This article argues that the much anthologised ghost story 'The Beckoning Fair One' (1911) by Oliver Onions is usefully read as engaging with a number of contemporary anxieties centred on the Edwardian male writer. Onions stresses the economic and psychological cost to his protagonist, Oleron, of remaining true to his artistic conscience in an increasingly commercial publishing environment. I consider shifting ideas about gender roles that include the promotion of an 'imperial' masculinity of a type antithetical to the artistic identity. I also explore Oleron's attitude towards an admirer, a New Woman-type journalist and contrast her with a spectral *femme fatale* who represents for him a muse from an earlier time. This belief in the ghost leads to a breakdown which I frame in terms of Edwardian models of manliness and hysteria. This is a novel approach insofar as the few discussions of the story to date tend to focus on its hallucinatory qualities rather than Onions' engagement with debates of the day.

Keywords: ghosts, Edwardian, masculinity, *femme fatale*, hysteria, New Woman.

'Let the miserable wrestle with his own shadows': The beleaguered Edwardian male author in Oliver Onions' 'The Beckoning Fair One'

Oliver Onions' atmospheric 'The Beckoning Fair One' (1911) has been extensively praised as one of the most disconcerting examples of the ghost story genre. At its centre is the writer Paul Oleron, who retreats to the solitude of an old apartment in order to finish his novel, *Romilly Bishop*, only to become obsessed with the 'Beckoning Fair One', who he believes haunts his home, and at first inspires but then destroys his imagination. Onions explores the psychological cost of the creative process and particularly the alienation that results from Oleron's relentless pursuit of the elusive muse as represented by the spectral presence. Whilst this

concern is, in many senses, timeless, I want to suggest that the narrative can more productively be read as engaging with a number of contemporary anxieties centred on the male writer in the long-Edwardian era. This is a novel approach insofar as the few discussions of the story to date tend to focus on its hallucinatory qualities rather than Onions' engagement with debates of the day.

Onions presents Oleron as having to contend with an increasingly commercialised publishing world alongside shifting ideas of gender that include a social desire for an imperial 'muscular' masculinity of a type antithetical to the artistic identity. He also has to navigate the temptations of domesticity posed by his admirer, the pragmatic New Woman-type journalist Elsie Bengough summed up by the narrator as 'a little indifferent to the graces of life' and 'careless of appearances'.[1] The original inspiration for his novel, she is superseded as muse by the spectral *femme fatale*, labelled the 'Beckoner'. Throughout the narrative there exists a tension between the protagonist as potential patriarch and the protagonist as artist, a sentiment that is captured most clearly when, towards the end of the tale, he thinks of himself as a failure because:

> he had missed not one happiness but two. He had missed the ease of this world, which men love, and he had missed also that other shining prize for which men forgo ease, the snatching and the holding and triumphant bearing up aloft of which is the only justification of the mad adventurer who hazards the enterprise.[2]

The sense of being judged and found wanting permeates the tale. As a result the mood of 'The Beckoning Fair One' is in line with that noted by historian Samuel Hynes who suggests that 'if "Edwardian" is to be used as an adjective describing a literary tone that tone must be of anxious awareness and social concern.'[3]

Although today the story is more famous than its author, Onions' name would have been recognised during the first half of the twentieth century. After graduating from the Slade School of Art and completing a stint as a journalist, his first novel, *The Compleat Bachelor* [sic], was published in 1900. He produced a considerable body of work that ranged from the murder-mystery to the historical novel, one of which, *Poor Man's Tapestry* (1946), won the prestigious

James Tait Black Memorial prize.[4] The author of his 1961 obituary, which appeared in *The Times*, compares his literary standing to those of his peers and concludes that he 'received far less recognition than was his due' overshadowed as he was by his contemporaries such as E.M. Forster and John Galsworthy.[5] 'The Beckoning Fair One' made its debut in Onions' first collection of supernatural stories *Widdershins* (1911). Published at the tail end of the era that is now regarded as the golden age of the British ghost story, it is the narrative on which his legacy rests, still appearing regularly in anthologies of ghost stories as well as stand-alone editions.

This story begins with the 'ascetic', middle-aged, Oleron renting an antiquated apartment in which to finish the novel he has been contracted to complete. Putting aside the manuscript, he renovates his new home and comes to believe that he shares it with a ghostly inhabitant. At first he retains some connections to the outside world, as his friend Elsie visits and urges him to write. Yet as the weeks progress, he believes that she is in danger from the jealous Beckoner causing him to prohibit her visits. Possessed by a manic desire to experience contact with the Beckoner, he burns the original script as a 'sacrifice' to his 'lovely radiant creation' and devotes weeks, in what he sees as 'duteous service', watching and waiting for her arrival.[6] Eventually he awakens from a period of delirium to find policemen at his bedside. Although Oleron does not grasp the fact, the narrator informs us that they have discovered Elsie's corpse bundled into a kitchen cupboard. As he is taken away, the reader is left wondering if Elsie was murdered by Oleron possessed by the vengeful Beckoner or if he, in his madness, finally acts on a deep-seated animosity towards his former friend as a threat to his bachelorhood and artistic integrity.

Whether or not emerging literary ghosts are 'real' or 'imagined' by their victims is an issue that becomes increasingly debated from the late nineteenth–century onwards, most enduringly perhaps in relation to Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Oliver Tearle covers this aspect of 'The Beckoning Fair One' in one of the few extensive discussions of the story. Connecting narrative hallucination to an increasing social interest in spiritualism and psychical research, he notes how Onions deliberately 'eschews such terminology that might be

associated with the conventional ghost story' as to leave the reader in doubt as to the veracity of the Beckoner.[7] It is also worth pointing out that Onions further complicates the issue, as halfway through the story he offers the type of 'verification' of the ghost that Glen Caveliero in *The Supernatural and English Fiction* describes as part of the 'game' played by authors with their readers.[8] Oleron is informed by the local vicar that the previous tenant, an artist tellingly named Madley, had been found dead in the building under the unusual circumstances of 'deliberate starvation', suggesting that the house has already claimed a victim and foreshadowing Oleron's fate. [9] Despite this revelation, I veer towards a psychological reading of the Beckoner as a product of Oleron's breakdown although it does not affect my exploration of the social and cultural discourses which bound the narrative whether ultimately she is imaginary or not.

When *Widdershin*s was published, it garnered favourable reviews. *The Observer* singled out 'The Beckoning Fair One' as particularly worthy of praise suggesting that it 'has a fascination and horror not easily forgotten, partly due to the fantastic conception, but more to the artistic working out.'[10] More recently, Jack Sullivan praises it as 'marvelously conceived' [sic]. He focuses on the tension Onions creates between the mundane and the extraordinary whereby Oleron champions 'the off-beat, the fantastic and the visionary, yet shrink[s] from these experiences at the same time'. Sullivan suggests the narrative represents the 'triumph of the imagination' but that the 'subjective fusion of 'joy' and 'terror' is problematically at the expense of the protagonist's sanity.[11] Nina Auerbach is equally praiseworthy and describes it as a 'magnificent twentieth-century tale'. Positioning it in its literary context she states that it is 'a parable of all Victorian visitations' where the 'ghost and ghost-seer manifest themselves as one single terrible being' (placing it alongside Henry James' 'The Jolly Corner' (1908) in which Spencer Brydon, like Oleron, ends up effectively haunting his childhood home in which he senses a ghost). [12]

Having introduced the story and its admirers, I want to focus on the different roles Oleron adopts as the story progresses. With this in mind, the body of the essay is divided into three parts.

The first section discusses the protagonist as struggling writer in a publishing environment to which he fails to adapt. I next consider Oleron as bachelor and his relationship with Elsie, suggesting that Onions portrays the life of the-family man as at odds with that of the artist. I finish by concentrating on the protagonist's frenzied' courtship' of the Beckoner that leads to a breakdown, interpreted through Edwardian models of male neurosis.

The artist and the world of publishing

Although supernatural tales might seem to turn away from the 'real' world, the opposite is in fact true and ghostly narratives in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period grapple with the issues of the day. Andrew Smith suggests that when viewed collectively they form a 'a series of grand political debates' about 'economics, national and colonial identities, gender and the workings of the literary imagination'.[13] Although he does not specifically discuss 'The Beckoning Fair One', it certainly covers the topics he notes, including that of the economic which heads the list. He explains that during the latter half of the nineteenth century a 'specularisation of economy' occurred whereby the 'processes of the money market' became increasingly 'invisible'. Currency itself became less materially stable 'as 'Gold and silver were replaced by paper facsimiles' and the actual worth of 'promissory notes' was 'elsewhere'.[14] The value of paper money is displaced, simultaneously present and not present, similar in status to that of the spectre and why ghost stories became useful places in which to explore such paradoxes and the concern they caused.

'The Beckoning Fair One' foregrounds the economic and the world of business in its opening paragraph, alongside establishing a building that in many ways is a typical haunted house:

> 'The three or four "To Let" boards' . . . overhung the palings each at its own angle, and resembled nothing so much as a row of wooden choppers, ever in the act of falling upon

> some passer-by . . . the house itself was only suffered to stand pending the falling-in of a lease or two, when doubtless a clearance would be made of the whole neighbourhood.[15]

The description of the hatchet-like signs 'ever in the act of' threatening pedestrians introduce a menacing note to the scene as well as capturing the ghost story's non-linear attitude towards time. Less expected perhaps is the information the narrator provides about leases. That the house's continued existence is perilously dependent on a few tenancies emphasises the financial spectre that haunts this space. The protagonist too is equally introduced in terms of finance as it is his lack of funds that drives a desire for a cheaper place to rent. The narrator explains his need to make an economy: 'Now Oleron was already paying, for his separate bedroom and workroom, more than an author who, without private means, habitually disregards his public, can afford'.[16] From the outset the tension between catering for and ignoring one's readership is foregrounded, as is the fact that creative potential is bounded by workaday concerns. Oleron, without 'private means' needs to earn a living, however much he tries to downplay the fact.

In thinking about the artist's life, Onions is one of the many authors of the era who used their craft as inspiration. Edwardian publishers were interested in topical writing and literature was a 'hot topic'. Phillip Waller points out that this period was 'both the first and only mass literary age' launched by cheaper books and rising literacy levels but cut short by the advent of the cinema.[17] Writers such as George Gissing tapped into the public's appetite for fiction and turned the spotlight on their own world. In his *New Grub Street* (1891) Gissing portrays the pragmatic and cynical 'pen-for-hire' Jasper Milvain as prospering when the more talented character Edwin Reardon who, like Oleron, will not compromise his artistic ideals by producing commercial writing, falls into in poverty and ill-health leading to his death. Debates about the connection between creativity and commerce were further fuelled by the rise of the 'best-seller'. Despite the phrase having been coined in the 1890s, it was not until the start of the new century that the label became commonplace and applied to fashionable tales such as Katherine Cecil Thurston's *Max* (1910) and Hall Caine's futuristic *The Eternal City* (1901).[18] Onions' wife, Berta

Ruck, produced many popular novels (around 80) with unashamedly romantic titles such as *His Official Fiancée* (1914), *In Another Girl's Shoes* (1916) and *Mock Honeymoon* (1939). In doing so she fits the popular image of the Edwardian 'lady novelist' turning out books to be consumed like disposable 'page-turners' rather than enduring pieces of literature (although a few of Ruck's novels remain in print today).[19] Onions is said to have not understood why her works were so successful, his ungraciousness allegedly the result of anxiety about the fact that it was she, rather than he, who financially supported the household.[20]

With this in mind it is perhaps unsurprising that Onions' protagonist is similarly dismissive about popular work and cherishes a lofty vision of the novelist and the writing process at odds with the notion of the best-seller. Typical of his stance is attitude towards the novel's fast-approaching deadline:

> . . ..he was anxious to have *Romilly* ready for publication in the coming autumn. Nevertheless, he did not intend to force its production. Should it demand longer in doing, so much the worse; he realised its importance, its crucial importance, in his artistic development, and it must have its own length and time.[21]

Oleron regards himself primarily as an artist led by the muse rather than publisher's demands. Here, early in the story, he manages to juggle the burdens of commerce with those of the imagination but as the narrative progresses the reader is shown the disastrous results of indulging the artistic at any cost.

Intensifying the conflict between writing as vocation and writing as profession was the royalty system, a relatively new innovation in the literary marketplace. Mark Morrison explains that it 'increased pressure' on authors who prior to the 1880s largely sold or leased copyright of their manuscript to the publishers guaranteeing a sum of money regardless of how many copies were bought. Post-1880s, for a text to generate a decent income for its author it had to sell in large numbers. Alternatively, if an author's reputation allowed, they could turn out a limited number of expensive editions.[22] This recent arrangement can be regarded as part of the

'specularisation of the economy' discussed earlier whereby 'Profit was deferred against future financial speculation'.[23] In terms of 'The Beckoning Fair One' neither of these two ways of making money is open to Oleron as he is unwilling to produce something popular whilst not well-regarded enough to sell to an appreciative few.

Elsie acts as the sensible insider in this tale, aware of what it takes to negotiate the new publishing environment. She is described as pulling 'a better living out of the pool' than Oleron and offers to find him journalistic commissions that would help to pay the rent, aware, as she is, of his straitened financial circumstances: 'your affairs are at a most critical stage (oh, don't tell me; I know you are about at the end of your money)'. As a 'lady – journalist' Elsie is a relatively common figure on the literary scene and representative of the 600 recorded by the census of 1891.[24] Well-known enough for *Punch* to satirise them as a cross-dressing harridans, they appear, for instance, in Henry James' novella 'The Papers' (1903).[25] He characterises one of his reporters, Maud, as a beer-drinking, cigar-smoking 'product of the day' and a 'shocker'.[26] Although James is not as censorious about female journalists as this description suggests, many of the dominant discourses of the day were. Increasingly 'identified with mass culture', and helping to full the pages of the magazines in a burgeoning commercial market, their work tended to be 'treated strictly as a commodity'. [27] Whilst Elsie, and her real-life counterparts, may have been making their presence felt in the writing world, they were not extended the same choices as their male colleagues.

Predictably, Oleron dismisses all journalism, regarding it as the antithesis to the aesthetic principles he espouses. Despite Elsie's pragmatism (and perhaps because of her unrequited love for Oleron) she understands his distaste for the notion that commerce might drive the 'value' of literature. Comparing their paths, Elsie states: 'Yours is the real work' adding, 'Without you we jackals couldn't exist. You and a few like you hold everything upon your shoulders'. [28] They both regard journalists as mere scavengers, and agree that there is an emotional and psychological strain in remaining true to one's art. Onions himself was said to find writing process draining; his

obituarist states 'He wrote with difficulty even with anguish'.[29] The pair are also in agreement as to whose writing is most valuable: "'His", she said, was "real work"; hers merely filled space'.[30]

Throughout the tale Oleron regards being true to the demands of his art as a moral imperative. Onions was clearly intrigued by the notion of 'artistic conscience' as it is the focus, and sub-title, of another tale from *Widdershins*, 'Hic Jacet'.[31] As in 'The Beckoning Fair One', the story revolves around the attempts of an author, the narrator Harrison, to complete a book, but in this case it is a biography for his recently deceased friend, the painter Andriaovsky. Harrison admits that he had been confronted with the alternative 'of starving for Art's sake or becoming rich supplying a clamorous trade demand'.[32] In choosing the latter path, and producing popular detective fiction, he had disgusted his companion who was adamant that there 'ought not to be professional artists' only those who were driven by the, albeit troubling, '"need" to create'.[33] Keen to make amends, Harrison wants to produce a fittingly aesthetic epitaph in a 'Life' of Andriaovsky. Yet he finds the task challenging, often falling into a mysterious fugue state when at his desk. Awakening from one of these trances, he finds a finished manuscript in his handwriting. Believing he has unconsciously produced a tribute to his friend, he is horrified to find that he has actually written is the next instalment of his crime saga. 'Hic Jacet' and 'The Beckoning Fair One' share an uneasiness about the fragility of creative integrity, as well as an underlying belief in the struggle of creating 'Art'. Whereas 'Hic Jacet' suggests that once artistry is sacrificed to expediency it cannot be regained, 'The Beckoning Fair One' demonstrates the dangers of allowing free rein to the desire to create. Reading the tales alongside each other, Onions is clearly interested in how an author might find a balance between the competing demands of commerce and artistry, perhaps accounting for the 'difficulties' with writing that he faced in his own life.

The artist and the domestic world

Underscoring this anxiety about authorial identity is the initially less obvious apprehension about gendered identity. The two concerns are linked through queries such as whether or not devoting one's life to artistic pursuits is a suitably 'manly' course and discussions about the modern Edwardian woman's suitability as muse.

Beginning with this latter subject, Oleron becomes convinced that Elsie does not possess the feminine qualities that can inspire his attempts to write a masterpiece. As a financially independent journalist she is the successor of the late nineteenth-century New Woman: a proto-feminist who challenged stratified gender roles by agitating for greater freedoms for women in a variety of areas from birth control to education. She was much discussed in the media and portrayed variously, and contradictorily, as a frigid bluestocking, sexualised nymphomaniac or rowdy militant. At the time of 'The Beckoning Fair One's' conception, it was the New Woman's more belligerent 'sister' who was making headlines : the female suffrage campaigner. In 1909 members of the radical Women's Social and Political Union rioted in London's Parliament Square and undertook hunger strikes in Holloway Prison causing public uproar. Yet even the less extreme women's groups were still regarded with distrust by many. Hynes, commenting about female activism in the era, suggests that 'their troubles kept getting mixed up' with 'other social issues' adding:

> contraception threatened the family and birth rate, divorce threatened the Church and the stability of society, suffrage threatened political balances, and so even the most moderate move towards liberation seemed a rush towards chaos.[34]

Elsie appears the epitome of moderation and does not profess to be either a New Woman or a suffragette. However, she is undoubtedly different from the 'ladies' who would have been extolled in Oleron's youth. That she has a career immediately distances her from the domesticated 'angel of the house' stereotype that was lauded as the ideal for middle-class women for much of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Oleron makes his attitude towards Elsie's lifestyle explicit when he realises that she wants their relationship to move beyond friendship. By this stage he is already convinced the apartment is haunted and has become obsessed with trying to capture sight of the Beckoner, who acts as a nostalgic reminder of a type of idealised Victorian womanhood. He feels guilty about preferring the spectre to his real-life friend and justifies his newfound passion by blaming it on Elsie's 'unbecoming' behaviour:

> Women such as she [Elsie], business women, in and out of offices all the time, always, whether they realised it or not, made comradeship a cover for something else. They accepted the unconventional status, came and went freely, as men did, were honestly taken by men at their own valuation - and then it turned out to be the other thing after all, and they went and fell in love.[35]

Elsie is squarely positioned as belonging to the world of 'business', and so Oleron thinks of her as 'unconventional' and placed in opposition to the 'other thing', presumably those women who treat men as suitors rather than allies. His description of Elsie as 'in and out of offices all the time' is telling. Much recent scholarship on female activism in this period highlights that the city became a highly contested space in which women wanted to be able to roam freely, without criticism or male accompaniment.[36] Elsie takes advantage of this growing freedom and crosses town to visit her steadily more hermit-like companion. However, she does not escape censure. Oleron pronounces that Elsie and her peers are in a 'false position', lying to themselves as well as any man who treats them as equals: 'Independent, yet not efficient; with some of womanhood's graces forgone, and yet with all of woman's hunger and need; half sophisticated and yet not wise'. He concludes that they are 'bound to suffer' as their 'most innocent acts are misunderstood'; a comment fuelled by a nosy neighbour who writes a disapproving letter to him about Elsie's unchaperoned visits and suggests they are not appropriate for a 'respectable' house.[37]

Onions' depiction of the modern woman as somehow 'dishonest' is further emphasised through Elsie's appearance. Elsie's dress places her within a framework of artifice as she wears what is described as 'cunningly disguised puffs' bought to hide her ample figure. The first description Onions' provides amplifies the sense of her careful self-fashioning as she is likened to a cultivated flower: 'thirty-four, large, showy, fair as butter, pink as a dog-rose, reminding one of a florist's picked specimen bloom'.[38] Her decorative clothing stands her apart from the fashionable 'modern' urban woman of the day who favoured unfussy clothes which allowed her, for instance, to ride a bike unencumbered: clearly impractical for Elsie with her veils and scarves.[39] It is details such as these that suggest Elsie is related to the 'surplus' woman who had bothered British society since the census of 1851 when respondents were asked for the first time about their marital status, revealing two-and-a-half million 'spinsters' and five-hundred thousand more women than men.[40] Solutions to the perceived problem of these allegedly socially burdensome 'superfluous' women included emigration but also more positive, and realistic, cries for improved education and career opportunities. Whilst Elsie is the beneficiary of such campaigns for female financial independence and is 'productive' in this framework, as an unmarried thirty-year-old she is, 'unproductive' in terms of fulfilling her supposed duty of raising a family.

Onions certainly figures Elsie as 'superfluous' and 'too much'. Not only is she immoderate in dress but also manner as she was 'given to sudden and ample movements and moist and explosive utterances'.[41] Her excessiveness becomes more overt as Oleron falls under the sway of the Beckoner, who, disembodied as she is, cannot be accused of this fault. He decides his friend is 'coarse-fibred, over-coloured, rank' and places her in a damning literary context by recalling Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and realising that 'Gulliver had described the Brobdingnagian maids-of-honour thus: and mentally and spiritually she corresponded'.[42] In a further intertextual moment, he thinks of her as the 'prototype' for his character, Romilly Bishop, which causes him to invoke the poet Dante's muse and fume, 'And

this was to have been his Beatrice, his vision! As Elsie she was to have gone into the furnace of his art, and she was to have come out the Woman all men desire!'[43]

The reference to Dante provides further insight into Oleron's attitude towards women. Dante's admiration for Beatrice was famously in the mode of courtly love: she was an object for artistic inspiration rather than the subject of a more mundane liaison. Oleron similarly venerates untouchable 'women', be it the fictional Romilly or the spectral Beckoner. He clearly finds it difficult to deal with actual embodied individuals regardless of whether they are male or female, part of the reason for his self-imposed isolation. Increasingly repelled by Elsie's corporeal presence, when she injures her foot on a broken floorboard he sees her as 'ugly and swollen with tears'.[44] Yet he is not entirely without sympathy, musing, 'Strangling sobs, blearing tears, bodies buffeted by sickness . . . how little love there would be were these things a barrier to love!'.[45] Recognising the fragility of the human condition does not prevent him from investing his emotions in the idealised version of femininity represented by the Beckoner or retreating from embodied womanhood represented by Elsie and her desire for emotional and physical contact.

Oleron's attitude towards Elsie is partly fuelled by a suspicion that she distracts him from his imaginative pursuits. He observes that 'the mere thought of Elsie was fatal to anything abstract'.[46] Throughout the nineteenth century, notions about romantic relationships appropriating masculine artistic energies led to, what Herbert Sussman describes as, the 'debate about finding the most efficient technology for the turning of male sexual energy, to the production of art.'[47] Elsie, as expectant suitor, could be seen as threatening this libidinal economy by potentially diverting Oleron's drives away from the literary. One solution to the wider problem was to promote the artist-as- monk model. Artistic monkish figures appeared in various guises, explicitly as the subject of Robert Browning's poetic monologue 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (1855) and implicitly in William Morris's work which Walter Pater described as reflecting 'the mood of the cloister'.[48] Before Oleron succumbs to his haunting, he could be perceived in these terms. Onions describes his face as 'lean', 'ascetic' and 'monk-like'. Placed in a garret

rather than a cell, Oleron is a bachelor who we are told is 'inclined to the austere in taste'.[49] When he realises Elsie's romantic feelings for him he sees his solitary way of life, devoted to non-worldly pursuits, as threatened.

However, it is not just Elsie who calls Oleron's monkish role into question, as in the opening decade of the twentieth century this type of masculinity was increasingly anachronistic. What was required of men in this overtly industrial and militaristic age was their contribution to the wider society either as head of the household or imperial subject. When placed in this framework, Oleron's ascetic pursuits become problematized and 'unmanly'. Jane Wood summarises this development and the consequences for the aesthete:

> Principles of production, property, and prosperity, espoused by the new manufacturing class on familial and national levels, were powerful contributors to an emerging ideology which marginalized . . . the effeminate artist. . . on the grounds of their non-contribution to a national, domestic, or sexual economy. [50]

Oleron's bachelordom is certainly at odds with a model of heterosexual masculinity tied to the nineteenth-century 'cult of the home' in which the domestic space was discursively positioned as a haven for middle-class men. [51] But definitions of 'home' were not purely descriptive of a physical space but also prescriptive as to what it should contain –a family with a male figurehead. So when Oleron takes his grandmother's furnishings out of storage and uses his dwindling savings to buy 'rugs and chintz curtains' he appears effeminate and fussy rather than suitably domesticated.[52] The narrator describes him as 'arranging, changing, altering, hardly yet into his work-stride again, he gave the impression of almost spinster-like precision and nicety'.[53] Labelling him 'spinster-like' is pejorative, particularly as housework is framed as an activity which prevents him from his 'regular' work of writing. Onions' portrait of a bachelor is not unusual, insofar as 'sometimes envied for his freedom from responsibility' he was often 'in danger of being regarded as less than a man because he had renounced the office of patriarch'.[54] In the same way that as an 'artistic' writer he is marginalised in the world of publishing, the

'spinsterish' Oleron is Othered as he does not fulfil the patriarchal role of head of a thriving house.

The breakdown of an artist

As the story progresses Oleron sheds his monk/bachelor identity for that of a man obsessed (or possessed) by his desire to capture the Beckoner, who acts as a catalyst for this transformation. Onion pits Elsie's sensible and material Edwardian femininity against an elusive and seductive *femme fatale* from an earlier age. Regardless of whether she is real or imagined, the Beckoner is the antithesis of the solidity associated with Elsie who is banished for much of the second half of the story, making her final appearance as a very tangible corpse. If Elsie represents the modern, the commercial and the practical, the Beckoner is associated with a bygone age, the imaginative and the sensual. Yet these figures are not as disconnected as this description suggests. Kelly Hurley reads the Gothic text as contending with the 'threat' posed by the New Woman in 'a displaced fashion through its numerous representations of monster women and she-devils'. [55] Hurley places the Beckoner alongside other sexualised predators of the era such as the villainess of Bram Stoker's *Lair of the White Worm* (1911), the three female vampires who attempt to seduce Jonathan Harker in his earlier work *Dracula* (1897), and Vernon Lee's vengeful spectral seductress in "Amour Dure" (1890). These *femme fatales* fascinate and jealously demand the attention of their hapless male victims, luring them to destructive behaviour and often death. The Beckoner undoubtedly fits this model, slowly possessing Oleron's thoughts and territorially supplanting Elsie, her 'poor mortal prototype' with 'something like passion, hate almost'.[56]

Readers are introduced to the idea that the house is haunted through a 'foolishly sweet and dulcimer-like' tune which Oleron believes he can make out in the rhythmic dripping of a tap.[57] Humming it the next day, his occasional housekeeper recognises the ballad as 'the Beckoning Fair One' (an actual traditional Welsh folk song). Reinforcing the ghostly presence's

connection to the musical, Oleron later unearths an ancient harp bag hidden in a cupboard. As the housekeeper had explained about the 'o-ald' tune: 'They do say it was sung to a harp'.[58] Tearle makes a connection between the musical and the Beckoner's role as muse pointing out: 'Music: the word, derived as it is from the idea of musing and muses . . . has been bound up with inspiration and deep reflection ever since it was first given a name' .[59] Yet this harp cover is not only connected to the cerebral but the physical. Its shape, that of a 'very irregular' triangle, and its colouring, 'shades of crimson', point to it as symbolic of female genitalia. When the bag is placed in this context and Oleron puzzles 'whatever can that have been?' his naivety about female sexuality is reinforced, as is the Beckoner's position as a spectral *femme fatale*.[60]

Oleron's next encounter further sexualises the spectre as it comes in the bedroom when he hears 'a silky rustle' followed by a 'long sweep' and an 'almost inaudible crackle'.[61] Onions makes great use of sensory ambivalence to create suspense throughout the story, here postponing the moment whereby he defines the sound. Eventually the narrator satisfies the reader's curiosity by explaining 'whatsoever or whosoever had appalled Oleron's soul by producing the sound of a woman brushing her hair': a distinctive noise that Onions is said to have noticed when his wife was preparing for bed.[62] Onions here exploits his readers' familiarity with the symbolism of hair worn loose as a synecdoche for female sexuality to emphasize the Beckoner's 'natural' and seductive femininity, providing a stark contrast to Elsie's more 'artificial' appearance.

The narrator uses the terminology of courtship to describe Oleron's pursuit of the muse, describing him as waiting for acknowledgement of his patient 'wooing'. Unlike the undemanding Elsie, the Beckoner wants tribute: 'his room clamoured for flowers, fresh and continually renewed; and Oleron did not stint its demands'. [63] The fact that she is not 'flesh and blood' allows him to indulge safely in fantasies about her desirability without having to deal with an actual desiring body. He believes the presence to be 'coy', 'bewitching' and 'coquettish' and resorts to trying to make her jealous by leaving the apartment for short periods of time.[64] His initial role in the relationship is that of hunter who is compelled to pursue 'the capricious, fair,

mocking, slippery, eager Spirit that, ever eluding, ever sees to it that the chase does not slacken'.[65] However, in his desperation to obtain his quarry he is transformed into the hunted / haunted and demonstrates a dangerous willingness to suffer for his passion, at an economic as well as psychological level: 'He paid no heed to it that his stock of money was running perilously low, nor that he had ceased to work. Ceased to work? . . . He was preparing such a work . . . such a Mistress was a-making in the gestation of his Art'.[66] It is worth noting that whilst he uses the language of genius and gestation, he exhibits an awareness of the economic alongside the creative even as he denies its importance.

Oleron's willingness to worship and surrender to his muse is critiqued by the narrator who progressively characterises the Beckoner in terms of monstrosity:

> The Abomination fastened on Oleron's power. The steady sapping sometimes left him for many hours of prostration gazing vacantly up at his red-tinged ceiling, idly suffering such fancies as came of themselves to have their way with him. [67]

This sexualised image reinforces the Beckoner's status as *femme fatale* and, more specifically, a succubus - a female demon said to steal male creative and sexual energy. She is described as such by the narrator who warns against Oleron's complicity in his seduction: 'let the miserable wrestle with his own shadows . . . let him. . .strain and enfold and couch the succubus; but let him do so in a house into which not an air of Heaven penetrates' adding ominously 'The lost must remain lost'.[68]

Oleron's breakdown could be interpreted by a modern reader as an extreme type of mid-life crisis. At the very least, the forty-four year-old protagonist has reached a point in his life where he assesses his success and finds himself wanting. There are many moments in the story which, like this early one, describe his realisation that he had treated 'the world a good deal better than he was treated by it' but that having 'chosen his path' he was now 'committed to it beyond possibility of withdrawal'.[69] There are equally as many asides from the narrator explaining the toll taken on Oleron by his lifelong refusal to compromise his artistic integrity: 'It is all very well

to tell a man who is at the point of exhaustion that only another effort is required of him; if he cannot make it he is as far off as ever…'[70] Emphasising the strength it takes for an impoverished artist to reach their goal, this comment warns readers of the near impossibility of Oleron ever creating his masterpiece. When this weakness is framed in the terms of the day, he could be said to lack the moral 'toughness' that was being sold as the mark of proper Edwardian manhood and was indoctrinated in the social male body through institutions such as the scouting movement and the school playing fields of both Britain and America.[71] Oleron's reflective nature and mounting emotionalism could be read as signs of an 'unhealthy 'mind: the antithesis to the 'healthy' mind, with its sense of action and purpose, fostered in the ideologies that dominated the decade.

The protagonist's breakdown can further be explained through nineteenth-century theories about hysteria and masculinity. Wood suggests that throughout the so-called 'century of nerves', the medical profession gendered nervous disorders. Hysteria was associated with women and an excess of emotion whereas 'hypochondrias' was positioned as a predominately male disease. By the end of the nineteenth century, models of masculine illness further differentiated between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' male disease.[72] 'Legitimate' breakdowns stemmed from an easily explainable source, such as a traumatic event, whereas the 'illegitimate' type was believed to result from a lack of pragmatism and willpower; two of Oleron's faults as shown in his self-destructive dismissal of practical considerations and his inability to complete his manuscript. His intellectualism and 'drawing room sensibility' are increasingly outmoded and mean that he is banished 'to the realms of effeminate inadequacy' and easy prey for the vampiric Beckoner.[73]

Onion shifts the style of the narrative at the point when Oleron can longer interpret the world around him and concentrates on the protagonist's subjective perceptions. The omniscient narrator is temporarily replaced by the protagonist's fragmented thoughts and observations. Lacking a clear chronology, in this hysterical narrative he hovers between moments of coherence and feverish confusion. At one point he hears Elsie shout 'Paul' and the sound of a key in a lock

but due to his delirium he cannot interpret these sounds. The narrative takes us the point to where Oleron finally believes that the Beckoner is near. Signalled by the 'alteration of the very air in the room', he senses that she is 'beckoning, beckoning…' Onions continues to make good use of ellipsis to effectively 'look away' at what amounts to the consummation of their relationship. As a result it is deliberately unclear whether it is the Beckoner or Elsie who causes Oleron to swoon after feeling half a kiss on his lips, 'robbing him of his very breath. . .'[74] If we believe in the Beckoner, this 'kiss of death' is the spectral *femme fatale's* ultimate aim and if it had not been for Elsie's intervention, so fatal for her, perhaps Oleron would have been carried from the house as a corpse like his predecessor Madley. For those readers who believe the Beckoner a hallucination, Oleron's repressed passion, when kissed by Elsie, collides with his horror of embodied female sexuality causing him to murder his former friend. Purposely vague about what happens in these final moments, Onions allows the tension to continue between the story as either one of spectral possession or nervous exhaustion.

Onions returns the omniscient narrator for the final scene and takes the reader outside the claustrophobic confines of the apartment to where a crowd gathers waiting for the police who were alerted by a neighbour that Elsie had failed to emerge from the building. When the inspector eventually searches the flat he finds 'something that resembled a large lumpy pudding, done up in a pudding-bag of faded browny red frieze'.[75] Elsie's corpse, engulfed by the Beckoner's harp bag and unceremoniously stuffed into a cupboard, is not eroticised or romanticised as were female cadavers in a variety of nineteenth-century British and American texts. In death, as in life, Onions describes her body in an unappealing way. She is literally made 'superfluous' and shrouded in the symbol of her rival.

However, the textual murder of an independent woman is not singular to 'The Beckoning Fair One'. Authorial punishment is meted out to female characters who behave 'inappropriately' in a variety of fin de siècle and early twentieth-century stories perhaps most famously in *Dracula*. In Stoker's tale, the fate of the flirtatious character Lucy, who signals her overt sexuality with a

flip comment about wanting to marry three suitors, is to be turned into a vampire by Dracula and then beheaded by her fiancée who wants to return her to innocence. Although Elsie does not possess the New Woman's drive for sexual freedom, she is still a 'lady journalist' who in Oleron's eyes, makes a sorry muse. He, however, does not go unpunished for his retreat into the imagination as he finishes the tale occupying the hinterland between the living and the dead. On entering the apartment, the police discover a 'waxy-white, emaciated man' stretched out on the bed like a corpse, in a room full of decaying flowers which 'stinks like a hearse'.[76] His not-quite-human status is emphasised by his continued inability to interpret the world in the usual way as he fails to understand the significance of the 'hooded stretcher' that carries Elsie away. [77]

Conclusion

In conclusion, Onions' compelling story explores the fraught relationship between the artist and muse and the sacrifices made for creativity. In this article I have suggested ways in which this timeless relationship is bounded by specifically Edwardian concerns as ghosts 'are never just ghosts; they provide an insight in to what haunts our culture".[78] What haunts the world of 'The Beckoning Fair One' is a fear that the Edwardian literary marketplace is not a space where authors can indulge their artistic conscience. In chasing 'The Beckoner', a muse from a bygone era, Oleron makes himself obsolete in a commercialised environment that saw the rise of the best-seller, increasing advertising and the manipulation of the press by publishing companies. Onions presents the dire consequences of writers ignoring pragmatic concerns. The language of contracts and deadlines recurs throughout the story and at the end the protagonist realises that 'no good would ever come of that half-finished novel' and that he would be better 'to pay forfeit to his publishers' as he is unable to honour his contract.[79]

Onions also represents a society haunted by those individuals who unsuccessfully adapted to swiftly changing expectations about 'appropriate' and 'healthy' masculinity and femininity. Oleron comes to realise not only is he a failed artist, but in an age which promoted

'compulsory matrimony', he is also an unsuccessful patriarch.[80] Elsie is key to both of these areas as she represents both the lure of the commercial side of the publishing world as well as the temptations of domesticity. Whilst this may seem a paradoxical position, combining as she does discourses of the public and private, Onions positions her on the cusp of both worlds; neither New Woman nor dutiful wife and mother. In this tale it is not only the wilful *femme fatale* who is demonised by Onions as there is the suggestion that if Elsie had behaved 'appropriately', she could have shared a family life with Oleron. Despite his uncertainty about the relationship, Oleron again laments missing out on a wife just before he thinks he hears Elsie call out: ''if only he had chosen the wife, the child, the faithful friend at the fireside…' [81] If the Beckoner is 'real' such sentimental reflection could jealously cause her to finish her rival. If she is a figment of his imagination perhaps the murder is one final attempt to hold-on to his solitary life as, in his feverish mind, thoughts of marriage are quickly superseded by those of rage against Elsie where he 'felt the blood rush up to the roots of his hair with anger against her'.[82]

The Beckoner initially seems to triumph in this tale, at least in terms of ridding herself of her competition and abolishing Oleron's equilibrium. However, she is obviously a far from a positive representative of womanhood. As with many literary ghosts, her motives for destroying her victims are never made clear and so readers can only regard her as wantonly evil. Onions does not offer any comforting resolution as her malevolent influence is still at large. We assume that she, or the conditions that led to Oleron's madness, remain in place. Led from the house, Oleron's last 'glimpse' of it returns us to the start of the story, with a description of the ominous 'hatchet-like "To Let" boards' waiting to once again signal the destruction of some other passing artist.[83] Further Onions actually seems to coalesce the two female characters into one figure with the ambiguous description of the life-threatening kiss condemning them both as dangers to his male protagonist.

Onions is more sympathetic to Oleron who is described as weary, economically in dire straits and largely alienated from his peers and yet he still attempts to remain true to his artistic

ideals. As the narrative progresses Onion reveals the precariousness of this stance and the heavy price of following artistic conscience. Drained of creative energies, Oleron leaves behind the male roles he had adopted of bachelor monk and passionate artist, and returns to a childlike state sleeping 'peacefully' in a cab between the policemen who found Elsie's corpse.[84] Relinquishing responsibility, he is presumably taken to either the asylum or prison where others will make his decisions for him. Many theorists interested in gender have observed that patriarchy is as damaging to men as women, and 'that it is a world of power and subordination in which men have been forced to compete' if they want to benefit from 'inherited masculinity'. [85] Oleron, with his withdrawal from wider society, refuses to participate in the competition and consequently finishes the narrative disempowered and emasculated.

Most ghost stories ultimately point to a disordered universe and stories from the Edwardian period especially share an 'apocalyptic quality' and viewed *en masse* create 'a sense of a gradual building of uncontainable forces' that eventually leads to the Great War.[86] Neither Oleron, nor Elsie, survive this personal apocalypse intact and Onions offers no catharsis for either protagonist or reader by suggesting that artistic conscience is possible in such a society. Perhaps it is this lack of closure that helps to account for why this tale, and Oleron's fate, continues to haunt reader's today.

1 Oliver Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', in The Collected Ghost Stories of Oliver Onions. (New York, 1971), p.12.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
3 Samuel Hynes, *Edwardian Occasions: Essays on English Writing in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1972), p. 8.
4 Neil Wilson. *Shadows In the Attic*, (London, 2000), p. 398.
5 "Novels of Realism and Poetry: Oliver Onions Obituary ", *The Times*, 10 April 1961,p. 18.
6 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p. 56.
7 *Ibid*., p. 144
8 Glen Caveliero, *The Supernatural and English Fiction*, (Oxford, 1995), p. 23.
9 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p. 47.
10 'Advertisement', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art,* 28 Jan 1911, p. 128.
11 Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares*, (Ohio, 1978), p. 105.
12 Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals*, (Cambridge, 1990), p. 104
13 Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920*, (Manchester, 2010), p.2.
14 *Ibid*., pp.16-17.
15 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.3.
16 *Ibid*., p.4.
17 Phillip Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870 – 1918*, (Oxford, 2006), p.4.
18 John Sutherland, *Bestsellers*, (Oxford, 2007), p.87.
19 The 'lady novelist' is discussed by Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism in the fin de siècle*, (Manchester, 1997), p. 159.
20 Sandra Kemp ed. *The Oxford Companion to Edwardian Fiction,* (Oxford, 2002), p.301.
21 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', pp.8-9.
22 Mark Morrison, 'Publishing', in A *Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford, 2006), p. 134.
23 Smith, *The Ghost Story*, pp. 17 -18.
24 Gillian Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman: Middle Class Women and Work in Britain, 1870-1914,* (Cambridge, 2015), p.64.
25 Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations,* p. 411.
26 Henry, James, 'The Papers', 1903, Chapter 1. http://www.henryjames.org.uk/papers/. Accessed June 4th 2015.
27 Ledger, *The New Woman*, pp.158 –159.
28 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.17.
29 "Novels of Realism and Poetry: Oliver Onions Obituary ",p. 18.
30 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.14.
31 *hic jacet* is a Latin phrase often inscribed on tombs and meaning 'here lies'. In this story it refers to the biography that Harrison is writing of his friend which is to act as a memorial but, unable as he is to complete it, proves to be a memorial to his lost aesthetic abilities.
32 Oliver Onions, 'Hic Jacet' in *Oliver Onions: Ghost Stories,* (Leyburn, 2003), p.282.
33 *Ibid*., p. 282.
34 Hynes, *Edwardian Occasions*, p.211.
35 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.44.
36 See for example Ledger, *The New Woman* and Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman*.
37 *Ibid*., p.45.

38 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.12.
39 Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman*, p.141.
40 Kathrin Levitan, 'Redundancy, the 'Surplus Woman' Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861', *Women's History Review*, 17:3, (2008) pp. 359-376.
41 *Ibid*.,p.13.
42 Gulliver characterises the Maids of Honour as uninhibited, disrespectful and very physical. When they undress in front of him he says that their bodies were 'very far from being a tempting sight, or from giving me any other emotions than those of horror and disgust' in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Harmondsworth, 1994), p.124.
43 *Ibid*., p. 21.
44 *Ibid*., p. 31.
45 *Ibid*., p. 32.
46 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One',p.40.
47 Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, (Cambridge, 1995), p. 4.
48 Qtd in *Ibid*., p.9.
49 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.19.
50 Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction*, (Oxford, 2001), p.71.
51 John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in the Middle-class Home in Victorian England*, (London, 1999), p. 4.
52 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One',p.7.
53 *Ibid*., p.8.
54 Tosh, *A Man's Place*, p.108.
55 Hurley, 'British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic,* ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. (Cambridge, 2002) p. 201.
56 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p. 40.
57 *Ibid*., p.22.
58 *Ibid*., p.23.
59 Tearle, *Bewilderments of Vision,* p.157.
60 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.12
61*I bid.,*,p.32.
62 *Ibid*., p.33.
63 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p. 53.
64 *Ibid*., pp.48-49.
65 *Ibid*., p.55.
66 I*bid*.,p. 55.
67 *Ibid.,* p.60.
68 *Ibid.,* p.60.
69 *Ibid*., p.7.
70 *Ibid*., p.17.
71 See for example, J.A Mangan, 'Social Darwinism and upper-class education in late Victorian and Edwardian England' pp.135 – 159 and Allen Warren, ' Popular manliness: Baden Powell, scouting and the development of manly character' pp199-219, in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800 – 1940*, ed. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester, 1987).
72 Wood, *Passion and Pathology*, p.68.
73 *Ibid.,*p. 70.
74 *Ibid*., p.66.
75 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p.69.
76 *Ibid*., p. 68.
77 *Ibid*., p. 70.
78 Andrew Smith. 'Hauntings' in *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McAvoy, (London, 2007), p.148.

79 Onions, 'The Beckoning Fair One', p. 64.
80 Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*. 5.
81 *Ibid*., p.64.
82 *Ibid*., p.62.
83 *Ibid*., p.70.
84 I*bid*., p.70.
85 Victor Seidler qtd in Michael Roper and John Tosh, 'Introduction: Historians and the Politics of Masculinity', *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh (London, 1991), p.6.
86 Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares*, p.3.