

Ruth Heholt, “Science, Ghosts and Vision: Catherine Crowe’s Bodies of Evidence and the Critique of Masculinity.” *Victoriographies* 4.1 (2014): 46-61.

Ruth Heholt’s convincing article on Catherine Crowe, the nineteenth-century spiritualist and novelist, builds on current academic interest concerning the Victorian supernatural and its transcendence of nineteenth-century gender roles. Heholt’s argument further justifies the assertion – made by critics such as Jenny Uglow, Vanessa Dickerson and Andrew Smith – that Victorian ghost stories served as literary tools through which to radically destabilise and re-examine contemporary gender binaries. Heholt proposes that Crowe used works, such as *The Night Side of Nature* (1848) and *Spiritualism and the Age We Live In* (1859), as a means of destabilising the masculine body and the domain of “objective” science, by instead introducing a feminine, more accessible, subjective method of “perceiving” where female “weakness” allowed access into the spirit world.

Heholt successfully establishes Crowe as one of the British pioneers of Spiritualism, her works pre-dating the Fox Sisters’ international fame, and showing, in Heholt’s words, “independence of thought and a clear feeling for the spiritual needs of her time” (48). Crowe believed that “biased skepticism” within the masculine, Victorian sciences prevented Spiritualism from being considered as a serious scientific practice (49). Despite frequent attacks by critics such as Caldwell and Dickens, she attempted to bridge the gap between science and spiritualism, presenting “real” supernatural experiences as scientific evidence. Heholt proposes that “Crowe saw it as science’s duty to investigate ghostly and supernatural phenomena [...] by refusing to investigate, scientists were invalidating the scientific method and indeed science itself” (49). By reacting against oppressive scientific doctrines, Crowe, Heholt argues, “questioned, challenged and interrogated the bastions of Victorian masculinity: science, rationality, vision and the male body” (47-48).

Heholt begins by proposing that Crowe not only prefigured the emergence of British Spiritualism, but prefaced late-Victorian research groups, such as the Society for Psychical Research, who believed ghostly sightings had scientific grounding (48). Crowe’s fragmented, unconventional narrative style, Heholt asserts, was adopted from folklore, while the stories were “gleaned from talk or gossip about ghosts” (49). These informal snippets were then supported by “mass” witnessing: “there is an overlying sense that they are also ‘known to many’ and that these ghosts have been witnessed by more than one person. This underscores the idea of ‘evidence’” (50). Heholt moves on to say that Crowe’s attempt to establish ghost sightings as “evidence” is not all that she sets out to achieve. Rather than adopt women writers’ methods of using a female ghost to subvert doctrines of the domestic, invisible housewife, Crowe, Heholt argues, makes “men and their ghosts” visible (53), and by doing so she attempts to destabilise the scientific, objective male gaze, either by allowing women to see male ghosts or by silencing and “feminizing” the male ghost. Heholt uses Crowe’s “The Swiss Lady’s Story,” “The Italian’s Story” and “Round the Fire” in *Ghosts and Family Legends* (1859) to demonstrate this. In “The Swiss Lady’s Story,” Heholt notes how the male gaze is reversed, and the male body feminised, as a silent apparition of a soldier is only visible to females and servants: “This is the visible body of a white, middle-class man that is so feminised, so scrutinised and that is referred to as ‘it’” (55). In the latter

two tales, Heholt suggests that Crowe's other male characters are reduced to lesser forms of manhood either through becoming, or coming into contact with, a ghost. In "The Italian Story," a murdered nephew returns as a disempowered, silent ghost to haunt his uncle. In "Round the Fire," the "manly" Captain S witnesses the ghost of a "beautiful naked boy"; an experience Heholt suggests "deconstructs the power and violence of the more conventional masculinity of the ghost-seer himself" (56). A similar event occurs to Count P in the same tale, his manliness "rendered passive and blind" after "his manly body is penetrated by an apparition" (57). Heholt argues that Crowe's "radical (re)vision" of the male ghost body and their ghost-seers under the guise of scientific evaluation "undermines the dominant certainties of empirical vision and masculinity" (59). It is through Crowe's pursuit of supernatural knowledge through scientific means that Victorian masculinity can, in turn, be re-envisioned and reassessed.

Heholt provides an innovative and highly persuasive study of Victorian feminised manhood, blending this well with other cultural contexts, such as nineteenth-century spirituality, science and sensual experience. By emphasising the importance of a little known Victorian female figure and her early feminist and scientific achievements, Heholt provides an opening for scholars specialising in gender, the supernatural and scientific studies to explore her work in greater depth. Although Heholt does touch on the evolution of the Spiritualist movement and other fictionalised ghost-tales, it would be interesting to see Crowe's work in context with other Victorian spiritualist or radical female writers, her narratives' gendered subtext representing an important addition to feminist discussion. Nonetheless, Heholt's article pinpoints a historically significant discourse that raises important questions for current scholars regarding nineteenth-century science and gender, the inclusion of women in scientific spheres and the attempt to merge scientific reasoning with speculation on the supernatural.

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