The Call Came from Inside the House: Supernatural Noise and Domestic Incivility

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In the opening scene of the psychological horror film When a Stranger Calls (Fred Walton, 1979), a babysitter—Jill Johnson (Carol Kane)—is terrorized by an anonymous male who calls asking her to check on the children in her care. His progressively creepier requests unknowingly fly in the face of their mother’s warning that the sleeping children—recently recovered from illness—must remain undisturbed. Once the parents leave, the large, stylishly appointed, and now noticeably silent house settles gloomily around the sitter. Sensibly enough, she resorts to the consolations of the telephone, chatting amiably at first, and then defensively, with an unnamed friend and potential rival for the affections of Bobby. Grudgingly, her friend concedes Jill’s prior claim to the boy and agrees to give him her number at the house. After a brief interval, the phone rings and someone—clearly not Bobby—asks: “Have you checked on the children?”

With each subsequent call the ring grows more strident, underscoring the essentially sonic nature of the caller’s assault. Other disturbing noises, like the mortal ticking of a pendulum clock and the sinister rumble of an icemaker, emerge in the gaps between the calls. Although remote from the phone, such sonic estrangements find their source in the caller’s diffuse menace; under his influence all noises presumptively communicate hostile intent, provoking something of a crisis in referentiality, at least until the sitter establishes otherwise. Of course, this sort of fake out has been a staple of horror films for as long as audiences have jumped at cats they took for lurking killers. What distinguishes When a Stranger Calls is Jill’s fundamental misunderstanding of the threat posed, which is to say that her defensive actions—checking windows, locking doors—are shaped by the tele of the phone, the distance between her position and the caller’s that the phone virtually overcomes. While the phone call carries the remote voice into a more intimate relation

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with its recipient, it nonetheless obscures its point of origin. Following Michel Chion, Mladen Dolar calls this unlocatable voice the acousmatic: “A voice whose source one cannot see, a voice whose origin cannot be identified, a voice one cannot place. It is a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body, but even when it finds its body, it turns out that this doesn’t quite work, the voice doesn’t stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn’t match the body.”

When Jill reaches breaking point and finally contacts the police, she attempts to place her caller—correctly locating his threat as proximate but mistakenly assuming that he must be external to the house: “He’s watching me. He’s outside!” The police response compounds what will be revealed as her deadly error: “You’re safe where you are.” By way of reassurance, the desk sergeant promises to notify a patrolling squad car and to trace the next incoming call. In the penultimate phone call, the harasser breaks from his script to voice a macabre wish to be covered in the sitter’s blood. Jill receives one more call, and, against expectation, it is the desk sergeant confirming the worst of all possible scenarios: her caller’s line has been traced to a location inside the house. She turns to see a shadow darken the stairwell above at the moment the sergeant orders her to leave the house. Although she escapes through the front door and into the arms of a waiting policeman, we learn that the children have been brutally murdered.

The caller’s shocking presence inside the house disturbs the intuitive—if historically contingent—sense that telephony operates as a network distributed across more or less fixed points (obviously, the advent of the mobile phone instantly undoes the plot twist such a system affords). In addition to the sheer unlikelihood of guessing at the existence of an extra telephone line upstairs (found in an office once used by the children’s father, a psychiatrist who treated, and misdiagnosed, their killer), the sitter’s incapacity to properly sense the murderer’s location is also bound up with the problem of the house itself. Its size, plush appointments, and modern construction methods suppress the footfalls, thumps, and screams that might otherwise testify to the intruder’s presence. The mother’s edict barring the sitter from the children’s room creates a further obstacle that comes into uncomfortable focus around the anonymous caller’s expression of what is, after all, her primary responsibility: to check. These contradictory demands play out as a struggle for authority over someone who is—to use an obsolete but relevant term—a servant.

When a Stranger Calls finds much of its horror and anxiety in a mix of antiquated and modern problems: servant duty, secure architecture, and, crucially, misunderstanding the behavioral properties of sound. As such, the film bears the artifactual impress of a much older history of domestic imperilment, one that similarly turns on the question of where sounds heard at home are understood to originate.

UNCIVIL NOISES

For the English middle classes, intrusive noise threatened the experience of elective quiet—one of domesticity’s most exalted properties—diminishing the capacity for self-improvement, recreation, and sleep. Unsurprisingly, blame for obnoxious noise within the house mostly fell at servants’ heavily shod feet. Where such sound proved resistant to dampening through insulation or the segregation of service from family areas, nineteenth-century handbooks of domestic advice

instructed in the behavioral muting of domestic labor practices. These books raised the stakes around servant behavior—including noisiness—beyond inconvenience and discomfort, offering dark warnings of status-damaging effects. As Anne Cobbett notes in *The English Housekeeper* (1830), “there is no one so free from hasty judgment, as not to be more of less prejudiced against the mistress of a house, by the untidy appearance or the awkward behavior of her domestics.”

Servant immoderation not only diminished the prospect of household civility but threatened to announce those failings abroad. As Thomas Harrison Walker makes clear in this entry on “Quietness” from *Good Servants, Good Wives, and Happy Homes* (1862), noise brims with communicative intent:

> Some servants seem to have a pleasure in doing their work in making as much noise as possible. If pushed a little, they must show it by running violently up and down stairs, slamming the doors, talking loudly, throwing things about, and other similar nuisances…. It will always be the aim of a good servant to do everything as quietly as possible; she will not therefore attempt to do three or four things at once, or to accomplish an hour’s work in half a one, all the time publishing her intentions by the hasty manner in which she throws things about, and the noise and bustle she creates; but, on the contrary, she will endeavor by forethought and arrangement, to do everything with the least possible discomfort to herself and the family.

Noise, so it would appear, gave expression to the otherwise unspeakable resentments of the put-upon, offering the beleaguered maidservant the means to temporarily overcome household injunctions against the *publishing* of intentions. Or rather it would have, were it not for Walker’s authoritative translation of her bustling and door-slamming into the language of insolent complaint. “Such servants,” he writes, “must not expect to retain their places; they can only be borne with from unhappy necessity.”

Walker’s object lesson depends on identifying the noisy offender. But what of noise that suggested no origin in the everyday practice and experience of the home? As noise it would continue to erode domestic civility, and threaten reputational harm, but without any means of correction. Such noise exposed the limits of household discipline, opening a doubtful gap in domestic order. Households that heard noises in the absence of originating bodies proved radically open to a range of possible explanations, including, inevitably, the supernatural. As Jeffrey Kittay explains, the haunted house is “indescribable” in that it demands “a representation of itself through the eyes of a percipient in the midst of a disorientation.”

The soundscape of the supernaturalized house is a useful location from which to test the state of domestic modernity—the extent to which secular or broadly skeptical accounts of residential noise were available to explain and manage provocative auditory phenomena. Absent

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2 Such methods are discussed in Andrea Kaston Tange, *Architectural Identities: Domesticity, Literature, and the Victorian Middle Classes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 185.

3 Anne Cobbett, *The English Housekeeper; or, Manual of Domestic Management: Containing Advice on the Conduct of Household Affairs and Practical Instructions Concerning the Store-room, the Pantry, the Larder, the Kitchen, the Cellar, the Dairy: Together with Remarks on the Best Means of Rendering Assistance to Poor Neighbours, and Hints for Laying out Small Ornamental Gardens, Directions for Cultivating Herbs. The Whole Being Intended for the Use of Young Ladies who Undertake the Superintendence of Their Own Housekeeping*, 2nd ed. (London: A. Cobbett, 1830), 12, Elizabeth Robins Pennell Collection, Library of Congress.


5 Ibid., 94.

such explanations, haunting events highlighted the limited range of meanings attributable to irruptive sound encountered at home and, more specifically, a lack of understanding regarding the expressive vocalizations of building materials and household objects. Emerging from a telling gap in domestic competency, these noises appeared to ventriloquize on behalf of the dead.

Some of the knottier problems provoked by supernaturalized sound are rehearsed in Addison’s description—in the guise of Mr. Spectator—of a stroll near Sir Roger de Coverley’s house from the *Spectator* “No. 110.” Mr. Spectator registers the peculiar acoustics of the adjacent vaulted ruins, especially their puzzling tendency to echo when “if you stamp a little louder than ordinary, you hear the sound repeated.” Testing a location’s sonic properties distinguishes the reasonable observer from the “weak minds” who would otherwise “fill it with specters and apparitions.” Locke’s “Of the Association of Ideas” offers an explanation for the originating conditions of such weak-mindedness:

>The ideas of goblins and sprites have really no more to do with darkness than light: yet let but a foolish maid inculcate these often on the mind of a child, and raise them there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives; but darkness shall ever after bring with it those frightful ideas, and they shall be so joined, that he can no more bear the one than the other.\(^7\)

For Locke, the nocturnally affrighted, supernaturally inclined mind is both weak and, in origin, domestic; an unfortunate by-product of the nursery’s formative intimacies binding ignorant servants to those condemned to their care. Having broadened the cohort of ghost-susceptibility beyond the servant class, Spectator relates something of the recent history of the de Coverley estate:

>My friend Sir Roger has often told me with a great deal of mirth that, at his first coming to his estate, he found three parts of his house altogether useless; that the best room in it had the reputation of being haunted, and by that means was locked up; that noises had been heard in his long gallery, so that he could not get a servant to enter it after eight o’clock at night; that the door of one of his chambers was nailed up, because there went a story in the family that a butler had formerly hanged himself in it; and that his mother, who lived to a great age, had shut up half the rooms in the house, in which either her husband, a son, or a daughter, had died. The knight seeing his habitation reduced to so small a compass, and himself in a manner shut out of his own house, upon the death of his mother ordered all the apartments to be flung open, and exorcized by his chaplain, who lay in every room one after another, and by that means dissipated the fears which had so long reigned in the family.\(^9\)

Supernaturalized noise triggers a state of exemption from the routine and typically inflexible obligations of domestic service, limiting the habitable portion of the house to a clutch of safe rooms apparently determined by common consent. Ghosts, expressed in the form of the sounds they make and the rumored histories through which they propagate, prove sufficient cause to refuse work, damaging the quiet fluency of domesticity and drawing its labors to a contestable surface.

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8 Cited in ibid.

9 Ibid.
Although de Coverley dismissively orders the haunted rooms reopened, the thorough banishment of spirits requires an elaborate, if pragmatic, concession to their reality in the form of the chaplain’s exorcism—a spectacle organized for the servants in return for breaking their partial siege over the house. This might resolve things to Sir Roger’s satisfaction, but the broader question of the fate and expression of domestic authority in the face of supernatural incursion remains open.

**WHAT WAS THAT? NO, NOT THAT, THAT.**

In 1806 the *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts* published a letter from a correspondent known only by the initials L. M. The letter, “On the Phantasms Produced by a Disordered Sensation,” broadly concurs with Friedrich Nicolai’s well-known account of ghostly visions as the product of a diseased and disordered mind, while distinguishing the ear as “much more an instrument of terror than the eye”:

Diseased perceptions of sight are more common than those of hearing, and they are in general borne with more tranquillity. A few simple sounds usually constitute the amount of what the ear unfaithfully presents; but when incessant half-articulated whispers, sudden calls, threats, obscure murmurs, and distant tollings are heard, the mind is less disposed to patience and calm philosophy. Instances however are not wanting, in which musical combinations of enchanting melody haunt the mind, and occupy the senses of those who are oppressed with an indisposition.

The ear, that unfaithful organ, finds menace in the partly heard and half-grasped, a problem L. M. considers to be as much aesthetic as auditory. He suggests that illness intensifies a tendency toward enchantment through melody and the (literally) haunting refrain. L. M. is one of several skeptical writers interested in the pathological underpinnings of supernatural phenomena at the turn of the nineteenth century. They include Joseph Taylor, the full title of whose 1814 book captures something of the moral belligerence of the collective project: *Apparitions; or, the Mystery of Ghosts, Hobgoblins and Haunted Houses, developed. Being a Collection of Entertaining Stories Founded on Fact; And Selected for the Purpose of Eradicating Those Ridiculous Fears, Which the Ignorant, the Weak and the Superstitious, Are but Too Apt to Encourage, For Want of Properly Examining into the Causes of Such Absurd Impositions.*

Taylor shared Addison’s concern with servants’ sway over children, advising parents to be wary of their legacy of supernaturalized accounts of the world. His book therapeutically compiles ghost stories that seem to cleave to convention, only to culminate in disenchanting bathos. In one such story a household stricken by frightening thumps heard overhead discovers that they issue from partly clad maids fleeing a fire across a common attic, while in another, the demonic

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11 Joseph Taylor, *Apparitions; or, the Mystery of Ghosts, Hobgoblins and Haunted Houses, developed. Being a Collection of Entertaining Stories Founded on Fact; And Selected for the Purpose of Eradicating Those Ridiculous Fears, Which the Ignorant, the Weak and the Superstitious, Are but Too Apt to Encourage, For Want of Properly Examining into the Causes of Such Absurd Impositions* (London: Lackington Allen, 1814).

12 Ibid., 14. Dickens’s account of the terrifying Captain Murderer would testify to the accuracy of this assessment. The captain appears in chapter 18 of *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) in bedtime stories told by Dickens’s nurse: “Her name was Mercy, although she had none on me.” Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 150.
source of a howling fireplace is no more than a young chimney sweep planted to terrify guests lingering too long at an inn. Taylor targets the explanatory power of long-held superstitions such as the ticking of the deathwatch, which is “believed to foretell the death of someone in the family,” but which is little more than a noisy beetle commonly found “in the plastering of a wall, and at other times in a rotten post, or in some old chest, or trunk.” Identifying the bug’s pitiful haunts directs the reader away from the impression of eerily unlocatable, premonitory tolling and toward the (expensive) sounds of infestation. In short, he wishes to replace the householder’s morbid anguish with something like modern residential competence.

As part of his thorough account of how sounds are susceptible to supernaturalization, David Brewster’s *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832) turns, like a number of the authors considered here, to the problem of the ear’s specific vulnerability to error:

> The great proportion of apparitions that haunt old castles and apartments associated with death exists only in the sounds which accompany them. The imagination even of the boldest inmate of a place hallowed by superstition, will transfer some trifling sound near his own person to a direction and to a distance very different from the truth, and the sound which otherwise might have no peculiar complexion will derive another character from its new locality.

The problem, as Brewster describes it, is that the auditor, primed by a location’s rich history of unexplained events, assumes that irruptive sound is personally communicative (in fairness to Jane Eyre, sometimes it is). On hearing these sounds, the imagination deepens their mystery: distant sounds are experienced intimately, while those originating closer to hand are removed to a point where they cannot support a rational explanation. The chatty supernatural agencies emerging from this context of vaguely animist romanticism occupy a space that Brewster wishes to reclaim for a belated practical physics of sound. Lacking a dispassionate understanding of sound exposes the auditor to needless misery. Brewster recounts the example of an acquaintance persecuted by strange noises of uncertain origin heard from—but not understood to originate within—the bedchamber. That the sound might have been intentionally directed “operated on his imagination” and produced in him “a superstitious feeling.” Later the noise is traced to a wardrobe door located “a few feet” from his bed:

> This wardrobe was almost always opened before he retired to bed, and the door being a little too tight, it gradually forced itself open with a sort of dull sound, resembling the note of a drum. As the door had only started half an inch out of place, its change of position never attracted attention. The sound, indeed, seemed to come in a different direction, and from a greater distance.

> When sounds so mysterious in their origin are heard by persons predisposed to a belief in the marvellous, their influence over the mind must be very powerful.

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14 Ibid., vii.
16 Ibid., 166–67.
17 Ibid., 167.
How aptly this captures what Anthony Vidler describes as the “fundamental insecurity: that of a newly established class, not quite at home in its own home.” Brewster’s anecdote trades in the everyday risks of living with an incomplete understanding of things that invariably squeak, moan, and rasp. His inquiry into the causes of what appears to be supernatural sound pits capacitating materialism against the spiritualizing tendencies within homes that require carpenters, not priests. More broadly, the problem of apparently communicative noise suggests something of domesticity’s inexorable amplification of the self; at home, everything—even terrifying, otherworldly sounds—ultimately speaks to, and of, the hearer, or at least some hearers. There are those who profit from exploiting this paralyzing vulnerability to sound, dividing the inhabitants of such unfortunate households into those who make noise and those who fear it.

**OAK + PEBBLE**

Servants occupy a curious position in the skeptical literature devoted to accounts of supernatural noise; they are variously witless dupes, superstition peddlers, or, more rarely, level-headed pragmatists shaming their panicked masters. These were not necessarily distinct categories so much as a set of positions through which a servant might migrate as an object of instruction for the middle-class reader. Less frequently servants appeared as agents in their own right—which is to say that the actionable benefit their narrative offered the reader was limited to amusing, if vaguely cautionary intelligence—as is the case in William Howitt’s odd compendium of anecdote, moral opinion, and geographical survey that is *The Rural Life of England* (1838). In the chapter “Terrors of the Solitary House,” Howitt introduces Jack, a servant whose keen eye detects some teacakes intended for his mistress and, in the great tradition of cunning rogues governed by their appetites, “conceived of a felicitous design of getting possession of them.” Before he may act on this plan, however, Jack’s mistress orders him out into the cold night air to count sheep:

> Instead of marching off to the Hard-meadow, however, of which he had not the most remote intention, he went leisurely around to the front door, which he knew would be unfastened; for what inhabitants of an old country-house would think of fastening doors till bed-time? He entered quietly; ascended the front stairs; and reaching a large old oaken chest which stood on the landing place, all carved and adorned with minster-work, he struck three bold strokes on the lid with a pebble he had picked up in the yard for the purpose. At the sound, up started every soul in the kitchen. “What is that?” every one of them said at once in consternation. The mistress ordered the maid to run and see; but the maid declared that she would not go for the world. “Go you then, Betty cook—go Joe—go Harry!” No, neither Betty, Joe, Harry, nor anybody else would stir a foot. They all stood together aghast, when a strange rumbling and grinding sound assailed their ears. It was Jack rubbing the pebble a

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20 For a discussion of servants as an extension of middle-class interests rather than as protagonists in their own right, see Bruce Robbins, *The Servant’s Hand: English Fiction from Below* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

few times over the carved lid of the chest. This was too much for endurance. A great fellow in a paroxysm of terror, snatched down the horn from its nail, and blew a tremendous blast.  

Jack uses the minster-work chest against the grain of its intention, exploiting its accidental sonic properties to induce domestic terror, while relieving Betty, Joe, and Harry, among others, from any obligation to follow orders. Howitt’s account suggests that such domestically paralyzing sounds are simple to make, the product of nothing more than a slightly oblique approach to the servant’s everyday scrubbing of hard surfaces. This is drudgery in its uncharacteristic tactical mode.

While Jack’s improvised deception converts an act of creative labor-refusal into a spontaneous holiday for all, the benefit, if any, to his mistress is perhaps less obvious. The oak chest—as—drum speaks to—and for—the presence of an unnamed threat against the house. In making the sound, Jack diverts unspeakable feelings about his mistress—as a selfish eater of cakes and issuer of unreasonable commands—that might otherwise have found expression through the same pebble, “picked up in the yard for the purpose.” His performance of sounds attributable to mysterious home intrusion diffuses what might otherwise appear as the candid expression of uncivil resentment while effecting short periods of transformed relations within the household.

**STUMPED**

“A Night in a Haunted House: Being a Passage in the Life of Mr Midas Oldwyche” (1848) fictionalizes some of the concerns about modern domesticity under conditions of supernaturally imposed noise. The introductory section pits Oldwyche—in spite of his name, a droll skeptic—against a clutch of earnest ghost-believers whose number includes a seemingly sensible clergyman possessed of “logical discourse.”  

Acknowledging no visual proof of ghosts haunting the house in question, the clergyman relies instead on the existence of “sounds which could not otherwise be accounted for.” These “inexplicable noises” suggest a person walking up and down stairs:

> What was most curious, was that they were like a club-footed person—that, in fact, it was not so much a walking as an uncouth kind of stumping that was heard, and which could not be listened to without feelings of the most disagreeable kind. It was said that the doors would often open and shut of themselves, as the footsteps went into or out of the rooms, and that, still oftener, the sound of the opening or shutting of a door would be heard, while to the eye the door remained unmoved. Frequently sighs were heard; sometimes, though not often, a slight laugh, and sometimes a low whispering that would continue for hours together, as if the being that made all these noises were talking to itself as it stumped along.

These sounds haunt to the extent that they exceed, or distort, the narrow bandwidth of permissible domestic noise. As is often the case, the ghost shares behaviors with the servant. As John Trusler made clear in *Domestic Management* (1819), servants were expected to operate under a restrictive sonic covenant:

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22 Ibid., 207–8.
23 Ibid., 207.
24 “A Night in a Haunted House: Being a Passage in the Life of Mr Midas Oldwyche,” *Dublin University Magazine*, May 1848, 554.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 555.
As discussed above, Georgian edicts of this kind persist well into the Victorian era, when servant behavior was understood to reflect on the family, and vice versa. Mrs. C. E. Humphry, author of *Housekeeping: A Guide to Domestic Management* (1893) and a woman singularly devoted to the suppression of domestic exuberance, believed that unduly noisy family members called their own good breeding into question while negatively influencing servant behavior. She considered the damping down of excess noise not only “a test of superiority in servants, but of households.”28 If servants were heard laboring, they required correction—what Maria Hutchins Callcott’s *A Few Household Hints, and Lessons of Conduct for Female Servants in the Form of Narrative Letters* (1856) chillingly underdescribes as “severe lessons.”29 Of course, as I have noted, the very thing necessitating discipline in one context might appear as evidence of supernatural activity in another. What distinguished a regulatory response from a fearful one might rest as much on prevailing attitudes toward servants as on the acoustic properties of the house, specifically its capacity for reverberant transmission. Accounts of supernatural phenomena reveal just how vulnerable the middle-class home might prove to minor sonic infractions, and how feeble, in turn, were its marshaled defenses.

As his dispute with the believers escalates, Oldwyche proposes a definitive test in the form—inevitably—of a night spent in the so-called haunted house that will repudiate the existence of the “club-footed” ghost.30 On approach to the house, Oldwyche’s vigorous skepticism succumbs to a range of queer sensations—notably, a sense that the house appears lonely and possessed of a “strange spectral look.”31 He reminds himself that “there are no such things as ghosts”; “let me not forget in what century I live; these are not the dark ages.”

It was, nevertheless, with some tumult about the heart that I lifted the huge knocker (for everything there was huge), and knocked at the door. The sound of the knock itself had something hollow and sepulchral, I thought, and seemed to awaken a hundred dim echoes in the vast space of the empty rooms and passages, which spoke of solitude and desolation with a gloomy eloquence not calculated to raise my spirits.32

Oldwyche’s reverberant knock should summon a servant as well as supplying some clues to the disposition of the interior. It does both but in ways that serve to demonstrate how the reputedly haunted house imposes discomfiting limits over domestic mastery. Oldwyche’s echoing
knock sonically visualizes the interior, but only as ranks of spirit-depressing rooms, while the servant called to the door rudely declines to recognize the visitor’s unequivocal right of entry despite being shown a letter of introduction from Mr. Greenborn, the house’s rightful owner. Even though the letter stipulates the services he is to render, the servant flatly refuses because he believes Oldwyche conspires to supplant him in his post, consistent with the flattened relations between the classes that obtain during occasions of domestic haunting. In reply, the servant explains that Oldwyche is “not fit for the place,” since he has “neither the constitution, nor the courage for it”: “She’d frighten you out of your life in three days. She’d cow you, man alive, and then where would you be? Under her feet. And pretty feet they would be to be under.”

Although the servant finally relents, Oldwyche’s dilemma—his absence of demonstrable domestic authority—troubles him throughout his anxious residency. His difficulty persuading the suspicious manservant that he has no designs on his position, for example, foreshadows the more dangerous case of mistaken identity as the ghost (Greenborn’s ancestor) takes Oldwyche for her long-dead suitor: “You are he who broke this faithful heart—this heart which, in the grave, still beats but for you….And for what? For these feet!”

Not surprisingly, Oldwyche’s robust skepticism utterly deflates in the face of the ghost, and with it his claims about the self-evident modernity of the Victorian present. The ghost has a related problem with the present in the sense that her wedding-day abandonment permanently binds the house to that moment of bygone trauma (incidentally paving the way for Miss Havisham’s yellowed bridal gown, stopped clocks, and moldering wedding cake). There is no room for progress, at least until the groom—in the shape of Oldwyche—makes his unexpected return. Houses haunted thus wise turn themselves inside out, converting intensely private grief into public reputation: the very combination of rumor, anecdote, and report that drew Oldwyche to the haunted house in the first place and that in turn plays out a minor variation on the reputational damage thought to follow on the heels of noisy servants. The content of Miss Greenborn’s haunting fixates narrowly on the bitter aftermath of her suitor’s rejection on the grounds of sexual revulsion, precisely the kind of excruciating scandal that must remain insulated within the domestic circle. By contrast, her ghostly sighing and stumping about insist that the house remain in the public eye (or ear), exposing the home to morbid eventfulness, the very opposite of quiet, modern domestic efficiency. All this proves too much for Oldwyche. When he (barely) evades the ghost’s clutches, he escapes not just from the house but from any counterclaims the Victorian present might offer on his experience: “I went to the Greenborn Arms for that night, and set off the next morning for London, having left a note for [his close friend] Harry Fenwick at Hilton, to say that I gave up the nineteenth century.”

HEARING RATIONALLY

The examples collected above suggest some of the stakes, as well as the rooted difficulties, in ridding the home of noisy ghosts. While the English essayist Charles Ollier shared much with writers like Taylor and Howitt, his work differs in that it begins to document the residential consequences of redistributing practical domestic knowledge from servants to masters. Much of this occurs within the familiar context of complaint against servant susceptibility to supernatural
explanation. In *Fallacy of Ghosts* (1848), for example, Ollier rails against female servants for whom “any apparently unaccountable night sound is immediately translated into a portent.”\(^{36}\) Paradoxically, their limited, superstitious minds are as creative as they are domestically troubling:

> With the dense stupidity in which the majority of girls who go out to service are brought up, is combined a large portion of cunning. Some of them have been known to make startling noises in the dead of night, purely to give birth to an awful story; and the best of the thing is, that in an incredibly short space of time they themselves believe the very marvels they invent.\(^{37}\)

Under the heading “Ominous night noises,” Ollier records the case of a master roused from his bed by a “violent knocking at the lower part of the house.”\(^{38}\) He investigates and finds nothing amiss, but a few days after the disturbance the servant girl suddenly gives notice on the grounds that “the place was too lonely for her”:

> It was ascertained that, either being scared at the dead silence of the night, so different from the crowded houses of London in which she had hitherto lived, and where perfect stillness never comes, or else anxious to create a wandering sensation, she had left her room, determined to bring some evidence of life about her by inflicting heavy blows with some instrument on the garden door. That her master should have been so successfully hoaxed was, doubtless, an additional source of enjoyment.\(^{39}\)

Ollier’s belief in the idiocy of the servant class sits uneasily with what he acknowledges as their capacity to game domestic acoustics. Like many of the polemics against ghost beliefs, and the behaviors that fed them, Ollier’s inadvertently registers a rich history of demotic exploration of the uncanny in which servant mastery over the profoundly familiar components of domestic life yields estranging, household routine–interrupting effects. Moreover, in the example above, not only does the servant supernaturalize labor sounds to replace tedious, repetitive toil with gothic eventfulness, but by filling the silent house with simulated noise she reverses the order of things: the servant summons the master from his bed.

When does domestic noise no longer require these ghost-allaying explanations? In an account of domestic disturbances published in *Ainsworth’s Magazine* from 1844, Ollier documents an occasion where something heard in the home is understood to have its unmysterious origin there as well:

> We have heard of a family, who lived in a solitary suburban house, approachable only by a by-road close to a church yard, being roused by an unaccountable noise from midnight sleep, leaving their beds, and huddling together in one room, while the master of the house, pistol in hand, searched the premises. Though nothing suspicious was detected, the female servants could not be persuaded to return to their chambers, because, as no thief was found lurking about, it was clear “the house was haunted.” And to this day such a belief would have been cherished, had not the master been a man in whose mind no prejudice or absurd fear could for an instant exist—one whose clear and sagacious faculties are competent to the exposure of

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\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 101.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 104.
any fallacy, however plausible. The sound was heard on a subsequent night; and being resolved
to detect its cause, which this gentleman suspected beforehand would turn out to be some-
thing very simple and very trivial, he ascertained at last that it proceeded from the rattling, in
a sudden wind, of a Venetian blind, hanging outside the window of an unoccupied room, and
which the servants had neglected, week after week, to draw up and secure.40

Here the problems of servant fabulation, labor refusal, and the supernaturalization of banal sound
are resolved with the emergence of a new kind of secular competency over domestic space. Ollier
demonstrates that the restoration of domestic civility hinges on the practical mastery over objects
previously beneath notice. Modern domestic efficiency—of which this is an instance—cannot
ignore the seemingly trivial aspects of the home, nor can it fully delegate such understanding to
the servant class. When the master’s investigation concludes at the site of the rattling blind, he
has acquired a sense of the material, behavioral, and social practicalities of the object. He knows
what may be done with it, or plausibly attributed to it, while refusing the blind’s capacity to speak
symptomatically of—and from—the spirit world. This begins the transfer of technical compe-
tence over domestic objects from servant to master, a transfer premised on a refusal: servants
may no longer shape domestic reality through the production or reception of unexplained noise.

Cumulatively, these ghost stories tell us about the persistence of supernatural experience
into the modern era, but they also suggest that a certain skeptical competence over the mean-
ing of sound—one of the features of modern domesticity—was a capacity shared unequally in
households. As masters learned the true causes of domestic noise, they would come to cultivate
permanent wariness in lieu of sporadic terror and domestic incivility. In order to properly banish
ghosts and the horrors they visited on the home, residents learned to listen to symptomatic calls
from within the house. A

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