

The Gytrash

The most famous mention of the *Gytrash* occurs in Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*. While walking alone one evening, the heroine hears mysterious sounds.

“A rude noise broke on these fine rippings and whisperings, at once so far away and so clear: a positive tramp, tramp, a metallic clatter, ... a horse was coming; the windings of the lane yet hid it, but it approached. I was just leaving the stile; yet, as the path was narrow, I sat still to let it go by. In those days I was young, and all sorts of fancies bright and dark tenanted my mind: the memories of nursery stories were there amongst other rubbish; and when they recurred, maturing youth added to them a vigour and vividness beyond what childhood could give. As this horse approached, and as I watched for it to appear through the dusk, I remembered certain of Bessie's tales, wherein figured a North-of-England spirit called a "Gytrash," which, in the form of horse, mule, or large dog, haunted solitary ways, and sometimes came upon belated travellers, as this horse was now coming upon me. It was very near, but not yet in sight; when, in addition to the tramp, tramp, I heard a rush under the hedge, and close down by the hazel stems glided a great dog, whose black and white colour made him a distinct object against the trees. It was exactly one form of Bessie's Gytrash--a lion-like creature with long hair and a huge head: it passed me, however, quietly enough; not staying to look up, with strange pretercanine eyes, in my face, as I half expected it would. The horse followed,--a tall steed, and on its back a rider. The man, the human being, broke the spell at once. Nothing ever rode the Gytrash: it was always alone; and goblins, to my notions, though they might tenant the dumb carcasses of beasts, could scarce covet shelter in the commonplace human form. No Gytrash was this,--only a traveller taking the short cut to Millcote. He passed, and I went on; a few steps, and I turned: a sliding sound and an exclamation of "What the deuce is to do now?" and a clattering tumble, arrested my attention. Man and horse were down; they had slipped on the sheet of ice which glazed the causeway.” (*Jane Eyre* 1847, Ch.12).

This experience leads to her first dramatic meeting with Mr Rochester, riding his horse, Mesrour, and accompanied by his dog, Pilot. It also embodies the qualities of gothic literature with its ambiguous view of reality in which events have many layers of meaning, yet the seemingly supernatural can be explained as ordinary. The fact that the

horse had a human rider seems to resolve Jane's fantasies sparked by the darkness, her own admitted youthfulness and the memory of childhood tales. The form of the legendary *gytrash* combined equine and canine characteristics, and Jane's fears turn into a very real horse and dog. The testy arrogant rider, who has injured himself in a fall, demands Jane's help and seems to bring the incident to an all too real, even pedestrian, close. However this is a novel written by an author who knew how to exploit the gothic format, and the meeting, in true gothic style, encapsulates Jane and Rochester's complex relationship and anticipates the eventual outcome of the novel. The turbulent haunted Rochester has qualities of the wild solitary spectral figure that constantly changes shape. He is elusive, remote, romantic and deceptive by turns - the epitome of a sexy gothic hero. But Bronte heroines were never just passive feminine counterparts for their heroes. At this first meeting, it is Jane who helps Rochester limp home, a foreshadowing of her acceptance of a wounded and chastened hero at the end of the book.

Jane attributes her reactions to stories about the *gytrash* that she heard from a servant, and this is likely to reflect Charlotte Bronte's own attitude to folklore. Servants were favourite purveyors of traditional folk wisdom in the 19th century, reflecting the idea that such things came from a world pushed to the periphery by rationalism and progress. Jane also mentions her own youthfulness as a factor in her susceptibility to fantasy. This too reflects 19th century ideas about folklore as somehow peripheral to mainstream culture. *Jane Eyre* is possibly the earliest reference to the *gytrash* figure, and Charlotte's description, put into the mouth of her heroine forms the basis for subsequent citations, such as that in Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, printed in 1898. However similar creatures, like *padfoot*, were mentioned in Victorian folklore collections like William Henderson's *Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties* published in the 1860s.

Although the incident in the novel is one of the most influential references to the *gytrash*, Charlotte was not the only Bronte to mention this figure. Her brother, Branwell, described the *gytrash* in an unpublished piece relating to the imaginary worlds created by the Bronte children. He noted that it was unlike the spirits of the dead or the fairies; rather it was a shape-changing spectre, sometimes a dog or a calf or even a flaming barrel. Branwell's biographer provides further confirmation that a similar apparition was seen in the area. The *gytrash* then was a localised name for a creature which usually appeared in the shape of a shaggy dog with large glowing eyes who terrorised benighted travellers. The name may be a northern dialect word related to Norman French 'guizard', that is an apparition, or the element 'guy' could refer to some non-specific, living entity. There are numerous other localised forms of this creature, *barguest*, *padfoot*, *shagfoal*, *black shuck*, the *gwyllgi* etc., and Yorkshire has its fair share of these malignant road spirits. Basically there are all versions of 'things that go bump in the night'. Their specific area of terror is the open road in the days before street lighting and public transport. They were much loved by Victorian and Edwardian writers. The *gytrash* appears in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, but Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles* comes from the same supernatural kennel, while M.R. James presents a wide range of spectral followers in short stories such as *The Rune* and *Whistle and I'll come to You My Lad* and H.B. Lovecraft's hideously formless 'old ones' slink around the edges of all his fiction.

These uncanny spectres have worked their way into modern horror fiction and film as well, by the simple process of substituting the unlit open road for the urban world of alleyways and of the interior landscape of nightmares. It is easy to see why they are so pervasive and so popular as they encapsulate our nameless fears of dark lonely places, and the ability of our imagination to people these desolate spaces with nightmare creatures. For some reason (perhaps because we are not solitary creatures ourselves) human beings would prefer to populate the world with horrible things than have nothing at all. It is interestingly that when these creatures were first recorded by folklorists in the 19th century, they were 'explained' as sounds distorted by darkness and space, or excuses for travellers who had been murdered or met with fatal accidents. Even Victorian fiction tended to 'rationalise' them, but these rationalisations are themselves part of the folklore and the source, in so far as there is one, is in our ambiguous and uncertain relationship with environments (such as darkness) where we are uncertain and less able to exert control.

The most general form of this creature is a 'black dog', a common type of spirit phenomenon. The apparition almost always appears outside human habitations in wild places or on lonely roads, rather than inside human habitations like poltergeists and the ghost of the dead. Interesting that they should represent a negative image of man's best friend. The *barguest*, a tradition known in Lancashire and Yorkshire, haunted churchyards and stiles and portended death for those who saw it. In Bronte's novel, Jane is sitting on a stile when she hears the approaching sounds of Rochester's horse. In actual fact these spectres are not all bad. Some of them protect rather than terrorise travellers or guard treasure and only attack those who disturb the treasure. Recently romantic neo-pagan notions have begun to affect this figure. *Black Shuck* (the Norfolk hound) has been explained as one of Odin's hounds and a relic of Viking paganism. These spectral dogs are not pagan or anti-Christian; they are just an embodiment of the topography and an expression of secret fears. Even though this is a modern idea, it does attest to the dynamism of the tradition and its ability to reflect our changing perceptions of our own past.

Whatever the origins and the psychology behind this figure - a *gytrash* experience is a horror tale in miniature. The scene is a benighted traveller on a dark and stormy night. First there is the sound of footsteps - specifically the padding of animal feet of some kind. The lucky traveller sees a light in a farmhouse and escapes (these are creatures of the dark). The unlucky ones are frightened, perhaps never to recover.