

The Canterville Ghost

Wilde's finest poetry is in his prose, and his finest prose is in his children's stories. Most are dark. Sacrifice and heartbreak are the themes. Frank homage is paid to Hans Christian Andersen, whose little match girl and little mermaid repeat their roles in Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and *The Fisherman and His Soul*.

The Canterville Ghost looks at the sunnier side. Virginia's sacrifice, and the ghost's heartbreak, reach the endings we hoped. All of Wilde's ideas but one are inspired. He was never in better form. Not many writers could have sent up the stolid Otises or the indignant Sir Simon so richly while leaving us in on their side throughout.

While my *Usher House* turns Poe upside down, the libretto for *The Canterville Ghost* follows Wilde's short story pretty closely. His one misjudgment was Sir Simon's murder of his wife, three centuries before, and his breezy justification of it to Virginia. That might have fit in many of Wilde's works. Here it grates against the wholesome and family-friendly theme. The libretto, like the 1944 movie with Charles Laughton, changes this detail. The bloodstain is also relocated from the floor to the armor, so that the audience can see it. Also Canterville and Cheshire are given more continuous roles, Washington Otis is left out, and Mrs. Umney is seen but not heard. These changes reflect no critique of Wilde. Stage and page have different needs.

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