

CASTING The RUNES

Occult Investigation in the World of M.R. James

By Paul StJohn Mackintosh

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Foreword

Montague Rhodes James is the most influential British writer of supernatural fiction. He was born in Kent in 1862, but moved with his family to Great Livermere outside Bury St Edmunds three years later. His childhood love of church architecture and of the Suffolk landscape would be crucial to his adult writing, both fiction and non-fiction. He won a scholarship to Eton, where he distinguished himself in classics, divinity and French. He was provost of King's College, Cambridge, for 13 years, then took up that position at Eton for a further 18 until his death. His published books include *Old Testament Legends*, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, *Abbeys, Suffolk and Norfolk* (which contains a tang of the macabre), and *The Wanderings and Homes of Manuscripts*. Best known, however, are his ghost stories, many of them classic tales of terror.

His writings on the ghost story were sparse but valuable, though sometimes his own practice contradicts them. The most substantial as a survey appeared in the December 1929 issue of *The Bookman*, where James demonstrates his familiarity with the genre. Some of his tales refer explicitly to its established tropes and clichés before building on them or subverting them (not, despite the view of some critics, that art need subvert its chosen form). While the Victorian spectre was often ethereal or simply kept its distance, James's apparitions tend to be grisly and physical, though a glimpse of them is frequently enough to provoke a shudder. The sheet had pretty well become the uniform of the traditional ghost, and so (in "*Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad*") James imagines its ultimate manifestation: a sly black joke, perhaps, but memorably horrible.

Many of his stories were written for reading aloud. Some were composed to frighten children: the first

audience of *A School Story* was the King's College Choir School, while *Wailing Well* was heard at a campfire by the Eton College Boy Scout troop. Most, however, were initially performed to adult friends at King's as an annual Christmas treat. In this James clearly meant to align himself with the tradition of the festive ghost story and indeed of oral storytelling, and he remarks in the introduction to his collected stories that he has "tried to make my ghosts act in ways not inconsistent with the rules of folklore". All this may suggest a certain cosiness, which would be confirmed by the standard view that the most important Jamesian attribute is his antiquarianism. Of course, that is crucial to the verisimilitude of many of the stories, and many of them deal with scholars whose comfortable world is invaded by the malign supernatural. Nevertheless, I maintain that the essence of James is to be found less in his characters and settings than in his technique. The quality that makes his best tales - which is to say most of them - unforgettable is his wit in communicating horror.

Far from being cosy, James's stories frequently present a reassuringly ordinary setting that is invaded by the malevolent and terrible. Sometimes everyday objects take on or harbour hideous life, and at times the juxtaposition of these elements borders on surrealism. He was among the first to make the tale of supernatural terror as frightening as possible, an effect he achieves by an inspired and precise selection of language. Many of his most effective moments are inseparable from his style. No writer better demonstrates how, at its best, the ghost story or supernatural horror story (either term fits his work) achieves its effects through the eloquence and skill of its prose - and, I think, no writer in the field has shown greater willingness to convey dread. He can convey more spectral terror in a single glancing phrase than most



authors manage in a paragraph or a book. He is still the undisputed master of the phrase or sentence that shows just enough to suggest far worse. Often these moments are embedded within paragraphs, the better to take the reader unawares; the structure of the prose and its appearance on the page contribute to the power of his work.

In his *Bookman* essay, James calls for “malevolence and terror... and a modicum of blood” and two years later, in the *Evening News*, he wrote “I say you must have horror and also malevolence. Not less necessary, however, is reticence.” He had no time for fiction that sought to be nauseating, but story after story demonstrates his commitment to terror. Nor was his definition of the ghostly confined to revenants. His tales swarm with spiders either giant or multitudinous, immense half-glimpsed insects, tentacled demons and even worse familiars to be found down wells or, most nightmarish of all, under your pillow. Even the returned dead tend to be, in his own words, ugly and thin. He had a genius for the telling phrase, into which he could compress more supernatural dread than most of us can manage in a paragraph. It’s hardly surprising that on Peter Nicholl’s tribute to the ghost story on Radio 4’s *Kaleidoscope*, Kingsley Amis (author of *The Green Man*, one of the very few successful Jamesian novels) was able to quote verbatim from memory a gruesome passage from the provost’s *Count Magnus*. If you know his tales, think about this: how many of them can be conjured up by remembering just a few words - “of crumpled linen”, “a lungless laugh”, “a mouth, with teeth”, “filled and sealed”, “and put its arms round my neck”?

He has been widely influential. Lovecraft learned from him, and his uncanny shadow spreads much wider: it touches the horror tales of L. P. Hartley, it peers out of some of the detective novels of John Dickson Carr and his alter ego Carter Dickson, it looms behind a ghostly tale embedded in Penelope Fitzgerald’s novel *The Gate of Angels*, it whispers to present-day masters such as Reggie Oliver and Adam Nevill... I’ve done my best to borrow restraint and suggestiveness from James myself. Films - *Night of the Demon* and *Ringu*, for instance - are rooted in his

work, and now Paul StJohn Mackintosh has developed this witty and erudite game whose dark playfulness is itself reminiscent of James. May it evoke nothing but pleasure! Should you find an inscribed slip of paper among the pages of the manual, it isn’t mine. If I were you, I’d pass it on to someone else as soon as possible.

RAMSEY CAMPBELL
Wallasey, Merseyside
January 2020





Introduction

Here you have a story written with the sole object of inspiring a pleasing terror in the reader; and as I think, that is the true aim of the ghost story.” - M.R. James

Casting the Runes is a roleplaying game (RPG) based on the GUMSHOE system for investigative RPGs, which was created by Robin Laws under the auspices of Pelgrane Press to model “stories where investigators uncover a series of clues, and interpret them to solve a mystery” - an apt description of much of the classic horror fiction of Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936). The unique character of James’s stories, and his own personality, which fed into his creation of the sub-genre of the “antiquarian ghost story,” are what inspired us to create this game.

Here, player-characters, dubbed “Investigators” for game purposes, proceed step by step to unearth the unearthly, under the guidance of Game Masters, or GMs for short. (Some James fans may prefer to designate their GMs as Masters in keeping with many Edwardian schools and colleges.)

The classic ghost story, replete with “malevolence and terror, the glare of evil faces, ‘the stony grin of unearthly malice,’ pursuing forms in darkness, and ‘long-drawn, distant screams,’” in James’s words, is the mood we’re aiming at. And for the occult detection element, read on...

Why this Game?

Kenneth Hite, at the start of his introduction to *Trail of Cthulhu*, wrote: “This game exists to adapt the greatest RPG of all time, *Call of Cthulhu*, to a different rules set, the GUMSHOE engine. Why on Earth would we do a thing like that?” Only, this game has

gone one step further, and effectively adapted, not one pre-eminent RPG, but two. Why? Well, it’s primarily the Cthulhu component of those titles. I love Lovecraftian horror, write it regularly, and revere both *Call of Cthulhu* and *Trail of Cthulhu*. But the success and popularity of the Cthulhu Mythos has tended to bring other styles of horror under its sway, and in the RPG space especially. I wince when I see a *Call of Cthulhu* or *Trail of Cthulhu* GM or scenario writer go through contortions to rationalize how some traditional spook or monster or legend is actually a Great Old One or one of Lovecraft’s alien species.

Applied carelessly, this diminishes the whole rich global corpus of supernatural traditions and folklore to a one-stop-shop where everything is Yog-Sothothery, the true sources of terror get lost in the scramble to evoke the Capital-Letter-Entity-of-the-Week, and there is only one explanation for the inexplicable. Games run on that basis may faithfully reflect H.P. Lovecraft’s own rationalistic materialism, but there’s no need for gamers to be confined within those limits. And Pelgrane Press has helped broaden the scope of horror gaming in exactly this way, with RPGs like *Night’s Black Agents*, *The Esoterrorists* and *Fear Itself*, and resources like *The Book of Unrelenting Horror*.

Also, the Cthulhu Mythos tends to impose a particular style of play, even within *Trail of Cthulhu*. The Sanity mechanic is an inspired, perennially fun, game device, but it reflects the whole slide-towards-doom lemming rush of many Lovecraftian RPG adventures, where the players know their characters are doomed anyway, and part of the enjoyment is the creative and stylish ways in which they meet their final Nemesis. In my opinion, this predisposes things towards the pulp end



MONTAGU RHODES JAMES (1862-1936), SCHOLAR AND MASTER OF THE GHOST STORY, IS THE INSPIRATION FOR CASTING THE RUNES.

of the spectrum, with widescreen effects, big events, roller-coaster thrills. So much Lovecraftian fiction, and Cthulhu Mythos gaming, in my view, plays out less as existential or psychological horror than as a disaster movie, with Cthulhu as just another MEE asteroid. Nothing wrong with that, except that two classic games already exist to do it. And their mechanisms, resources, and systemic biases tend to push things away from another flavour of horror. “You must have horror and also malevolence,” James remarked in *Ghosts - Treat Them Gently!*, his essay on ghost story writing. “Not less necessary, however, is reticence.” And in 1929 in *Some Remarks on Ghost Stories*, he added: “Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it, and

there is much blatancy in a lot of recent stories.” Reticence is the last quality you’d expect from a Cthulhu Mythos game. M.R. James wrote some of the most powerful, enduring, horror stories in the English language, so he probably had a point.

So far, that reads like a list of negatives: What about the positives? Well, one is the chance to realize some of the most enduring, evocative ghost stories and horror tales ever written, unequalled in their field. Another is to tap back into the vast heritage of traditional folk tales, legends, occult practices and beliefs, and play them out on their own merits, to enjoy the archetypes and fears they embody. A third, as I’ve hinted, is the opportunity to recreate the kind of horror that M.R. James excelled at, the chill, atmospheric, measured, often quiet escalation towards something genuinely horrifying. Sandy Petersen, the master himself, has paid tribute to M.R. James’s three rules of ghost story writing (malign entity, familiar setting, no jargon) as the basis of good horror RPG scenarios.

I don’t think it’s just relative popularity that dictates that no one has yet tried to turn any of James’s creations into soft toys like Cthulhu plushies. There’s a lot of built-in bathos in the Cthulhu Mythos, with its pulpy apocalyptic hysteria, which Lovecraft himself may or may not have been conscious of. M.R. James may have indulged in many a dry donnish chuckle in his stories, but his climactic horrors are pure terror. The supernatural never seems unbelievable in M.R. James, whereas Lovecraft’s painstakingly, scientifically rationalised horrors too often end up seeming simply ludicrous. I think it’s no coincidence that the current revival of folk horror has burgeoned almost entirely outside the Lovecraftian orbit.

All this explains why *Casting the Runes* has no Sanity mechanic. For game masters who want to reintroduce one, it’s all there in *Trail of Cthulhu*. In our view, the GUMSHOE Stability mechanic is more than enough



to model the frights and shocks of Jamesian ghostly encounters, as well as the fact that few to none of James's protagonists end up gibbering in a padded cell. They may die horribly, or recover uncertainly from terrifying encounters, but those encounters tend to reinforce a more traditional world-view, rather than blast human minds with their cosmic insignificance. Unhappily for the characters, it's a world-view teeming with genuine evil and occult menaces, but those menaces at least have a universal eschatological significance, and all the more dark and frightful for that.

Why the Period?

Casting the Runes focuses on a very tight historical band, roughly between when M.R. James published *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* in 1904, and when he published *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories* in 1925. In practice, it's biased towards the earlier part of that period, roughly the Edwardian and immediately post-Edwardian gilded age from Queen Victoria's death in 1901 to August 1914 - even though James's own stories embrace settings and protagonists from the Twenties, via the High and Early Victorian periods, right back to the Georgian and even Restoration eras. Why? There are two reasons, one narrowly related to the current RPG market, the other to broader issues of style and period.

Firstly, there are already plenty of sourcebooks, supplements, and core materials in *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Call of Cthulhu*, as well as other dedicated RPGs, to allow GMs to set their campaigns and scenarios in other epochs. The Victorian age, even the late Victorian period of early Wells and Conan Doyle, is already well covered by *Cthulhu by Gaslight* and other sources, including legion steampunk games. The later 1920s and the 1930s have deep, deep coverage courtesy of *Call of Cthulhu*, and the reams of spinoffs supporting British and European settings, as well as *ToC* itself. GMs and players who want to relocate their Jamesian horror to the realms of Agatha Christie's Poirot and the earliest Alfred Hitchcock movies are warmly recommended to pick up a copy of Kenneth Hite's superb *Trail of Cthulhu* supplement *Bookhounds of London*, and its supporting companion *Book of the Smoke*. Those with

a hankering for a (much) earlier period can delve into Kenneth's Tudor necromancy supplement *The School of Night*, or his equally exhaustive exploration of *Alchemy*. You couldn't do better, and we won't even try.

Secondly, then, there's the question of M.R. James's own style, and that of his contemporaries, many of them pioneers of tales of occult detection. Ramsey Campbell has called M.R. James "the most influential stylist in British supernatural fiction," and his dry, laconic, urbane stance is hard to imagine in an earlier era, even the 1890s. It's far closer to the style of Saki's short stories, Kipling's tales and poetry, or G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, all from writers who'd internalized the influence of the Nineties, and moved on beyond both Victorian moral earnestness and equally effusive, breathy Aestheticism. To some extent, that may reflect James's own struggles with belief in his youth, the son of an Evangelical Anglican minister who became conspicuously less doctrinaire. It definitely mirrors the spirit of an age. It certainly reflects cultural and social changes in full swing as the 20th century began. If we expanded the game to embrace all the periods James wrote about, we'd lose that unique flavour, as well as producing a hopelessly unwieldy book.

M.R. James's Edwardian contemporaries also included the pioneers of occult detection, especially Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood, E.F. and R.H. Benson, and the authors of the Flaxman Low series of adventures. Some wrote self-consciously in the shadow of Sherlock Holmes; all helped make the Edwardian era a heyday in the development of this distinctive sub-genre. *The Great God Pan* first appeared in 1890, *The Experiences of Flaxman Low* appeared in 1899, contemporary with many of Machen's other horror tales, *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary* in 1908, and *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* in 1913. Even Saki produced a few breathtakingly brief horror tales that could inspire superb scenarios. The chronological and thematic parallels with James's own ghost stories are too close to ignore: only a couple of James's protagonists are tagged as investigators, but many of them do investigate, un-



earth clues, and follow mysteries to their dark conclusion. This game is designed to serve up the period details, spectres and sorcery, to allow GMs and players to evoke a Jamesian world of contemplative, often passive inquiry, or full-on Carnacki-style psychic investigation, all in the same richly evocative epoch.

Why Jamesian Women?

I hope this section won't even be necessary, but just to be 100% clear: Some conservative Jamesian purists may object that this game makes full allowance for equal status for female academics and investigators, versus James's own cosily clubbable, predominantly male protagonists. Too bad. First, it's a game, and there is no way we would handicap it for 50% of the audience. Second, even the most purist account of Edwardian and early 20th-century occultism and academic history can't ignore the prevalence of women in the period. Long before M.R. James had even gone up to Cambridge as an undergraduate, Girton College had been founded as a college for women in 1869, to be followed by Newnham College in 1873. In Oxford, Lady Margaret Hall was founded in 1878, Somerville in 1879, St Hugh's in 1886, St Hilda's in 1893. In the period covered by *Casting the Runes*, there have already been three decades of female Oxbridge students by the time the Edwardian era begins, although they were not awarded formal degrees by their respective universities until the 1920s in Oxford and the 1940s in Cambridge. M.R. James's own strictly masculine ambience is his own business - not ours, nor the period's.

It's true that the Edwardian era was a critical time for the status of women in academia, as well as politics. Millicent Mackenzie, educationalist and Theosophist, became Assistant Professor of Education in the University College of South Wales & Monmouthshire in 1904 and full professor in 1910, followed in 1913 by Caroline Spurgeon, Professor of English at Bedford College in London. This was well behind the Continental tradition, and an Edwardian female academic might well have gained her PhD at a European university, as mathematician Sofia Kovalevskaya did at the University of Göttingen in 1875. The story of the "Steamboat Ladies," who took ship from the women's colleges in

Oxford and Cambridge between 1904 and 1907 to take their *ad eundem* BA and MA degrees at Trinity College Dublin, could be a fascinating scenario hook in itself. North of the Border, meanwhile, St Andrews University admitted women undergraduates on the same basis as men from 1892, and built its first female hall of residence, University Hall, in 1896. The degree of L.L.A. (Lady Literate in Arts) was awarded by St Andrews from 1876, and continued until the 1930s.

Outside the purely academic sphere, women had a huge influence on the fields that are absolutely core to Jamesian occult investigation. It would be a very blinkered, foolish pedant indeed who ignored the influence of Margaret Murray in both archaeology and folklore studies around the core period of this game. *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* has had its Lovecraftian citation, but that's only one measure of its impact at the time. Murray also juggled militant feminist activities with her position as an academic at University College London - practically a role model for the aspiring Jamesian female investigator. Meanwhile, in occultism, we have practising psychologist and Theosophist Dion Fortune, Annie Besant, Maud Gonne... the list goes on, and on.

Reactionaries who project their own prejudices back onto the past have a bad habit of being tripped up by historical fact. They certainly have no place here.

The Other Edwardians

Similarly, *Casting the Runes*, by focusing on its strictly Jamesian fictional territory, is able to conveniently skip over the fact that its age of Edwardian equipose was balanced on the backs of 412 million Imperial "citizens," or 23% of the world's population c. 1913. The British Empire actually reached its highest population after World War I, but Imperial jingoism had arguably peaked much earlier, as typified by the various loyalty leagues and patriotic associations covered in The Period chapter of this book (p. 138). For all the pretensions of the time towards one great Imperial family, it is ludicrous to claim that the great majority of the British Empire's population were anything other than subject peoples, denied political



rights and unlikely to receive anything like equal treatment anywhere in the Empire. Even the term “Commonwealth of Nations” did not come formally into being until the Balfour Declaration at the 1926 Imperial Conference, and as late as 1936, George Orwell’s young fellow imperialists in Burma were complaining that “it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie.” Bad luck if you happened to be that coolie.

Characters from any other background than the Anglo-Saxon staple of James’s tales are likely to encounter a very different world in Edwardian Britain. A few lucky black figures like composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, or Indian luminaries like Sir Ranjitsinhji Vibhaji Jadeja the cricketing prince, were able to transcend the strictures of the time, but the individual success stories have to be set against the crushing institutional and social deadweight preventing a non-white inhabitant of the Empire from becoming anything beyond a subject - or an economic object. Exactly how the players and GM choose to deal with the issue when it arises is up to them - whether to allow a character a free pass on Edwardian prejudice as a local Imperial sovereign able to parlay their status into acceptance, or to burden the character with game-mechanical penalties and constant encounters with bigoted opposition.

Received opinion might leave many thinking that gay and lesbian characters had an easier time of it in Edwardian Britain. E.M. Forster, Lytton Strachey and even, according to some interpretations, M.R. James himself, are object lessons in the opportunities for gay individuals to live a more or less successful public life in the Edwardian period.

Lesbians had already enjoyed the doubtful recognition of Algernon Charles Swinburne in his poetry, and many a British spinster couple lived lives mirroring Henry James’s “Boston marriages.” Vernon Lee (a.k.a. Violet Paget) is one of the greatest examples of lesbian intellectual contribution to cultural criticism and supernatural fiction during the period. Debate may continue about whether M.R. James’s ghost stories

have a homoerotic subtext: there is no doubt and no hesitation about Vernon Lee.

That said, Edwardian Britain was living in the immediate aftermath of the Wilde trial, and the “gay” Nineties gave way to a very much more constrained period. Sodomy was at least no longer a capital offence in Britain, but the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 imposed a strictly codified legal burden that continued to ruin lives well into the 20th century. Whatever the opportunities for homosexual romance to play out in the closeted ambience of gentlemen’s clubs and college common rooms, players and GMs should not forget the very restrictive wider context.

