Picturing the Future: The Feminist Orientation of Portraiture in *The Ebony Frame* and an Example of Victorian Spirit Art

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As a visible expression of Victorian culture, portraiture reflected the many and varied interests of the era, including a preoccupation with death and a possible afterlife, and the growing debate regarding the role of women in society. Portraits often featured in period ghost stories, and also made an appearance in spiritualist art. The ghost story and spiritualism have each been interpreted as a means of linking the Victorian present to its quickly receding past. A comparison of two contrasting portraits, one described in ‘The Ebony Frame’, a ghost story by Edith Nesbit, the other an image drawn by artist-medium Anna Mary Howitt Watts, challenges this perspective. Both demonstrate a feminist orientation that looks forward, rather than backward, envisioning a progressive future rather than a nostalgic past.

Whether they were hanging on the walls of the family drawing room or being described in the pages of the most recent novel, portraits provided a visible expression of the concerns of Victorian society. These many and varied interests included a preoccupation with death and a possible afterlife, as well as the growing debate regarding the role of women in society. The portrait makes frequent appearances in that most quintessential of Victorian literary forms, the ghost story, and is also represented in spirit art, a lesser-known expression of Victorian material culture. Women played an active role in both fields, as accomplished writers of the ghost story and talented spiritualist mediums.

The Victorian ghost story and spiritualism have both been identified as means for a society in transition to cope with its vanishing culture and customs. The ghost story ‘[anchored] the past to an unsettled present by operating in a continuum of life and death’,1 while spiritualism connected past and present by reconciling traditional religious belief with new evidence presented by science and technology.2 A comparison of two contrasting portraits, one described in ‘The Ebony Frame’, a ghost story by Edith Nesbit, published in 1891, the other an image drawn by artist-medium Anna Mary Howitt Watts between 1856 and 1884, shows a different orientation, however. Both express a feminist perspective that looks forward, rather than backward. It can therefore be argued that these images connected the Victorian present not to a sentimental past, but to a vibrant future that pictured the greater participation of women.

‘The Ebony Frame’ tells the story of Mr. Devigne, a rakish newspaper reporter who inherits his aunt’s London house and all of its contents. Upon taking possession, he notices over the dining-room fireplace a newly installed print set in a frame of ‘fine ebony, beautifully and

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curiously carved’. While the print is a recent purchase, the frame has come from the attic, filled with bric-a-brac and ancient furniture. An impulse drives Devigne upstairs, where he finds the oil painting that goes with the frame – a full-length portrait of a Pre-Raphaelite beauty that has been bound face to face with a portrait of a cavalier.

The discovery shocks Devigne on two fronts. Not only is the image of the cavalier an exact representation of Devigne himself, he is immediately smitten with the woman in the companion portrait. The woman – who is never named – has a ‘straight nose, low brows, full lips, thin hands, large deep luminous eyes’. Wearing a black velvet gown, she is seated beside a table cluttered with paraphernalia suggesting arcane knowledge, including compasses, mysterious instruments, a goblet, books and papers. With her arms resting on the table, she holds her head in her hands, and stares directly at the viewer, her gaze a bewildering combination of supplication and command.

Devigne has an understanding with a real-life woman named Mildred, whom he courts because it ‘is very nice to feel that a good little woman is thinking of you’. The woman in the mysterious portrait evokes a different order of emotion, however: he is besotted with her. He restores the painting to the ebony frame and hangs it over the fireplace. One evening, while admiring her by firelight, he invites the woman to step out of the frame and join him. Much to his terror, she does.

She reveals that they had been lovers in a former life. When the cavalier, Devigne’s alter ego, went off to war, she was left unprotected. As a woman who reached beyond the limitations set by society, she was viewed as transgressive and punished decisively. She says: ‘Just because I had looked at the stars and gained more knowledge than they, they must needs bind me to a stake and let me be eaten by the fire’. Despite suspicions of sorcery, she insists she was never in league with the devil until the night before her death. Mad with grief over her lost love, she agreed to sacrifice her soul for the chance to return to earth. The wish was granted, as long as her picture remained in its enchanted frame and as long as a viewer wished for her presence. She adds a proviso – if Devigne is willing to forgo any chance of reaching heaven, she can remain mortal and they can be together.

Devigne has never experienced such perfect happiness, and although he is not convinced he has to lose his place in heaven for her, they agree to confirm arrangements the following evening at midnight. The woman resumes her place in the portrait, and Devigne is condemned to wait. Events are complicated the next day by a visit from Mildred and her mother. Unsettled by Mildred’s inane chatter and his obsession for his true love, Devigne flees into the street. When he returns for the midnight rendezvous, he finds his house in flames. He manages to rescue Mildred, but the haunted portrait is destroyed.
Like the Victorian ghost story itself, portraiture in uncanny stories has been described as a point of contact between past and present. It can, however, also be viewed as a link between the present and future. In ‘The Ebony Frame’, traditional female roles and the possibilities of reform create the point of contact. Victorians generally saw a woman’s role as the ‘angel in the house’, purely domestic and subservient to men. While there is speculation about why women writers were drawn to the ghost story, it has been proposed that because ghostly interaction works outside ‘all the known laws of nature’ – as Devigne himself expresses it – it can likewise work outside the scope of the accepted social order. ‘The Ebony Frame’ reverses traditional gender roles, casting the male as passive and assigning agency to the female protagonist.

It is the woman in black velvet who orchestrates events through her bargain with the devil, setting the stage for a potential reunion. Although Devigne is the catalyst for her return to the material world, it is her beauty and inexplicable stare that compel him to wish for her presence. Indeed, his name suggests that he is simply a conduit for her manifestation. Her education and understanding of the universe outstrips Devigne’s – he comprehends neither the meaning nor use of the mysterious instruments in the painting, which are presumably tools of her arcane activities. Devigne, on the other hand, has shown a distinct lack of ambition, taking a lackadaisical approach to both his career as a ‘Fleet Street hack’ and his courtship of Mildred. Although he instinctively feels passion for the mysterious woman, he has no memory of his past life.

Critics attempting a feminist interpretation of Edith Nesbit’s work can be bedevilled by her stated antipathy towards women’s rights. Nesbit was an accomplished writer who specialised in children’s adventure stories. Her domestic relations were unconventional – she raised two of her husband’s children by another woman – her political views were socialist, and she frequently acted as the major breadwinner in her household. Like her character in ‘The Ebony Frame’, she sought esoteric knowledge, becoming a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an organisation that uncovered ancient wisdom for modern spiritual enlightenment. But as much as she embraced her own potential in a changing world, Nesbit opposed women’s suffrage and mocked suffragettes in her writing. She once

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8 Mary Patricia Kane, quoted in Andrew Smith, The Ghost Story 1840-1920: A Cultural History (Manchester, 2010), p. 79.
11 Nesbit, p. 609.
15 Alex Owen, The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern (Chicago & London, 2004), ebook, p. 3.
accepted an invitation to speak to the Fabian Society about balancing motherhood and career, but ended up delivering a lecture called ‘The Natural Disabilities of Women’.16

Some critics reconcile such disparities by arguing that merely by drawing attention to the plight of her female protagonists, Nesbit highlights a patriarchal society’s disregard for the potential of women.17 Stories like ‘The Ebony Frame’, which feature dead women attempting in vain to return to the land of the living, can be considered ‘symbolic of women’s exclusion from the social realm’.18 Further, the visual elements of Nesbit’s uncanny stories have been identified as particularly powerful means of illustrating the marginal status of women in society.19

The style of the mysterious painting supports the notion that ‘The Ebony Frame’ makes a subversive statement. The narrator is specific that portrait is painted in the style of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,20 a group that rejected the highly formal approach favoured by Victorian society, and took the controversial decision to draw inspiration from style of late medieval or early modern painting.21 Devigne references the work of Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and indeed, the description of the woman in black velvet bears a striking resemblance to Jane Burden, Rossetti’s long-time model and lover. The posture of the woman suggests Rossetti’s painting of Burden entitled ‘The Blue Silk Dress’, while her direct gaze evokes some of Burne-Jones’s more unsettling depictions of the transgressive female, such as the fatal mermaid in ‘The Depths of the Sea’. Aligning the story with avant-garde art in this way reinforces its progressive perspective.

Unlike the female-authored ghost story, which often strayed into subversive territory, spiritualism was much more concerned with conventional respectability. Women were central to the spiritualist movement and were adept as mediums, often surpassing their male counterparts in the development of their abilities.22 The gift, ironically, provided greater agency for women while also strengthening constraints on them. While female mediums were generally respected and achieved a social status that was otherwise unattainable,23 it was accepted that their spiritual authority centred on the home, thus reinforcing their confinement to the domestic sphere. Further, women’s success was believed to be expedited by a natural tendency to be passive and their ability to renounce the self.24

The best-known expressions of Victorian mediumship were seances, which gathered together groups of people to summon the dead. Other types of mediumship included automatic writing and automatic drawing,25 which occurred when the hand of a medium was guided by a spirit power, creating either words or a design, without the medium exerting her will.

17 Margree, p. 427.
18 Margree, p. 433.
19 Margree, pp. 432-33.
20 Nesbit, p. 607.
22 Owen, The Darkened Room, p. 5.
23 Owen, The Darkened Room, p. 4.
Like Edith Nesbit’s haunted painting, the spirit art of Anna Mary Howitt Watts makes a statement about the experience of being female in Victorian society, while suggesting possibilities for the future. As a young woman, Howitt Watts trained at Henry Sass’s art academy. Her promise was such that when her family went bankrupt in 1846 and could no longer afford tuition, the school’s principal arranged for her to stay on. Continuing her education after Sass’s required some determination – since the Royal Academy refused to admit women, Howitt Watts had to travel to Munich to study.  

As in so many areas of endeavour in the Victorian period, the art world became a focal point for a discussion of the role of women in society. Raised in a progressive household, Howitt Watts took a feminist position. She counted among her friends women who gathered at Langham Place to discuss reform. Her ideas about a collaborative and self-determining community of female artists are articulated in her 1853 novella, *The Sisters in Art.*

Howitt Watts worked as an illustrator and painter, exhibiting paintings in 1854 and 1855. In 1856, she offered the Royal Academy the large-scale work *Boadicea Brooding over her Wrongs,* which challenged Victorian notions about the role of women through both its style and content. First, the depiction of the Iceni queen highlighted female agency in a historical context. History painting was an elite genre which was generally the purview of men, since women rarely had the technical training to attempt it. Finally, the model for Boadicea was the formidable and well-known feminist, Barbara Leigh Smith. Rejected by the academy, it was instead exhibited at the Crystal Palace, to mixed reviews. The most damaging criticism came from John Ruskin, who questioned Howitt Watt’s authority to paint a historical subject at all. She suffered a nervous breakdown as a result. After another breakdown the following year, Howitt Watts destroyed all of her paintings, vowed never again to exhibit, and devoted her life to spiritualism.

For a feminist with a history of exercising her agency in a sometimes hostile environment, the switch to becoming a passive receptacle through spiritualist mediumship appears to be an about-face. Howitt Watts’s first attempts at mediumship involved automatic writing, which initially pleased her with messages from lost loved ones. Communications with the spirit world quickly took a disturbing turn, however. Messages announcing the impending deaths of those closest to her started to flow, and she suffered frightening physical effects. It was while trying to repress the automatic writing that she picked up a pencil to sketch. Her hand

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27 Hirsch, para. 2 of 5.

28 Wettlaufer, pp. 140-43.


started to move on its own, creating her first spirit drawing. She was delighted with her new gift, which had the added benefit of fewer side-effects.

Religious imagery figures prominently in Howitt Watts’s spirit drawings, including ‘heads of Christ, angels, and curious female figures seated within spheres and hearts’.31 Despite the Christian overtones of her visions, they often had a feminist bend. She describes an image of the New Jerusalem as ‘a majestic woman clothed in wonderful draperies studded with jewels, and wearing many crowns; upon her breast wearing a singular and beautiful breast-plate.’32 Likewise, the Last Judgement came to her as ‘a strong celestial woman, hurling down into an abyss a Titanic man, who fell smitten by no sword in the woman’s hand, but by the Word of Truth which proceeded from her lips.’33

Despite the agency of the women in such visions, other images suggest martyrdom. One of these is a delicate drawing of a light-bearer (fig. 1), who wears a long, red dress, her peplum skirt and puffy sleeves speaking more to the everyday than to the mythic. Her waist is cinched with a green belt. The long, blue sash that floats diagonally across her skirt and forms an ornate loop by her knee emphasises feminine delicacy. She stands on a red, tulip-like flower that is surrounded by spiky fronds. Her head is framed by a tear-drop shaped leaf, while her upper body is surrounded by sharp-edged leaves. The light-bearer’s arms are outstretched, her posture much like the crucified Christ. A flame burns upward from the top of her head.

Howitt Watts left no interpretation of the image, but her husband advised in an 1889 edition of Light that the figure signifies enlightenment, ‘the Divine gift of being [a diffuser] of light or knowledge’.34 That spiritual illumination is hard won is suggested by the thorny vegetation on which she stands, which illustrates that suffering is the foundation of wisdom. This suffering is reflected in the pain on the light-bearer’s face.35

The drawing provides an interesting counterpoint to Nesbit’s ghostly painting. With its subtle style and muted colours, it imparts a sense of the ethereal. The leaf framing the light-bearer’s head hints at a halo, while the spikes spreading behind her upper body seem like angelic wings. Pale leaves dance around her head like attending spirits. With her slight figure and domestic dress, she could be the angel in the house. In contrast, the description of Nesbit’s painting evokes the bright colours and strong lines of a Rossetti painting, expressing vitality, while the dark hair and dress of the phantom woman suggests the demonic. Nesbit’s entity is corporeal – her hand is warm when she touches Devigne,36 and his comment that they

33 Howitt Watts and Watts, Light, p. 176.
34 Howitt Watts and Watts, Light, p. 205.
35 Howitt Watts and Watts, Light, p. 205.
36 Nesbit, p. 609.
Figure 1. Anna Mary Howitt Watts, untitled spirit drawing of a light-bearer. Image courtesy of the Cambridge University Library/Society for Psychical Research, MS SPR 65/9/36
‘made such cheer each of the other as true lovers may after long parting’ emphasises physicality. That such vigour is desirable is overt in ‘The Ebony Frame’. Once Devigne has experienced the woman in black velvet, he is repelled by Mildred’s constraining domesticity, her ‘ridiculous flounces’ and ‘her rather pinched waist, her rather tight boots’, a description coincidentally close to Howitt Watts’s light-bearer. Although his phantom lover’s spirit transcended the flames 250 years previously, there is no escape for the transgressive female in the Victorian era. The lack-lustre life Devigne leads after the haunted painting is lost signals a society diminished by the constraints it places on women.

While ‘The Ebony Frame’ highlights the destruction of the active, transgressive female, the light-bearer leaves the equally distressing impression of martyred domesticity. There is a message beyond this immediate suggestion, however. Female agency through the pursuit of knowledge has not resulted in extinguishment in this case, but in the capacity to burn brighter. Further, Howitt Watts’s spirit drawings tend to depict the risen Christ as almost exclusively female. There were those in the Victorian spiritualist movement, certainly, who supported the notion of an androgynous, ‘dual-principled Christ or God-Spirit’. The triumph of the divine feminine is inherent in the light-bearer’s association with the living Christ, and the implied reconciliation between the spheres of male and female agency. With her domestic nature, the light-bearer functions as a type of ‘Everywoman’, so this reconciliation encompasses all women.

It has been suggested that portraiture in some female-authored uncanny tales of the Victorian era uncover ‘stories that had been left in the shadows or suppressed’. Edith Nesbit’s portrait of a marginalised character casts light on the uncomfortable repercussions of female agency. As a work of spirit art, the light-bearer cannot be considered a self-portrait of Anna Mary Howitt Watts, even so, the image’s martyred posture reflects the artist’s experience when she stepped outside accepted social constraints. While ‘The Ebony Frame’ and the light-bearer approach the issue from very different directions, they both promote greater agency for women. The extinguishment of Nesbit’s ghost creates a negative space, leaving the reader to ponder unfulfilled potential, while the light-bearer proposes a positive alternative by turning suffering into wisdom, and by integrating male and female principles. In this way, these works move beyond the view of the Victorian ghost story and spiritualism as means to connect with the past, and instead show how they could envision a progressive future.

37 Nesbit, p. 610.
38 Nesbit, p. 613.
39 Howitt Watts and Watts, Light, p. 204.
41 Mary Patricia Kane, quoted in Smith, p. 79.
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Figure 1. Anna Mary Howitt Watts, untitled spirit drawing of a light-bearer. Image courtesy of the Cambridge University Library/Society for Psychical Research, MS SPR 65/9/36