

Even Ancient Greeks and Romans Enjoyed Good Scary Stories, Professor Says

October 17 2007

These days, Halloween is all about good scary fun, but people have been thrilling to spooky tales as far back as ancient Greece and Rome, according to University of Massachusetts Amherst classics professor Debbie Felton, who studies the folklore of the supernatural.

“Ghost stories have been popular for thousands of years, and there are many reasons why people enjoy them and enjoy being scared by them,” says Felton. “There’s certainly a cathartic effect to hearing a ghost story and being scared out of your wits without ever being in any real danger. But, more essentially, ghost stories ultimately reflect religious beliefs concerning the importance of a proper burial and the survival of the spirit after death. The dead have a need to rest in peace, while the living have a need to believe in an afterlife; who really wants to think about eternal non-existence? And the humor in a lot of ghost stories is a good way to deal with the disturbing reality of death.

“As one author wryly observed about the lasting appeal of ghost stories, the appearance of ghosts ‘has always elicited considerable interest on the part of humanity. Their substance of materialization, their bearing, dress, and demeanor are matters of definite concern to those who expect shortly to become ghosts themselves.’”

Felton also studies literary ghost stories from the Gothic novel through British writers such as M.R. James down through American authors like Stephen King. She has served as a consultant on ghost stories, folklore and mythology for the Fox Family Channel as well as for Sports

Illustrated, and has given lectures on folklore of the supernatural all over the country. Recently she was a guest lecturer at Xavier University in Cincinnati, where she gave a talk on “The Case for Serial Killers in Antiquity.”

In 1999, Felton wrote “Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost Stories from Classical Antiquity,” which related stories of ghosts and hauntings from ancient Greek and Roman times, many of which are similar to modern ghost stories.

“For example, the Roman author Pliny the Younger, in a letter to a friend of his that has survived the centuries, tells a wonderful little ghost story about a haunted house in Athens,” she says. “It’s a prototypical haunted house story: the horrific ghost of an old man scares everyone away, the house is deserted and falling into disrepair. Finally a brave man comes along who dares to spend the night in the house. He is not afraid of the ghost, and instead realizes the phantom wants to communicate. He follows the ghost to a spot where it disappears; he digs up the spot, finds bones, buries them with the proper rituals, and the ghost never appears again.”

According to Felton, another great spooky story from antiquity isn’t about a ghost but a werewolf, and it’s told by the Roman author Petronius in his work “Satyricon.” A man is going from Rome to a villa in the country to visit his mistress, and a soldier offers to accompany him. They stop to rest at the cemetery outside the city, and the soldier does something that terrifies his companion: he takes off his clothes, urinates in a circle around them, and turns into a wolf. The man runs as fast as he can to the villa, finds that a wolf has ravaged the flocks there, but that one of the servants managed to wound the wolf with a spear. Hearing this, the man heads back to Rome, where he finds the soldier being treated by a doctor for a spear wound. The man realizes the soldier is a shapeshifter. As with Pliny’s ghost story, this early werewolf story

has many of the prototypical elements found in later such stories, including the presence of a full moon.

Felton, who is currently writing a book titled, “Things That Went Bump in the Night: Strange Stories from Ancient Greece and Rome,” has a deep appreciation for the scary stories of antiquity. “I think these Roman stories are great, and most people don’t realize that ghost and werewolf stories like these were being told 2,000 years ago.” The book will be published by the University of Texas Press. Felton has also recently written a chapter on “The Dead,” which appeared last January in Blackwell’s Companion to Greek Religion.

Source: University of Massachusetts Amherst

Citation: Even Ancient Greeks and Romans Enjoyed Good Scary Stories, Professor Says (2007, October 17) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-10-ancient-greeks-romans-good-scary.html>

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