

Enacting Ghosts, or: How to Make the Invisible Visible.

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I

Early September 1853 newspapers reported an uncanny story from Vlijmen, a small place just west of 's-Hertogenbosch in the province of Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands. Some days ago, so the account, a well-to-do Protestant woman had died and she had been buried in the Protestant graveyard, which was adjacent to the Catholic one. A few days later, people had seen things: 'frightening faces and so-called apparitions of ghosts', specified as 'fiery or flaming skulls and pearly white ghosts, in the shape of cats, which moved up and down, in all directions across the graveyard'. This made that no one dared to come even near there anymore. Rumour had it that the soul of the deceased woman was tormented by Satan, but that he had trouble executing his job in the neighbourhood of the Catholic graveyard. This was clearly a Catholic opinion: Vlijmen was mixed confessionally and after almost two centuries of an underground existence the Catholics had just been officially recognized again. Many prayed for the poor soul.

One brave journeyman at a mill, however, decided to do some research. Armed with a bat, he went to the graveyard, where he was confronted by a skull with fiery eyes and mouth, followed by a white shape. Level-headedly, he wanted to beat away the ghosts, but before he was able to, he stumbled over an iron wire, just above the ground. From a nearby bush, a man rushed off. Our hero chased him to his house and acquainted him with the bat. Then he went back to the churchyard and discovered that the skull was nothing more than a hollow pumpkin with a light inside and the white ghost a dead cat. They had been pulled across the graveyard by iron wires.¹

This is as far as the newspaper account went. The reporter praised the young man for his action and mentioned that a police report had been filed (which may mean that local research can yield more specifics). I have cited this case as one of the about 30 examples I have found in one particular Dutch newspaper (from the province of Drenthe, more to the

¹ *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant (PD&AC)* 3 Sept. 1853; earlier in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* 28 Aug. 1853. In the following month a discussion ensued about the accuracy of the report; in the end it was declared genuine: *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* 18 Sept. 1853, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 2 Sept. 1853, 29 Sept. 1853;

north) between 1850 and 1910, in the course of my research into the history of witchcraft in the Netherlands, about 25 years ago.² As an anthropologist, I had become fascinated by the presence of traditional witchcraft in the anthropologists' own backyard, so to speak, while all we were thought was about witchcraft in Africa or in Surinam and other far-away places.³ Of the ghost reports I had just noted down the dates, and my notes had been lying dormant until I found an opportunity to finally have a closer look at the actual reports.



Here, I will discuss how accounts of hoaxing on the one hand and misinterpreted experiences on the other, help to understand how, in this case people in the Netherlands of roughly a century to a century and a half ago, realized their imagination of the dead. Not in a paradisaical kind of afterlife, or as rotten corpses in the ground, but as specific entities which permeated the boundaries between the living and the dead. I will first pay some attention to the kind of research I have undertaken and the different sources used - apart from newspapers there are also the 'stories' collected by folklorists. Then I will move to content, with a special focus on the phenomenon of the hoax. This last should offer an entrance to the subject of ghosts that

² Willem de Blécourt, *Termen van toverij* (Nijmegen 1990).

³ Wilhelmina van Wetering, *Hekserij bij de Djuka* (Amsterdam 1973);

does not seem to be applied very much. Hoaxsters, however, allow the researcher to engage with an extra dimension in the encounter, between the ghost and the observer there is now a third party interacting with both. (How this involves the researcher, is always a problem in historical research). Moreover, this essay will move between story and history, between the past as it was experienced and as it was related to contemporaries, between 'fact' and 'fiction' to give it another name. As it will appear, the boundary between the two seems blurred but in the end turns out rather precise.

II

Historical anthropology has been characterized as 'doing fieldwork among the dead'.⁴ In practice, it means archives and paperwork, but the metaphor remains catching. The two main differences with actual fieldwork are that, firstly, archival research is much more topic oriented (and as such serial) and it is always problematic to contextualize reports, to embed them in their local community, the more so since they all stem from different places. Secondly, historical anthropology is based on fixed information. The next researcher may find new material or reinterpret known records, the texts themselves remain the same (and can therefore be checked). They can be 'interrogated', but they don't talk back. Communicating with the dead has always been a one-sided affair and this applies equally when the dead return to plague the living, especially when the then living have a hand in it. Dealing with reports as the above means shifting through layers of images and opinions and often the answers remain elusive.

The newspaper reports I found twenty-five years ago, mainly stemmed from one newspaper. the *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant*, produced in Assen, the capital of the province of Drenthe in the north-eastern Netherlands.⁵ I had selected this province because it offered the best opportunity to find witchcraft reports of the period after the witch trials (in the Netherlands they already stopped in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries). I have now checked the reports from the *Asser Courant* against present-day newspaper databases in the Netherlands.⁶ In order to obtain some sense about the overall reliability of the

⁴ Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (1987), ...; cf. Willem de Blécourt, *Focaal Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant*, cf. M.A.W. Gerding (ed.), *Encyclopedie van Drenthe* (Assen 2003), 749. In Delpher up until 1869.

⁶ Nationally: www.kranten.delpher.nl; for regional databases see e.g.: www.archiefleeuwardercourant.nl, www.kranten.archiefalkmaar.nl, www.zoeken.krantenbankzeeland.nl. Searching these databases results in a lot of findings which have hardly anything to do with revenants, for instance when the term 'ghost' is used metaphorically. I have also not looked at 'ghosts' in serial fiction and in advertisements (e.g. for plays).

Asser reports, I have also conducted a small, parallel research in a newspaper from Rotterdam in the western part of the Netherlands, the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* for the years 1878-1899 (it started in 1878).⁷

Drenthe was seen as a backward province, a sort of internal colony that mainly provided peat as an energy source of the mills in the west, particularly Holland. As the intellectuals of Drenthe were very much aware of the image they generated elsewhere in the Netherlands, it gave them pleasure not just to report on the 'superstition' within their own province, but also to show that people in the rest of the Netherlands could just be as uneducated and stupid. As it was stated in 1888: 'One does not have to be in a remote corner in one of the provinces to find extreme cases of superstition'. In this particular case it concerned ghosts in a place within a stone's throw of The Hague.⁸ Two years later a ghost incident in Amsterdam was reported.⁹ However, this countering of backwardness can hardly have been the motif of the editor of the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, which also featured a fair amount of ghost reports, although it is striking that five reports from Amsterdam were printed and none from Rotterdam.¹⁰ I suspect that apart from being desperately educational, ghost stories had an entertaining value, too. The general drift of newspaper reports on topics such as witchcraft and 'ghost stories' everywhere was that by disposing the 'reality' behind the (mistaken) beliefs, they were meant to further enlightenment. Even when no particular cause had been discovered or no particular perpetrator ('the police is still looking'), publishing the 'superstition' in the public domain itself was still deemed to contribute to the education of the 'superstitious'. The ghost reports are thus fairly evenly spread over the country, although statistics have to remain tentative.

The reports in the two newspapers overlapped only slightly: of the thirty-six from Rotterdam, only six were also published in Drenthe. Already the mention of the source in the Drenthe newspaper (the Rotterdam reports do not include sources) shows a vast amount of copying between newspapers and consulting the historical newspapers online only enlarges such a finding. This, of course, primarily indicates that a particular report was popular. Others attained much less attention and my impression is that ghosts were also deemed to be good

⁷ Available through Delpher, see previous note. "onafhankelijk vrijzinnig"

⁸ *PD&AC* 20 Febr. 1888: Voorburg.

⁹ *PD&AC* 25 Sept. 1890; *De Tijd* 30 Sept. 1890: stadnieuws: een Amsterdamsche spookgeschiedenis; source: 'Vliegendbl'.

¹⁰ *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad (RN)* 22 Oct. 1888, 27 Febr. 1889, 25 Sept. 1890, 29 March 1893, 16 Oct. 1893.

page fillers, although such differed between newspapers.¹¹ A national newspaper as the liberal *Algemeen Handelsblad* left ghosts largely alone, for instance. Sometimes local papers present more detail, especially when a story runs for a couple of days or has a follow up when a court case ensues. Were all these reports genuine? Certainly there can hardly be any doubt when the phenomenon or story attracted crowds and also when a 'real cause' could be indicated. Moreover, there was always the possibility to protest against the depiction of a specific locality.

III

The gist of the newspaper reports was, and still is, that people were mistaken in believing in revenants. Most of the time, it either concerned normal physical phenomena, or it turned out that pranksters had been active. Both possibilities, however, also provide some insight as to how common people imagined ghostly manifestations - a process that went beyond the visual and that included sound and, in a sense, touch. Next to that, the reports reveal what people's reactions were to manifestations of the returning dead. Any overall picture will nevertheless have to be judged as balancing between the construction of the historical anthropologist (or historian) and contemporary concepts.

Ghosts were undoubtedly conceived as white. A white shape, spotted in 1855 (Meppel) was taken for a ghost and that it eventually turned out to be a piece of white cloth, snapping in the wind, only underlined the overall idea of whiteness.¹² Thus a figure, 'completely clad in white' frightened some people inside a house while his accomplices were busy stealing 36 bags of potatoes (Wouw 1866).¹³ In Zeeland, a young woman, dressed in white with a large crinoline, caused quite a scare (1873). Whiteness was the one major characteristic that appeared in the Rotterdam reports, too (six times).¹⁴ Only in Vlissingen (Flushing) a black lady appeared (1885).¹⁵ In the province of Groningen, however, again a girl

¹¹ For a general history of Dutch newspapers still see: Maarten Schneider & Joan Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant 1618-1978: van 'nieuwstydninghe tot dagblad* (Baarn 1979, 4th revised edition).

¹² *PD&AC* 25 July 1855.

¹³ *PD&AC* 13 March 1866; also *Rotterdamsche Courant* 15 March 1866; earlier: *Algemeen Handelsblad* 12 March 1866 and *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* 12 March 1866.

¹⁴ *RN* 19 July 1887, 21 Febr. 1888, 9 July 1889, 29 Oct. 1889, 17 Sept. 1890, 31 July 1895.

¹⁵ *PD&AC* 2 Sept. 1885; *Goessche Courant* 29 Aug. 1885; *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* 5 Sept. 1885; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 8 Sept. 1885. When in 1860 a black lady ghost was reported from neighbouring Grijpskerke, it was commented: "Strangely enough it wasn't a white one", see: P.J. Meertens, *Een Zeeuwse volkskundige enquête uit 1860* (Amsterdam 1961), 41.

was frightened by a 'figure dressed in white' (1892).¹⁶ But two years later in the capital of the same province, there was some discussion as to whether ghost had been red or white.¹⁷ At least it was described as wearing a long white ... and having red hands and fiery eyes.¹⁸ Yet white remain the disguise of choice.

In June 1895 drawn-out moaning sounds were heard at a school in Vreeswijk. First taken for something ghostly, after a few days it was discovered that it had been a girl who helped at the school. Interestingly enough she admitted to be constantly anxious herself and to see a shade next to her.¹⁹ People nevertheless stayed scared and at the end of the next month the local policeman encountered a white shape. He grabbed it but found himself only with the cover, a white sheet. He pursued the figure and discovered a twenty-two years old woman.²⁰ Her story emerged at the ensuing court case: her mother lived next to the school where many people had congregated because of the ghost and had made such a noise that her mother, who was ill, had been gravely disturbed. She had decided to chase off the crowd by appearing as a ghost herself, taken a white sheet and suddenly manifested in the moonshine. Only the constable had not been frightened. She was convicted because of wearing a 'forbidden disguise'.²¹

The red ghost will have referred to something glowing, as in the report mentioned in the beginning of this essay. One of the main differences between Protestant and Catholic revenants, was that the latter were fiery - it was a characteristic of the soul who was beyond grace, as also the souls of unbaptised children were imagined as ghost lights, will-o'-the-wisps. Catholics thus identified lights as ghosts: people were frightened by a candle in a pumpkin.²² Or a match struck at a churchyard could easily be taken as something supernatural, as happened in Tilburg in 1895.²³ Protestant whiteness will have been related to the contrast with the living (funerals were in black), and indicated the crossing of the boundary into the realm of the dead. White ghosts were also better visible at night.

¹⁶ *PD&AC* 29 March 1892, from *N. Gron. Crt.* 26 March.

¹⁷ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 16 Aug. 1894; *Leeuwarder Courant* 17 Aug. 1894.

¹⁸ *PD&AC* 16 August 1894, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 15 Aug. 1894

¹⁹ *De Tijd* 26 June 1895, *RN* 26 June 1895

²⁰ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 31 July 1895, *RN* 31 July 1895

²¹ *De Telegraaf* 26 August 1895, *RN* 28 August 1895,

²² *RN* 1889 Neer (L.), cf. H. Welters, *Limburgsche legenden, sagen, sprookjes en volksverhalen*, II (Venlo 1876), 54-55.

²³ *PD&AC* 1 Oct. 1895; *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant* 26 Sept. 1895; *De Telegraaf* 27 September 1895; *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* 28 Sept. 1895; *Algemeen Handelsblad* 28 Sept. 1895.

Sometimes a particular tallness is mentioned.²⁴ Occasionally a ghost turned up in a different shape, for instance with a strange hat,²⁵ a hat with ribbons (which turned out to be a scarecrow),²⁶ or even a bird or a big black cat that was impossible to hit.²⁷ And in a number of cases the reporter did not even bother to give a description of the creature's appearance.

Next to being visual, ghosts alerted people to their presence by sound. Anything out of the ordinary would qualify. Thus a 'frightening noise' in an attic in Roswinkel (Drenthe) made four or five men tumble down the stairs, until it turned out to have been in mouse caught in a bottle (1895).²⁸ Elsewhere, a loud roar would induce people to talk about ghosts (Den Bosch 1898).²⁹ And of course, there was the knocking, reported from Axel near the Flemish border as well as from Amsterdam.³⁰ Or worse: a rain of stones,³¹ or in another case, objects being thrown around, clothing soiled and cut (1899).³² In yet another case beds were disturbed and kitchen utensils messed up.³³ In yet another stones flew around and wallpaper was ripped off the wall.³⁴

Whereas noises, as well as the occasional strange sight, could have been caused by anything, the more specific cases had a human perpetrator. This was not always reported and probably also not always revealed. In 1888 initially mysterious knockings in Amsterdam turned out to have been made by an eleven-years old girl.³⁵ In 1892 in Zoutelande in the province of Zeeland not just knockings occurred, but bed covers, stones and beans were thrown into the room and people hear whistles. After a week, a nine-years old boy was tricked in admitting his role by the local school teacher who copied the ghost sounds: "Now it isn't me, mother, now I am not doing it" the boy cried bewilderdly.³⁶

It were all occurrences out of the ordinary and one of the few available explanations was the interference from the other side. However, all these reports together do not make a

²⁴ *PD&AC* 29 Dec. 1881 Zierikzee, from *Rott. N.bld.*; *PD&AC* 18 Febr. 1882 Willemstad from *R. Nbl.*

²⁵ *PD&AC* 18 Febr. 1882: "verschillende getuigenissen".

²⁶ *PD&AC* 2 July 1886 Leur from *N. Rott. Crt.*;

²⁷ *Leeuwarder Courant* 8 Oct. 1898.

²⁸ *PD&AC* 10 Nov. 1895.

²⁹ *PD&AC* 22 Dec. 1898.

³⁰ *PD&AC* 17 July 1886, from *Midd. Crt.*;

³¹ *PD&AC* 18 Jan. 1898 Bleskensgraaf from *N. Rott. Crt.*

³² Velsen. *PD&AC* 1 April 1899; *Haarlem's Dagblad* 31 March 1899, *Leeuwarder Courant* 31 March 1899; *De Tijd* 1 April 1899, from *NRC*.

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³⁵ *RN* 17, 19, 22 and 24 Oct. 1888.

³⁶ *Middelburgsche Courant* 29 March, 4 April, 7 April (missing, see *Algemeen Handelsblad* 8 April 1892), 8 April, 9 April, 12 April 1892; *RN* 9, 11 April 1892. See also: J.H. Midavaine, 'Spookverschijnselen in Zoutelande', *De Wete* 25 (1996), 5-8.

composite 'ghost' picture; they can best be considered as outlining the range of possibilities in ghost imagining. That goes for the reception, too. Reactions varied between being frightened and being curious. Crowds who flocked to experience the phenomenon were routinely depicted as a 'superstitious' mass. In 1853 in Vlijmen people avoided the graveyard. The cloth in de wind made a woman scream, whereupon she lost consciousness. Her husband, reacting on the scream found his wife 'as dead', and was caught by fright in such a way that he needed help, too (1855). The lady in the crinoline 'caused such a fright, that it became impossible to put the children to bed; the maids and farm hands were unable to do their normal job in the evening, the old women, shivering with fear, could not talk about anything else' (1873). A girl who was scared by a white-clad shape, ran back into her house and was unconscious the next day, so that it was feared that her life was in danger (1892).³⁷ Two years later in Groningen a girl had swooned.³⁸ The mouse in the attic made people 'paralised by fear. Pale as death they stared at each other, but no one had the courage to investigate'.³⁹ In Amsterdam, a man who attempted to confront the ghost of a waiter was found lying unconscious on the floor the next morning, pale as a cloth.⁴⁰ Apart from an occasionally frightened woman or girl, these details are missing in the Rotterdam newspaper.⁴¹ It is striking that, at least in some of the descriptions, an encounter with the presumed deceased turned the living into a similar, be it more lethargic state. It drew them near the boundary the dead had already crossed.

IV

On their own newspaper reports do not reveal everything. Only rarely were they concerned with actual concepts of revenants. In that sense folklore records can be seen as supplementary to the newspaper accounts and vice versa since folklorists hardly reported any misinterpretations of natural occurrences. The narratives were either recorded in the same period, or they concerned memories of people about that period.⁴² Although they are still a far cry from extensive interviews or field-work reports, they do occasionally provide another look at things, at playing ghost in this instance. They also give a general sense of why ghosts returned to the world of the living, which had to do with broken promises and unkept

³⁷ *PD&AC* 29 March 1892, from *N. Gron. Crt*; *De Tijd* 30 March 1892; *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 30 March 1892 (from same source).

³⁸ *PD&AC* 15 March 1894, from *N. Prov. Gron. Crt*.

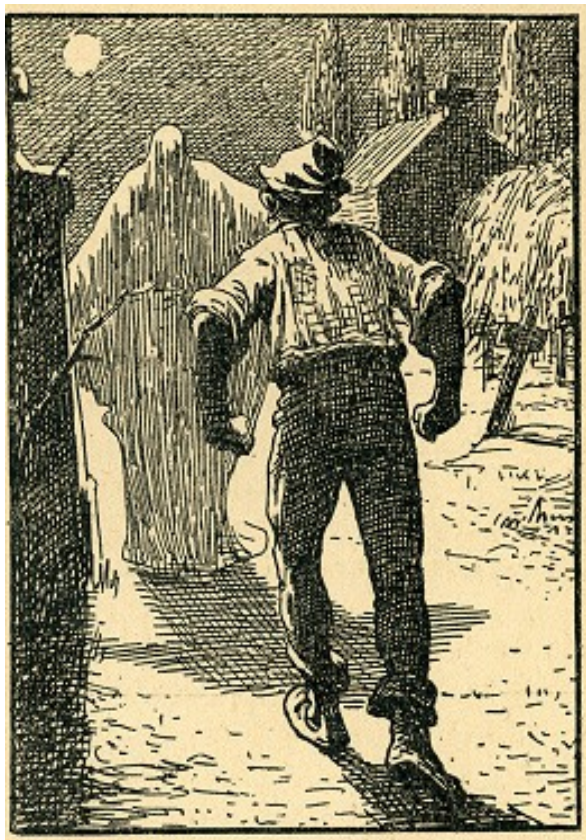
³⁹ *PD&AC* 10 Nov. 1895.

⁴⁰ *PD&AC* 25 Sept. 1890.

⁴¹ *RN* 23 March 1882, 28 Sept. 1895.

⁴² Now for a large part available through: www.verhalenbank.nl

obligations, [...] These seem, however, of little relevance when it comes to understanding the hoax stories and reports. And indeed, the informants of the folklorists also discussed whether some phenomenon had really been a ghost, and not, for instance, a goat.



The first group of folklore stories on hoaxes concerns the topic of exploitation that for some reason hardly appeared in the Dutch newspapers I consulted.⁴³ As this did feature in, for instance English newspapers, hardly finding it was probably mainly a coincidence. Thus a story (or memory) from the east of the Netherlands, recorded in the 1960s from a male informant born in 1884 related to a house that was for sale. As there were several prospective buyers, one of them tried to outwit his competitors. He wrapped himself in a white sheet, and with a candle in his hand walked around the house between 12 and 2 at night. People began to notice and the man got it cheap; the others who had wanted it didn't like ghosts.⁴⁴ An attempt to influence the sale of a field, already reported in the late nineteenth century from the province of Noord-Brabant did not succeed because a passing woman noticed the ghost's

⁴³ The sole instance: *RN* 8 Febr. 1899.

⁴⁴ A. Tinneveld, *Vertellers uit de Liemers* (Wassenaar 1976), 91, nr. 130.

legs.⁴⁵

In exploitation cases people are frightened away. When ghosts drew people together, it could provide an opportunity for pick-pockets, but this did not appear in the Dutch material at all. These exploitation stories or cases (for there is no reason why they should not have been enacted) are derivatives and mainly show the popularity of ghost concepts, in particular the concept of playing ghost. Most relevant in the folklore material are the warning stories which almost completely miss out in the newspapers, mainly because the newspapers issued a different kind of warning by stressing stupidity. The two main groups of warning stories can be characterized as the counter fright and the killing. They are typified as The Extra Ghost (or Devil)⁴⁶ and What is Dead Should Stay Dead.⁴⁷ A third group that can be recognized is about speaking skulls, which is too specific in this context.⁴⁸

In a Frisian story from the middle of the nineteenth century (1864), a maid serving at ministry is both beautiful and virtuous. She has loads of admirers and finally chooses one but finds out that he tells insulting tales about her and ends the courtship. The boy swears revenge, puts on white clothing and together with a mate forms tall ghost. Upon noticing the 'ghost', however, the maid remarks: 'This is strange. Two whites on top of each other, I have seen that before, but the black one on top of that, I have never seen.' Thereupon the boy underneath run away, thinking it was the devil, and lets his mate take a tumble.⁴⁹ A hundred years later in Frisia this story was (still?) extremely popular, but the stories in this province were also particularly well researched.⁵⁰ In the south of the Netherlands a late nineteenth-

⁴⁵ Willem de Blécourt, *Volkverhalen uit Noord-Brabant* (Utrecht/Antwerpen 1980), 3.44.

⁴⁶ J.R.W. Sinnighe, *Katalog der niederländische Märchen- Ursprungssagen-, Sagen- und Legendenvarianten* (Helsinki 1943), 27 nr. 942* C. Ein Mann sitzt auf der Schulter eines anderen; beide sind in ein weisses Tuch gehüllt. "Zwei Weisse mit einem Schwarzen darauf, hab ich noch niet gesehen.". Another Frisian variant, noted in 1892: Theo Meder & Cor Hendriks, *Vertelcultuur in Nederland. Volkverhalen uit de Collectie Boekenooen (ca. 1900)* (Amsterdam 2005), 381, no. 416; Huizenga, G.V. 237-238; Panken 2.71. The type is discussed in: G.N. Visser, 'Twij witten en 'n swaarde', *Driemaandelijke Bladen* 34 (1972), 106-114 which also indicates a seventeenth-century predecessor.

⁴⁷ Sinnighe, *Katalog*, 27, nr 942* B. "Wer tot ist, soll tot bleiben" Vermeintlicher Geist erschlagen. Also: Dykstra II, 100-101; O.S. 278-280. Cf. Meder & Hendriks, *Boekenooen*, 666-667, no. 86, from Broek in Warerland; the international taletype ATU 1711* The Brave Shoemaker, under which the last story can be classified, does not completely cover the Frisian narratives, cf. Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography*, II (Helsinki 2004), 396-397; ATU 1676 The Pretended Ghost is slightly more appropriate; see also: Christine Goldberg, 'Tot: Was tot ist, soll tot bleiben', *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* 13 (2010), col. 801-904.

⁴⁸ Sinnighe, *Katalog*, nr. 942* A: Die vermeintliche Geister (Teufel) betrogen. Cf. Willem de Blécourt, 'Sweikhuizen: Voor spook spelen', in: Willem de Blécourt, Ruben A. Koman, Jurjen van der Kooi & Theo Meder, *Verhalen van stad en streek. Sagen en legenden in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2010), 573-574.

⁴⁹ Waling Dykstra, *Twa Ufjenhusers by nammen-om. Forhalen en teltsjes* (Leeuwarden 1864), 64-70. The Dutch version in: Waling Dylstra, *Uit Friesland's volksleven van vroeger en later*, II (Leeuwarden 1896), 98-99.

⁵⁰ Van der Kooi, *Volkverhalen in Friesland*, p. 526-528: 1676E* Spookspelen: Twee witten met een zwarte

century tale concerned seven young men who wanted to frighten girls. They dressed up in white shirts but suddenly noticed that there were eight of them.⁵¹ This was also told as a student prank, in which a student took on the role of the extra ghost.⁵²

The second group of stories has a more gruesome ending. The same man who knew the tale about the house sale, told about a boy who went courting. As his parents disagreed with his choice, his brother tried to prevent him going to the girl. He put on a sheet and played ghost. But the boy wasn't afraid and hit the ghost and thus killed his brother.⁵³ The following story was recorded from another informant from the same area: A farmer and his hired hand used to play ghost pranks on temporary labourers. They put a contraption in the loft that produced moaning and the hand showed up with a sheet over his head. With one particular labourer the farm hand continued outside and went to sit on a gate. But the man did not want to be ridiculed anymore and he hit the 'ghost'. He killed him. Since then there were no more hauntings at this farm.⁵⁴ Such a story is hard to validate. On the one hand it is clearly a story (even with a number in the folktale catalogue), on the other hand especially the first part is told in such vivid detail that it may very well have happened – it was, after all not impossible to do. A wrongful dead, however, had to be reported to the authorities.⁵⁵ The last is typically a piece of information which would emerge from a community study (also when negative).

In Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen, Southern Zeeland, a farm hand, who had confessed not to believe in ghosts, was sent to fetch a waffle iron at night. At some place he had to cross a board over a ditch. On his return a white shape rose from underneath the bridge. But here, too the farm hand hit out with the waffle iron, saying 'whatever is dead, should remain dead'. Back home he did not tell anyone. When people began to worry, they asked him at last whether something had happened to him. Yes, he said, I met a ghost, but I hit it and it won't harm anyone anymore. They found the farmer's son dead.⁵⁶ The more formulaic a narrative, the more it will have been a narrative as opposed to a memory of an event. These stories function as narratives anyway. They issue a warning not to play ghosts, but in a different register than the newspaper reports. On the other hand, when an attempt to influence a sale is

erop; 78 variants.

⁵¹ Willem de Blécourt, *Volksverhalen uit Noord-Brabant* (Utrecht/Antwerpen 1980), no. 2.71.

⁵² Meder & Hendriks, *Boekenooogen*, 689 no. 106.

⁵³ Tinneveld, *Vertellers uit de Liemers*, 93, no. 139, same narrator as nr. 130.

⁵⁴ Tinneveld, *Vertellers uit de Liemers*, 244-245, nr. 290, teacher born 1902.

⁵⁵ Cf. *RN* 19 July 1887: the man who had shot the 'ghost' in Margraten was goaled but later released.

⁵⁶ Sinnighe, *Zeeuws Sagenboek* (Zutphen 1933), 355-356.

reported as successful, it may have enticed prospective actors.⁵⁷

V

The question of whether something was just a narrative or an enactment confused people in the late nineteenth century sometimes, too. In September 1890 newspapers ran the story about a (rare) headless ghost in Frisian Oudemirdum which made scary noises and ferocious gestures; instead of drawing crowds it made people stay at home.⁵⁸ In all probability this concerned a life ghost, although it was not pointed out immediately. The creature was only called a 'headless man', rather than a headless ghost. Two weeks later the next Frisian ghost appeared. A local physician who was known for his campaigns against ghost had to pass a graveyard in the middle of the night. Three men were waiting for him and when the doctor came he was met by a white shape who called "you have killed me". He replied: "Then you devil did not get enough" and hit the shape with his stick, who then ran off.⁵⁹ Other newspapers choose to combine the two accounts. They first reported a follow-up on the Oudemirdum case. Two men had searched for the ghost but not found anything and people thought it would be someone who tried to scare off competitors at thrush-catching. Then the account was continued with a case "of old" in Oostermeer, the one about the physician. "If everyone would act this way on those occasions," it was concluded, "then there was a chance that the belief in ghosts would finally belong to the past".⁶⁰ Two years later a Dutch-American paper ran the same story, now located in the village "S.", somewhere in the Netherlands. People had been discussing ghosts and the local doctor assured that he wasn't afraid of anything. He was challenged to walk on the cemetery at midnight, where he met a ghost telling him: "You have killed me." But the doctor replied: "What is dead should stay dead" and hit the ghost on the head.⁶¹ If the folklore material better represented the stories in oral circulation, then the pretend ghost should have been killed. When this detail was once added in a newspaper account, it immediately caused problems.

March 1888 the Amsterdam newspaper *Het nieuws van den dag* reported from Bornebroek a Catholic village in the east of the Netherlands (near the German border) that a ghost had visited one of the few Protestant farmers. He was advised to have it banished by the

⁵⁷ also Limburg 3.44

⁵⁸ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 5 Sept. 1890, also *De Tijd* 5 Sept. 1890, *RN* 6 Sept. 1890.

⁵⁹ *RN* 17 Sept. 1890; *Goessche Courant* 23 Sept. 1890.

⁶⁰ *De Gooi- en Eemlander* 20 Sept. 1890, *De Graafschap-bode* 20 Sept. 1890.

⁶¹ *De Volksstem* 4 V 1892, Wisconsin.

local chaplain, but finding the costs too high (500 guilders), he decided to take action himself. A few days later, when the apparition showed up once more, he started to beat it severely. Finally the ghost shouted: "Stop it! Stop it! I am the chaplain". The man nevertheless died of his wounds. The correspondent added that his story was based on truth but had not been made public before because of 'local reasons'.⁶² Already the same day the local school teacher reacted: "I don't know who your reporter was, but he seems insane." The whole thing was a fiction and the chaplain was still alive. Two months ago someone who wanted to be funny, had thought up the ghost story.⁶³ The correspondent, asked for justification by his editor, was defiant: the story was known in six places in the region and of the twenty-eight people he asked, twenty-five held it to be true.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the chaplain of Bornebroek had registered a complaint about libel at the regional court. He had been particularly offended by the suggestion that he would have tried to swindle a Protestant, a detail that most newspapers missed.⁶⁵ It had become a matter of Roman Catholic honour and the orthodox Protestants suggested that it was part of the Catholic bashing by the liberals.⁶⁶

When late August the case was dealt with by the court in Amsterdam (the *Nieuws van de Dag* had refused to reveal its correspondent and the editor had been charged), the newspaper emphasized the legendary nature of the report. Its local correspondent had only helped to spread the story further, without mentioning name or date. It only had been a contribution to illustrate the belief in ghosts and even the chaplain had admitted that the story circulated regionally about a pastor.⁶⁷ The court disagreed; the chaplain's 'moral value as a human being' was certainly infringed and the editor was, after the case had gone through appeal, sentenced to a 250 guilders fine.⁶⁸ When oral narratives were disguised as specific reports and published in a newspaper, their character as a legend changed. Instead of the warning they carried not to play ghost (because one might end up dead), they were drawn into a political discourse which under the circumstances could favour a personal rather than a narrative reading.⁶⁹

⁶² *Het Nieuws van den Dag* 23 March 1888. Not found in the *PD&AC*; only in the *RN* in August.

⁶³ *Het Nieuws van den Dag* 26 March 1888.

⁶⁴ *Het Nieuws van den Dag* 29 March 1888.

⁶⁵ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 30 March 1888, from *Twentsche Crt.*, *De Gooi- en Eemlander* 7 April 1888.

⁶⁶ *De Standaard* 31 March 1888, see also the Catholic *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant* 1 April 1888.

⁶⁷ *Het Nieuws van den Dag* 25 Aug. 1888, *RN* 27 Aug. 1888.

⁶⁸ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 1 Sept. 1888. *Het Nieuws van den Dag* is only available online till the end of August.

⁶⁹ The Roman Catholic church was normalised in the Netherlands in the middle of the nineteenth century; before that Catholic missionaries did use exorcism as a way to distinguish themselves from the current Protestant creed, see: Hans de Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving. Holland 1500-1800* (Den Haag 1991), 245-249.

The failure of the judges to recognize the Bornerbroek case as a story, gives extra weight to in the legends and especially in the formula 'what is dead has to remain dead', the identification with the dead had become complete, although instead of a personal it had become a social identification, one assigned by others. Moreover, the case was embedded in local history. Two years earlier, a strange man had been spotted with a long beard who was said to have been eating grass. Many considered him as a ghost.⁷⁰ A few kilometers to the west, in the hamlet of Hertme, a 'ghost house' could be found. In the seventeenth century the Catholics held their meetings there and it was told that some Protestants had put on sheets to disturb the religious ceremony.⁷¹

VI

In 1873 in the same area of Zeeland where the 'what is dead' story circulated, the police was notified to look for the 'White lady' in a certain barn. There they found many pieces of female clothing: skirts, overcoats, etc., and, hidden in a pit, underneath a bundle of straw, the lady herself. Only it was not a woman, but a man of 24 years old, who with some of his friends was engaged in robberies. It may very well be that in between, he had found a way to give expression to his transvestism. While this case in itself should remain unique, the notion of dressing-up is, perhaps significant. As Owen Davies remarked, 'ghost hoaxers ... were performing for an audience'. It was therefore necessary 'to perform according to the audiences' expectations, perceptions and understanding of ghosts. Otherwise a hoax, just like a play, would fail'.⁷² This underlines the importance of the public realm, the common imagery of ghosts to which a player had to conform in order to be successful. But what about the actor? Was the donning of the almost obligatory white sheet just a way to better convince the public that they were dealing with a genuine ghost? Or did it also help to better identify with the role, to become a ghost? In that sense the frightening story about the extra figure attains another dimension. The actors dressed up for the part (in the student version, they even went to a specialist shop for it), but were, so the story, were still not ready for the real thing and thus ran away. Identification with the part was fickle, so to speak. It may very well have reflected the orthodox Christian frustration with the theatre, which was simply something that

⁷⁰ *Volksblad* 14 July 1886.

⁷¹ http://www.langsheiligehuisjes.nl/nl/participants/bijzondere-bebouwing/participant_id,152/category_id,3. Consulted 6 April 2013.

⁷² Owen Davies, *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* (Basingstoke 20067), 165.

one should not attend.

The other joke was indeed two-sided: the unbeliever who boasted not to be afraid nevertheless did not seem to have bothered that he killed a human being: it had been a ghost, after all. The barber who told this about his grandfather even added: 'They did not do anything to him and it did not cause him any trouble', implying that this would normally have been a cause for prosecution.⁷³ It emphasizes the narrative character, but the story is very close to history here. It was presented as history and in the narrator's mind it was history. Yet genuine history diverged. In most instances newspaper reports were more sober than legend texts.



A boy who played for ghost in an attempt to deter another boy from visiting a special girl and who had even taken the trouble of putting on a mask, eventually gave up (1858).⁷⁴ A farm hand who boasted not to believe in ghosts and evil spirits was on his way to his girl friend when two of his neighbours set upon him. He was so frightened that he immediately turned

⁷³ Collection Sinnighe. Narrator: Willem van Ginneken, hairdresser Bavel, 1965.

⁷⁴ *PD&AC* 2 Febr., 4 Febr., 23 Febr. Ruinerwold.

around, leaving hat and wooden shoes behind. When he recovered, he returned with a stick but met the 'apparitions' again, fled and fell into a ditch. Back home he told that he had seen two devils, an old one and a young (1886; the reporter didn't know whether he had been able to visit the girl, that night).⁷⁵ Courting was one of the main reasons for being outside at night; in 1885 a maid left by her lover had caused ghost rumours,⁷⁶ and late 1886 a 'pining lover' had even been mistaken for a ghost.⁷⁷

Neither reports or stories bothered much with going into the details of the rationale for returning. They concentrated more on the basic question of the existence of an afterlife and how such could be observed. The boaster who doubted this was given a lesson, which was a perfectly normal thing to do in the Dutch context. The stories indicate, however, that the praxter nevertheless crossed a line. Especially the phrase 'What is dead has to remain dead' reveals that the player was identified with the dead, if not so much in a personal sense then at least socially. At the same time the story also indicates that a revenant was not comprehended as properly dead, since for the protagonist the played ghost was indiscernible from a genuine one. Dead people should remain in their graves. The stories may have been widespread, which primarily marks them as stories, their message became manifest every time they were told.

Newspaper reports were never written for the benefit of future historical anthropologists. Folklore records, often justified as preserving an almost lost past culture, perhaps slightly more so. Yet it is above all the combination of different records which allows a glimpse into past customs and concepts, expressed in a particular form and with specific meanings attached. Enacting ghosts was condemned on different levels, but there were always people who could not resist the challenge (and some of them were punished in courts). Rather than communicating with the dead, the hoaxers sought to gain advantage over the living. That they did not always succeed, was only normal.

⁷⁵ *PD&AC* 11 Febr. 1886 Nijeveen?; cf. *Zierikzeeuwsche Nieuwsbode* 8 Jan 1887: two boys thought they saw a ghost and ran away, leaving their girls behind..

⁷⁶ *RN* 5 Sept. 1885, *Goessche Courant* 29 Aug. 1885.

⁷⁷ *RN* 29 Dec. 1886, *Middelburgsche Courant* 28 Dec. 1886, *Zierikzeesche Courant* 30 Dec. 1886.