an appeal to Miss Furnivall's conscience. The story concludes with a more domestic and moral lesson rather than the exaggerated ending of Walpole's novel. Gaskell manipulates the function of the Gothic ghost in Walpole by transforming the presence of the spectre from a literal realisation of an abstract prophecy into a moral imperative related to an individual's psychology (or conscience) and located within the domestic space of a Victorian manor house.

This introduction of the ghost into the domestic spaces of Victorian England is an important feature of 19th-century Christmas fiction. It allowed the Christmas books to promote an idea of social reform, which ultimately blended contemporary Christian beliefs with the era's more secular domestic ideology. As Moore points out, in Dickens's Christmas books, the touchstone for the Christmas book genre, "a gospel of social reform replaces the biblical nativity story and Christ's gospel of spiritual salvation."[35] Yet, as Moore admits, "Christian ideology formed the foundation of character motivations and social conversations" of the era's early Christmas books.[36] So, while Miss Furnivall's narrative of repentance (i.e. the acknowledgement of her past sins) fits the social model of the Christmas story genre, it also echoes the message behind much devotional poetry, which asks readers to review their lives and actions in an effort to conform to

34 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.

35 See Moore, 38; and for further information, 22-338.

36 *Ibid*., 38. By early Christmas books, Moore is referring to Christmas literature largely published prior to the 1860s. Post 1860s there was a major shift in the function of the ghost. Authors shifted from the redemptive Dickensian ghost towards ghosts that "had more fears about their own souls, and... cared little for the souls of others." *Ibid*., 97-98. As the century progressed, the Christmas book market became increasingly commercial and dedicated to the production of children's literature. For further information, see Moore, 99-119.

the ideals taught by Christ. The ghost story constructed by Gaskell thus becomes a key example of the period's preoccupation with social reform and the conflation of domestic and Christian ideologies. Her text is not an isolated example of such narratives; rather, it is paradigmatic of the literary conversations that dominated Victorian Britain. I now want to turn to the era's periodical press, which played an important role in the dissemination and cultural framing of Christmas and the Victorian ghost story.

'The Ghost of an Idea': The Haunting of the Victorian Christmas Market

In any discussion of the Victorian Christmas book and ghosts one must start with Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (published in 1843), which changed the Victorian literary landscape.[37] Dickens prefaces *A Christmas Carol* with a simple declaration of his authorial intent. He writes, "I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me."[38] Though Dickens's novella arguably is the most famous Christmas book ever produced, it is not the first book written specifically for the Christmas market. Christmas themed texts published during the 1820s and 30s include Washington Irving's "The Christmas Dinner" (1820), Thomas K. Hervey's *Book of Christmas* (1835), and Alfred Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* (1834), with its "group of friends around the Christmas fire."[39] However, despite the presence of these other publications, the popularity of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* marks a watershed moment in seasonal gift book production. By December 24 1843, the sales of Dickens's first sumptuously produced and expensive Christmas book (it retailed at 5s per volume) reached 6,000 copies.[40]

37 For further reading on Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and its importance to critical understandings of Victorian Christmas, see Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens*; Moore, *Victorian Christmas*; Richard Kelley, "Introduction," *A Christmas Carol.* Charles Dickens. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, Ltd., 2003), 9-30; and Michael Slater, "Introduction," *The Christmas Books: Volume I* A *Christmas Carol/the Chimes*. Charles Dickens. (London: Penguin Books, 1985), vii-36.

38 Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol," *The Christmas Books*. (London: Gerald Duckworth, Ltd. with Worth Press Ltd., 2005), 3.

39 Parker, 106.

40 Robert Patten L., *Charles Dickens and his Publishers*. (Oxford: Oxford

Robert Patten points out "the more astonishing aspect of the *Carol*'s reception is the sale *after* Christmas, *after* Boxing Day, on into the summer."[41] More copies of Dickens's *Carol* had sold between January and April 1844 than "during the Christmas season of 1843."[42] By May 1844, the publishers of *A Christmas* Carol released the seventh edition of Dickens's ghostly tale of redemption.[43] The unparalleled success of Dickens's first Christmas book on the market affected the subsequent production of Victorian ghost stories, creating the conditions necessary for the Victorian ghost story to thrive and become part of the era's Christmas traditions.

After the success of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, Dickens "made it his business to supply readers with special texts to be read at Christmas time" for the next twenty-four years.[44] Though Dickens would publish four more Christmas books, his greatest contribution to the Christmas market, after *A Christmas Carol*, was his decision to publish nine Christmas numbers for his periodical *Household Words* from 1850 to 1858. After the first Christmas number of 1850, each subsequent Christmas number cost readers three pence compared to the two pence charged for regular issues. The difference in price and the increased length (thirty-six compared to twenty-four pages) set the Christmas numbers apart from the regular numbers of *Household Words*, making them a distinct Christmas commodity.[45] Eventually periodicals such as *The Cornhill Magazine*, *St. James's Magazine*, *Belgravia*, *Temple Bar*, *Saturday Review*, *Tinsley's Argosy*, and *St. Paul's* all participated in the tradition of publishing a special Christmas number for the holiday season.[46] These publications inevitably included a "much-anticipated yuletide ghost story to chill the soul on an evening around the fire."[47] Though Dickens published Christmas issues of *Household Words* in December 1850 ("The Christmas

University Press, 1978), 146.
41 *Ibid*.
42 *Ibid*.
43 *Ibid*.
44 Parker, 222.
45 For complete bibliographic information about *Household Words,* see Anne Lohrli, "Household Words - The Periodical," *Household Words: a Weekly Journal, 1850-59*. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1973), 3-50.
46 Lynch, "Spectral Politics," 68.
47 *Ibid*.

Number") and December 1851 (announced in a December 20 advertisement as "Showing What Christmas is to Everybody"), it is in the December 1852 Christmas number of *Household Words* that Dickens solidifies the link between the Victorian ghost story and the Christmas market in the era's periodical press.

While other editors published "a whole range of fiction for the Christmas reader,"[48] Dickens's ghost stories and Christmas numbers became "the major catalyst for the Victorian association of ghost stories and Christmas."[49] Dickens affects this connection in two ways. He contributes stories on Christmas themes (see "A Christmas Tree" in 1850) to *Household Words*, and he frames his Christmas numbers according to the holiday tradition of telling stories (including ghostly tales) around the hearth. He explicitly articulates this framing device in the Christmas number from 1852, which he titles "A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire." Dickens opens this Christmas supplement with his contribution "The Poor Relation's Story." Out of the ten stories published in this particular number, only Dickens's introductory piece and Harriet Martineau's "The Deaf Playmate's Story" reference the framework of the Christmas number. Dickens uses the poor relation's narrative voice to set the scene, describing how he feels "very reluctant to take precedence of so many respected members of the family, by beginning the round of stories they were to relate as they sat in a goodly circle by the Christmas Fire."[50] Despite his hesitation, the poor relation does tell his story (one of poverty and familial greed) beginning an evening of storytelling that will include Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story."

As previously noted, the publication of Gaskell's ghost story in the Christmas numbers of *Household Words* participates in the larger cultural movement linking the ghost story with Christmas literature. Most critics attribute this connection to the commercial

48 John Sutherland, "Christmas Books", *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*. (Essex: Longman Group UK Limited, 1988), 26. Gaskell, for example, published her didactic short story "Christmas Storms and Sunshine" in the 1848 Christmas number of the short-lived *Howitt's Journal*, a social reform publication known for publishing non-escapist fiction.
49 Dennis Denisoff, "Introduction," *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Short Stories*. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press Ltd., 2004), 21.
50 Charles Dickens, "The Poor Relation's Story," *Household Words*. 6 (1852-53): 1.

forces working on the literary market. Quite simply, people were more willing to spend money on entertainment during the holidays. Thus, editors like Dickens "solicited ghost stories for [their] seasonal issues" to provide the audience with the frivolous entertainment they desired.[51] The intense popularity of the publications "encouraged the spread of the practice until it became a festive tradition."[52] The periodical press (re)established the tradition of reading ghost stories at Christmas transposing its oral roots from a rural past into the urban world of periodical publications and increased literacy. It is this connection between the modern ghost story and the older oral traditions of the Christmas season that suggests some of the broader critical implications of associating the Victorian ghost story with Christmas.

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the oral history of the ghost story, one can posit why the tradition became a part of the urban periodical press.[53] If the Victorian ghost story can be read as engaging with modernity by challenging its scepticism and the validity of its scientific rationalism (as Smajic suggests),[54] then the association made by Dickens between the oral tradition of telling stories around the Christmas fire and the Victorian ghost story can be seen as a reassertion of traditional values and practices. Parker argues that "[i]n writing it as he did, and publishing it when he did Dickens was not just joining in the annual merrymaking."[55] Rather, he was "insisting upon the centrality of Christmas in national life, reminding the nation of established traditions and of values the festival affirmed and suggesting values it might yet affirm."[56] These traditions, which we can implicitly link to the movement in devotional literature that aimed to prompt stable and recurring moments of devotional reading and reflection, were necessary to affirm in the face of modernity. In her biography on Gaskell, for example, Jenny Uglow describes how "events like the Great Exhibition [of 1851] made [Gaskell] feel as

51 Denisoff, 21.
52 *Ibid*.
53 For further discussion regarding the difficulty of tracing oral traditions, see Moore, 82.
54 Smajic, "Trouble with Ghost Seeing," 1108-109.
55 Parker, 158.
56 *Ibid*.

if science and progress were sweeping away the era of her youth."[57] Gaskell's short stories implicitly represent her nostalgic attempt to hold onto the traditions of storytelling that she inherited from her youth and practiced privately well into the 1850s.[58] The publication of her short stories in Dickens's Christmas publications emphasizes this aspect of her writing; however, because Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" is a foundational example of the Victorian ghost story, most critics ignore the interpretive implications of Gaskell's participation in the Christmas market. For instance, Carol Martin argues that Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" is evidence of the author's "profound discontent with the condition of women in patriarchal society."[59] The patriarchal social order comes to stifle the potential good of Miss Furnivall ultimately destroying her.[60] While this is a valid reading of the story, reinserting "The Old Nurse's Story" into its original publication context, the 1852 Christmas number of *Household Words*, reveals how Gaskell's story participates in the broader cultural project of reclaiming tradition in the face of a secular and commercial modernity.

While collected editions of Gaskell's short fiction generally acknowledge the story's original publication context, usually in the textual notes on the story, none question how the Christmas context of Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" alters its cultural function. Read as an example of the genre, Gaskell's story demonstrates a cultural shift from the superstitious past of the Gothic literature to the sceptical modernity of the Victorian ghost story. Within the narrative structure of the story, Gaskell links her story to the older oral tradition of telling ghost stories to an audience. The framework of Dickens's *Household Words* amplifies and recontextualises this structure explicitly linking Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" to the tradition of telling ghost stories around the Christmas fire. Through its association with Christmas, the story becomes a symbol of the past traditions that are lost in the face of modernity and progress. Dickens's insistence on publishing literature specifically designed for the Christmas market

57 Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993), 279.
58 See Carol Martin, "Gaskell's Ghosts: Truths in Disguise," *Studies in the Novel*. 21 (1989): 30.
59 Martin, "Gaskell's Ghosts," 33.
60 *Ibid*.

suggests that he firmly believed that these seasonal traditions were necessary elements of British culture that needed to be preserved and immortalised through literature. The ghost story is the ideal genre for this project. It navigates the tensions between the past and the present, and its subject matter implicitly reminds readers of seasonal traditions. Clery describes how in the late 18th Century the scene of the village or family, servants and all, gathered around the fire presented reader's with a "scene of natural community,… [where] the circle of superstition, generally rural, is valorized to contrast with the artificial pastimes of the disenchanted city." Something similar occurs in Dickens's *Household Words*. The framing of the short stories as part of the oral traditions of yore suggests that the periodical is reacting to the increasingly secular and commercial practices of Victorian Christmas.

Dickens's decision to publish Victorian ghost stories within the context of the oral traditions that were originally aligned with superstitious rural culture reintroduces spirituality into an increasingly secular world. This occurs even as Gaskell's short story engages with modern theories of psychology, spiritualism, and the existence of ghosts. Clery describes how "[r]ationally speaking, the ghosts and goblins [of Gothic fiction] are not *true*, but when they appear in the literary artefacts of past ages, they are *true to history*, accurate representations of an obsolete system of beliefs: a stance we might call *exemplary* historicism." The foreign and temporally distant locales of Gothic novels allowed readers to engage with and believe in the superstitious beliefs of past even as their modern scepticism led them to disavow the nation's superstitious (and Catholic) past. However, the Victorian ghost story collapses the binary between the superstitious past and sceptical modernity by importing irrational impossibilities into the modern and domestic landscapes of Britain. As Smajic points out "[t]he fictional ghost-seer is typically caught in a disconcerting double bind between instinctive faith in the evidence of one's own sight and the troubling knowledge the vision is often deceptive and unreliable." The Victorians inhabited a similar double bind torn between their faith in modernity and the superstitions and religious faith they inherited. The Victorian ghost story complicates these tensions between the ghostly past of the Gothic and the realism of modernity by exposing the potential unreliability of modern theories in the face of the supernatural. The appearance of the ghost

story in Christmas publications exaggerates this turning back to the supernatural in the face of modernity, ultimately demonstrating how the ghost story participates in a reaffirmation of Victorian traditions and superstitions within an increasingly secular society.

In Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers,* Wardle attempts to dismiss the short story of Gabriel Grub as nothing more than local superstition. His mother, however, interrupts him by asking: "Is there anybody hardy enough to disbelieve it? Suppose! Haven't you heard ever since you were a child, that he *was* carried away by the goblins, and don't you know he was?" Wardle's mother becomes a symbol of the superstitious past. She believes in the ghosts and goblins that populate the stories she associates with the Christmas season. This past haunts the Victorian ghost story. The genre attempts to navigate the growing divide between the superstitious past and the scepticism of modernity. It becomes a rhetorical tool for authors to reassert the established traditions of Britain back into the increasingly secular society of Victorian England. Most critics ignore the broader implications of the association between the Christmas ghost story, explaining this phenomena as simply a coincidental product of Dickens's genius and his ability to manipulate the literary market. Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" anticipates this critical turn: the nurse acknowledges that her audience does not "care so much" for the beginning of her story "as for what [they] think is to come." Yet, it is the Victorian ghost story's evolution from its Gothic origins that exposes how the ghost story imports past (literary) traditions into modernity through its complex negotiation of cultural and commercial expectations.

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