

# Visitors from beyond the Grave

## Ghosts in World Literature

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## GHOSTS OF GIRLFRIENDS PAST: DEVELOPMENT OF A LITERARY EPISODE<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Most ancient Greeks and Romans believed in the ability of ghosts to interact and communicate with living humans by means of apparitions, usually through dreams. The ghost of a beloved one could show up to the surviving lover with the purpose of reproaching him for his past behavior or conveying instructions. This chapter explores some relevant milestones in the history of this literary motif from Homer to contemporary culture. As a precedent, Patroclus appears to Achilles to require a proper burial (*Il.* 23. 65-107). In Propertius (*Elegies* 4.7), Cynthia shows up to Propertius in a dream and reproaches him. The Propertian passage will be a key reference for later treatments. Petrarch remembers Laura's visits from heaven in numerous poems of his *Canzoniere*. The Mannerist poet Luis Martín de Plaza also dedicated a moving sonnet to the motif to express his feelings of haplessness. In contemporary poetry, Jaime Gil de Biedma describes the ghostly visit of his beloved Bel as a symbol of remorse. The motif constitutes the subject-matter of an entire poetic cycle by Luis Alberto de Cuenca: the ghostly visits only cause frustration in him.

**KEYWORDS:** Ghosts, girlfriend, topos, classical tradition, divination, dreams, apparition, epiphany.

In this chapter, we will first examine the beliefs of ancient Greeks and Romans about the apparitions of ghosts. Then we will survey some relevant milestones of the transmission of a literary topic: the visit of a deceased girlfriend to her beloved in a dream. The scene of Patroclus appearing to Achilles can be interpreted as a referential precedent. Propertius took inspiration from this Homeric model for describing the apparition of Cynthia in his elegy 4. 7. In its turn, Propertius' elegy will become a model in Western literature for Petrarch, Luis Martín de la Plaza, Jaime Gil de Biedma, and Luis Alberto de Cuenca. The motif reappears in contemporary mass culture, which confirms its relevance.

### BELIEFS OF GREEKS AND ROMANS ABOUT THE VISITS OF GHOSTS

Did ancient Greeks and Romans believe in ghosts? The safest answer to this question would be: some did, some did not. As a scholar remarks, classical beliefs about the survival of the human soul after death lacked consensus and

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the two anonymous referees for their critical suggestions.

“ranged from the completely nihilistic denial of after-life, through a vague sense of souls’ ghostly existence, to a concept of the individual soul’s survival and of personal survival in a recognizable form”<sup>2</sup>. The Atomists and Epicureans were the most reluctant to accept the existence of the ghosts and tried to provide a materialistic explanation for them<sup>3</sup>; on the other hand, the Stoics and the Pythagoreans believed in the existence of ghosts and in prophetic appearances<sup>4</sup>. The Peripatetics and Academics held a more ambiguous position<sup>5</sup>.

Now it is true that ghost episodes are featured conspicuously in many fictional texts of classical literature. In Aeschylus’ *Persians*, the ghost of the late king Darius, summoned by the Chorus, appears on stage to comment about the situation of the Persian empire<sup>6</sup>; in the *Iliad* by Homer, the shadow of Patroclus communicates with Achilles (we will analyze this passage); and, in the *Aeneid* by Vergil, the ghost of Creusa appears to his husband Aeneas<sup>7</sup>. This does not prove that Greeks and Romans believed in these ghostly manifestations at face value. Similarly, popular success of modern films like *Ghost* (1990), *Casper* (1995), and *The Sixth Sense* (1999), as well as of television series like *American Horror Story* (2011), does not prove that Americans believe in the existence of ghosts<sup>8</sup>, although it does suggest that American people are familiar with ghost folklore and are readily able to recognize the main conventions of this kind of stories.

The Romans were quite prone to what we would consider today superstitious attitudes. They believed in Fortune as a leading principle of nature and furthermore as a quality inherent in some individuals<sup>9</sup>. Romans classified days in the calendar as *fasti* or *nefasti* (adequate or inadequate for business and ceremonies). They conceived religion as a contractual rapport with gods: devotees payed sacrifices to the gods, and these protected the Roman state in exchange. They believed that future was predetermined and, consequently, that it could be explored by means of divination practices (as shown in *De divinatione* by Cicero). For another thing, many Romans believed that they could achieve their purposes by the means of magical operations<sup>10</sup>. Most of them took prodigies and portents as warnings from the gods.

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<sup>2</sup> Hopkins 1983: 227. Felton 1999a: 4-21 discusses ancient views on ghosts, held both by common people and philosophers.

<sup>3</sup> See Felton 1999a: 21, Traver Vera 2014 and the chapter by Traver Vera in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> See Cic., *Div.* 1. 27 and the discussion by Lévy 1997 and Felton 1999a: 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Kemper 1993: 18, Felton 1999a: 21.

<sup>6</sup> A., *Pers.* 681-842. A relevant detail is the fact that Darius’ ghost comments on the difficulty to exit Hades (*Pers.* 688-690). On this episode see Hernán-Pérez Guijarro 2009: 36-38. On ghosts in Greek tragedy the *locus classicus* is Hickman 1938; see also Aguirre Castro 2006 and 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Verg., *A.* 2. 771-794.

<sup>8</sup> For the beliefs of modern Americans about ghosts, see the statistics cited by Emmons 2003: 92.

<sup>9</sup> Cic., *De Imperio Cn. Pompei* 28: *scientiam rei militaris, virtutem, auctoritatem, felicitatem*. Paragraphs 47-48 are devoted to prove Pompey’s intrinsic fortune.

<sup>10</sup> See Luck 1985, Socas 2011.

Against this background, it should come as no surprise that most common Romans would accept that ghosts, defined as “a disembodied figure believed to be the spirit of a living being who has died”<sup>11</sup>, could keep a certain form of existence<sup>12</sup>. The *Di Manes* were considered precisely a collective divinity of the deceased. The phrase *D. M. S. (Deis Manibus Sacrum*, “consecrated to the gods Manes”) was customarily dedicated to them in funeral inscriptions, and they received regular cult in the *Parentalia* festivities. In the festival *Feralia*, which closed the *Parentalia*, people brought humble offerings to the graves of their relatives, intended to placate the potential hostility of the spirits<sup>13</sup>. It is therefore safe to assume that Roman feared the possibility of these ghosts interacting with living people. Furthermore, Roman people believed that the ghosts of unburied dead, called *Lemures*, haunted inhabited areas, so they should be appeased by means of apotropaic rites carried out during the *Lemuria* festivity.

An episode in the comedy *Mostellaria* by Plautus can contribute to a better pondering of Roman beliefs about ghosts. In this play, we find the earliest extant haunted-house story in classical literature<sup>14</sup>. The *Mostellaria* belongs to the *palliata comoedia*-genre, whose plot takes place in a relatively realistic setting and whose characters are ordinary people. In fact, the ghost episode is simply a story made up by a slave. While Theopropides is travelling abroad, his son Philolaches dilapidates the familiar fortune. When the old father returns home unexpectedly, the slave Tranio tries to keep him from the house and from finding out about his son’s misbehavior. Tranio tells Theopropides that the whole family has been forced to abandon the house, because it has been haunted by a ghost. To add likelihood, the slave inserts an explanation typical of ghost folktales: the ghost haunts the house because he had been violently murdered and badly buried (497-505), and the ghost himself disclosed his story to Philolaches in dreams (490-505):

*TH. Quis homo? an gnatus meus? TR. St, tace, ausculta modo.  
ait venisse illum in somnis ad se mortuom.* 490  
*TH. Nempe ergo in somnis? TR. Ita. sed ausculta modo.  
ait illum hoc pacto sibi dixisse mortuom.*  
*TH. In somnis? TR. Mirum quin vigilantia diceret,  
qui abhinc sexaginta annos occisus foret.  
interdum inepte stultus es,* 495

<sup>11</sup> Felton 1999a: 12. Compatible definitions are offered by Emmons 2003: 88 (“the returning spirits of dead humans”), and Hernán-Pérez Guijarro 2009: 31-32. Similar definitions of ghosts were provided in antiquity by Lucretius 1. 134-135, 733-734, as discussed by Traver Vera 2014: 29.

<sup>12</sup> For the beliefs of the Greeks on the afterlife, see Rohde 1925. For the Roman views on this subject-matter, see Laguna Mariscal 1997 and Felton 1999a: 4-21.

<sup>13</sup> On these festivals see Felton 1999a: 12-14.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussions by Felton 1999a: 50-61, Felton 1999b, and García Jurado 2006.

THEUROPIDES- What person? My son?

TRANIO- Hist! hold your peace: just listen. He said that a dead man came to him in his sleep----

THEUROPIDES- In his dreams, then, you mean?

TRANIO- Just so. But only listen. He said that he had met with his death by these means----

THEUROPIDES- What, in his sleep?

TRANIO- It would have been surprising if he had told him awake, who had been murdered sixty years ago. On some occasions you are absurdly simple.

Two points concern us: the fact that Theopropides swallows the tale and gets frightened, in spite of certain inconsistencies in Tranio's speech<sup>15</sup>; and the fact that the slave specifies that the ghostly apparition happened in a dream, while mocking the old man's suggestion that the ghost could have appeared in person (493-495). This suggests that the audience of the play (and Roman people in general), while being mostly skeptical about ghosts appearing in person, was ready to accept their appearing in dreams. In other words, a natural connection between ghosts and dreams was felt, as asserted by Felton<sup>16</sup>: "Many ghosts in Classical Literature appear to people in their dreams, and the Greeks and Romans clearly were not unaware of the connection"<sup>17</sup>.

#### EPIC SWEETHEART: APPARITION OF PATROCLUS TO ACHILLES

A specific example of this possibility occurs when the ghost of a late girlfriend or beloved shows up to her/his sleeping lover in a dream, with the purpose of reproaching him for his past behavior or conveying instructions. We find a precedent in Chant 23 of Homer's *Iliad*. Patroclus had been killed in the battlefield by Hector in Chant 16, but his body had been neglected because of Achilles' urgent desire to exact revenge on Hector. It is not until the second night after Patroclus' death that Achilles and his comrades, the Myrmidons, lament his death and carry out some preliminary ceremonies (23. 1-34). Then they have a rich dinner and go to bed (23. 54-58). Achilles himself falls asleep out of over-tiredness (23. 59-64). Then, as Patroclus' body keeps unburied (*ataphos*), his ghost appears to Achilles in a dream (23. 65-92). Achilles answers to him, and the apparition makes him reflect (23. 93-104).

It is worth noticing the main elements of this episode. Patroclus' ghost has the same appearance he had when he was alive, in stature, eyes, voice, and

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<sup>15</sup> Detected and discussed by Felton 1999b.

<sup>16</sup> Felton 1999a: 19.

<sup>17</sup> Dimundo 1990: 44-53 also explores the natural link between dreams and ghosts' apparitions. For the various functions of dreams in early modern English culture, see Levin 2010.

clothes (23. 66-67, 107). In his speech, Patroclus touches on three main points: he requests a proper burial, so that he can enter safely the realm of Hades for never returning (23. 70-79); he prophesizes Achilles' own death (23. 80-81); and he asks for the bones and ashes of both heroes (Patroclus and Achilles) to be reunited after Achilles' death, as a monument of the intimacy<sup>18</sup> they shared while living (23. 82-92). Achilles promises to obey the instructions (23. 93-96) and tries to embrace the ghost of his dear comrade, but the soul dissipates like smoke (23. 97-101). Finally, Achilles reflects on the destination of the souls: for him, the ghostly apparition proves that the souls keep a certain kind of after-life existence, although this existence is not full, since their mental strength does not remain.

In this passage, the episode of the ghostly apparition of a person to his/her lover features for the first time in Western literature. Several of its elements will be echoed in later treatments.

### CYNTHIA HAUNTS THE DREAMS OF PROPERTIUS

By the time Propertius wrote his fourth book of elegies, he had broken up with Cynthia (as narrated in elegies 3. 24 and 3. 25), who had eventually passed away. Poems included in the fourth book either develop etiological discussions on the history of Rome, or remember Cynthia from the distance, without the pressing emotions present in books 1-3<sup>19</sup>. Some scholars have called this book an “anomaly” in the corpus<sup>20</sup>. Propertius writes poem 4. 7 as a kind of recapitulation on his love affair with Cynthia<sup>21</sup>. The following structure can be established for the poem:

1. *Introduction* (1-12)
  - Reflection on Manes (1-2)
  - Apparition of Cynthia (3-12)
2. *Speech by Cynthia* (13-92)
  - a. Complaint about Propertius' unfaithfulness (13-48)
  - b. Self-defense (49-70)

<sup>18</sup> This professed intimacy confirms that the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus was homoerotic in nature, as put forward by Sanz Morales – Laguna Mariscal 2003 and Laguna Mariscal – Sanz Morales 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Ramírez de Verger 1989: 29, Dimundo 1990: 15.

<sup>20</sup> Knox 2004: 153. On the odd structure of this book, Janan 2001: 7 speaks about the “contradictory division of Propertius' fourth book into erotic and political elements, along with the dichotomies of private versus public and individual versus social suggested by the principal divide”. See also Janan 2001: 13-22, Wyke 2002: 99-108, Dufallo 2007: 83, 98, and Keith 2008: 83.

<sup>21</sup> This long and difficult elegy has been discussed by Muecke 1974, Yardley 1977, Dimundo 1990, Janan 2001: 100-113, Knox 2004, Hutchinson 2006: 170-189, and Dufallo 2007: 77-84.

- Cynthia's faithfulness (49-54)
  - Description of good and evil heroines in Hell (55-70)
  - c. Instructions to Propertius (71-94)
    - Protection of servants (71-76)
    - Funeral offerings (77-86)
    - Assessments of ghosts' visits (87-94)
3. *Closure*: Propertius vainly tries to hug the ghost (95-96)

As an introduction, Propertius affirms the existence of Manes, taking Cynthia's visit as an argument for this conviction (1-2); then he describes her physical appearance (3-12):

*Sunt aliquid Manes: letum non omnia finit,  
luridaque evictos effugit umbra rogos.  
Cynthia namque meo visast incumbere fulcro,  
murmur ad extremae nuper humata tubae,  
cum mihi somnus ab exsequiis penderet amoris, 5  
et quererer lecti frigida regna mei.  
eosdem habuit secum quibus est elata capillos,  
eosdem oculos: lateri vestis adusta fuit,  
et solitum digito beryllon adederat ignis,  
summaque Lethaeus triverat ora liquor. 10  
spirantisque animos et vocem misit: at illi  
pollicibus fragiles increpuere manus:*

There are Spirits, of a kind: death does not end it all, and the pale ghost escapes the ruined pyre. For Cynthia, lately buried beside the roadway's murmur, seemed to lean above my couch, when sleep was denied me after love's interment, and I grieved at the cold kingdom of my bed. The same hair she had, that was borne to the grave, the same eyes: her garment charred against her side: the fire had eaten the beryl ring from her finger, and Lethe's waters had worn away her lips. She sighed out living breath and speech, but her brittle hands rattled their finger-bones.<sup>22</sup>

Cynthia's long speech to Propertius (13-92) focuses on *her* loyalty and *his* unfaithfulness. She reproaches Propertius for being able to sleep, in spite of her decease being so recent, and she recalls their past physical intimacy (13-22):

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<sup>22</sup> Translations from Propertius are by Kline 2012.

*'perfide nec cuiquam melior sperande puellae,  
 in te iam vires somnus habere potest?  
 iamne tibi exciderunt vigilacis furta Suburae  
 et mea nocturnis trita fenestra dolis? 15  
 per quam demisso quotiens tibi fune pependi,  
 alterna veniens in tua colla manu!  
 saepe Venus trivio commissa, et pectore mixto  
 fecerunt tepidas proelia nostra vias. 20  
 foederis heu pacti, cuius fallacia verba  
 non audituri diripuere Noti!*

'Faithless man, of whom no girl can hope for better, does sleep already have power over you? Are the tricks of sleepless Subura now forgotten, and my windowsill, worn by nocturnal guile? From which I so often hung on a rope dropped to you, and came to your shoulders, hand over hand. Often we made love at the crossroads, and breast to breast our cloaks made the roadways warm. Alas for the silent pact whose false words the uncaring South-West Wind has swept away!

In the section of instructions (71-94), the ghost of Cynthia asks for further funeral dispositions (77-86) and requires Propertius to respect visits by the ghosts as an authoritative source of messages and warnings (87-94). Then Cynthia prophesizes that their ashes will eventually be reunited in the afterlife (93-94). When Propertius tries to hug her, she dissipates among his arms (95-96):

*nunc te possideant aliae: mox sola tenebo:  
 mecum eris, et mixtis ossibus ossa teram.'  
 haec postquam querula mecum sub lite peregit,  
 inter complexus excidit umbra meos. 95*

Now, let others have you: soon I alone will hold you: you'll be with me, I'll wear away the bone joined with bone.'

After she'd ended, in complaint, her quarrel with me her shadow swiftly slipped from my embrace.

Scholars have long recognized that Propertius portrays Cynthia's apparition on the model of the scene in *Iliad* 23<sup>23</sup>. Many of the elements in the Homeric

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<sup>23</sup> At least from the article by Muecke 1974 and the monograph by Hubbard 1975: 149-152. After them, the Homeric background has become *doctrina communis*: Dalzell 1980: 33, Panpanghelis 1987: 146, Dimundo 1990: 27-43, Canali 2000: 443-452, Knox 2004: 55 and n. 6, Hutchinson 2006: 170, Günther 2006: 380, and Dufallo 2007: 78. For another thing, Dickie 2014: 4 considers the Propertian parallel in his discussion on the meaning of the passage in the *Iliad*.



episode are echoed in Propertius' account. Both ghosts (Patroclus and Cynthia) are said explicitly to appear in a dream. Their main purpose is to reproach their lovers for neglecting their burial, and to request fast and proper burial dispositions, although Cynthia's request includes further items. Like Patroclus' ghost, Cynthia is said to hover above Propertius' head. Both ghosts are described as having the same physical appearance that they had when alive, although the ghost of Cynthia seems somehow more emaciated and grim. Both Patroclus and Cynthia reproach their lovers for being able to sleep in the circumstances. Both recall their past physical / sexual intimacy with their lovers. And finally, both ask their lovers to mix their ashes and bones as a sign of love. The two survivors (Achilles and Propertius) take the visits by their beloved as evidence of the existence of ghosts: Achilles expounds this conviction as a conclusion and Propertius as an opening generalization<sup>24</sup>.

For a scholar like Dalzell<sup>25</sup>, Propertius has used a sophisticated Homeric framework to sum up some elegiac motifs very dear to him: faithfulness versus infidelity, death, and the underworld. The main innovation of Propertius in respect to Homer (*oppositio in imitando*) is the fact that Cynthia contrasts her own faithfulness with Propertius' infidelity. By this procedure, Propertius inserts the ghost episode within the tradition of Latin love elegy, faithfulness or loyalty (*fides*) being the *sine qua non* condition for the love relationship<sup>26</sup>. The message of this elegy is that the relationship between Propertius and Cynthia failed for lack of loyalty among the lovers.

#### PETRARCH'S LAURA: THE GHOST TURNED INTO AN ANGEL

Petrarch (1304-1374) can be considered an agent of the Classical Tradition, since he introduces several classical motifs in modern poetry<sup>27</sup>. He is the author of a *Canzoniere*, whose main subject matter is his love for Laura, a girl whom he allegedly met in 1327. He wrote the collection over a period of 40 years. The sequence has been divided traditionally in two sections: *Rime in vita di Madonna Laura*, that is, poems written while the Lady was alive (poems 1-266); and *Rime in morte di Madonna Laura* (poems 267-366), that is, poems written after Laura's death, which took place in 1348.

Not less than fifteen poems in the latter section present Laura's spirit appearing to Petrarch, to provide him with comfort and advice<sup>28</sup>: "Ben torna

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<sup>24</sup> Hutchinson 2006: 172 on Propertius 4. 7. 1: "The poem begins from the end of Homer's episode: Achilles says in grief (*Il.* 23. 103-104) 'so even in Hades there is a soul and ghost' (or, with an ancient variant, 'soul and ghost are something')."

<sup>25</sup> Dalzell 1980: 35.

<sup>26</sup> See Librán Moreno 2014.

<sup>27</sup> As stated by Laguna Mariscal 2000: 245 n. 4, and Schwartz 2004: "Petarca, el gran intermediario".

<sup>28</sup> *Canzoniere* 279, 281, 282, 283. 9-11, 284, 285, 286, 302, 328. 9-14, 336, 341, 342, 343, 359,

a consolar tanto dolore / madonna”<sup>29</sup>. Several points are likely inspired by Propertius 4. 7: the apparition of the late Lady in dreams<sup>30</sup>; the description of her physical beauty equaling the looks she had when alive (386. 3 “qua lio la vidi in su l’ età fiorita”)<sup>31</sup>; and her ability to utter messages<sup>32</sup>. A couple of representative examples will suffice to show Petrarch’s tone and feelings:

*CANZONIERE 282*

Alma felice che sovente torni  
a consolar le mie notti dolenti  
con gli occhi tuoi che Morte non à spenti,  
ma sopra ’l mortal modo fatti adorni:

quanto gradisco che’ miei tristi giorni 5  
a rallegrar de tua vista consenti!  
Così comincio a ritrovar presenti  
le tue bellezze a’ suoi usati soggiorni,

là ’ve cantando andai di te molt’anni, 10  
or, come vedi, vo di te piangendo:  
di te piangendo no, ma de’ miei danni.

Sol un riposo trovo in molti affanni,  
che, quando torni, te conosco e ’ntendo  
a l’andar, a la voce, al volto, a’ panni.

*CANZONIERE 326*

Or ài fatto l’extremo di tua possa,  
o crudel Morte; or ài ’l regno d’Amore  
impoverito; or di bellezza il fiore  
e ’l lume ài spento, et chiuso in poca fossa;

or ài spogliata nostra vita et scossa 5

362. See the survey by Regn 2014. Schwartz 2004 has noticed the influence of Propertius 4. 7 in Petrarch, although she only considers *Canzoniere* 359.

<sup>29</sup> *Canzoniere* 283. 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> *Canzoniere* 282, 342. 6 “al lecto”, 343, 359. 3 “ponsi del letto”, 359. 71 “sonno”.

<sup>31</sup> *Canzoniere* 282. 13-14 “te conosco e ’ntendo / a l’andar, a la voce, al volto, a’ panni”, 284. 8 “sí dolce in vista”, 286. 3-4 “anchor par qui sia, / et viva, et senta”, 302. 4 “la rividi piú bella”, 328. 9 “Li occhi belli”, 336. 3 “qua lio la vidi in su l’ età fiorita”, 359. 56-58. However, in one single passage Petrarch portrays Laura’s face faded by death: “Discolorato ài, Morte, il piú bel volto / che mai si vide, e i piú begli occhi spenti;” (283. 1-2), which reminds us of Cynthia’s degradation in Propertius 4. 7. 7-12.

<sup>32</sup> *Canzoniere* 279. 9-14, 282. 14 “la voce”, 283. 12 “come ella parla”, 285. 10 “nel parlar”, 286. 13 “suo dir”, 336. 8-9 “sua dolce favela”, 341. 9-14, 342. 9-14, 343. 4 “voce”.

d'ogni ornamento et del sovran suo honore:  
ma la fama e 'l valor che mai non more  
non è in tua forza; abbiti ignude l'ossa:

ché l'altro à 'l cielo, et di sua chiaritate,  
quasi d'un piú bel sol, s'allegra et gloria,  
et fi' al mondo de' buon' sempre in memoria.

10

Vinca 'l cor vostro, in sua tanta victoria,  
angel novo, lassú, di me pietate,  
come vinse qui 'l mio vostra beltate.

But there are two main differences: while Cynthia is described as a ghost with a grim appearance, escaped from Hell, Laura is pictured rather as a beautiful angel, coming from Heaven<sup>33</sup>; the aim of Cynthia was to reproach Propertius while Laura's purpose is declaredly to offer comfort and holy advice<sup>34</sup>. The heathen Roman ghost has turned into a Renaissance Christian angel.

#### THE COY GHOST FLEES THE DESIRE OF LUIS MARTÍN DE LA PLAZA

Luis Martín de la Plaza (1577-1565)<sup>35</sup> belonged to the Antequera's school of poets, transitional between Renaissance and Baroque. His poetic work, though valuable, is scarcely known today, perhaps because it has not been properly edited<sup>36</sup>. Twenty-seven of his poems were included in the Mannerist anthology *Flores de poetas ilustres*, published by Pedro de Espinosa in 1605<sup>37</sup>. In the following poem (number 4 of *Flores*), which Luis Alberto de Cuenca had included in a collection of Spanish poetry<sup>38</sup>, Martín de la Plaza recalls how his deceased Lady<sup>39</sup> appeared to him in a dream:

Cuando a su dulce olvido me convida  
la noche, y en sus faldas me adormece,

<sup>33</sup> *Canzoniere* 281. 2 "in forma di nimpha o d'altra diva", 343. 3 "angelica", 359. 60 "Spirito ignudo sono, e 'n ciel mi godo".

<sup>34</sup> *Canzoniere* 279. 9-14, 282. 2 "consolar", 282. 6 "rallegrar", 283. 9 "consolar", 284. 3 "medicina", 285. 4 "fedel consiglio", 286. 9-14, 341. 5 "ad acquetare il cor misero et mesto", 342. 10-11 "col suol dir m'apporta / dolcezza", 343. 8 "al mio scampo".

<sup>35</sup> Pepe Sarno – Reyes Cano 2006: 185-186.

<sup>36</sup> This is the view of Morata Pérez 1995.

<sup>37</sup> Modern edition by Pepe Sarno – Reyes Cano 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Cuenca 1998: 184-185.

<sup>39</sup> The poem has also been interpreted by Vique Domene 2011 as dealing with a living Lady, who despises the poet during the day and whose image appears to the lyric subject in dreams. I think that the phrase "de aquella que fue sueño en esta vida" (4) and the adverb "aun" (10) rather suggest that the Lady is dead by now.

entre sueños la imagen me parece  
de aquella que fue sueño en esta vida.

Yo, sin temor que su desdén lo impida,  
los brazos tiendo al gusto que me ofrece;  
mas ella (sombra al fin) desaparece,  
y abrazo al aire, donde está escondida.

5

Así burlado, digo: «¡Ah falso engaño  
de aquella ingrata, que aun mi mal procura;  
tente, aguarda, lisonja del deseo!»

10

Mas ella, en tanto, por la noche oscura  
huye; corro tras ella, ¡oh caso extraño!  
¿Qué pretendo alcanzar, pues sigo al viento?

The apparition is identified as the ghost of a dead beloved (4: “de aquella que fue sueño en esta vida”), who appears to the lyric subject in a dream (3: “entre sueños”) during the night (2: “la noche”, 12: “por la noche oscura”). The main motif of the sonnet is the poet’s desire (6: “gusto”, 11: “deseo”) and his vain attempt to embrace her (5-14). This attempt fails because the image has an airy-and wind-like quality (8: “abrazo al aire”, 14: “sigo al viento”), so it eventually fades and flees from the frustrated lover (12-14). Most of these elements come from Homer, Propertius, and Petrarch. In contrast to these texts, the ghost is not given a voice in the sonnet by Martín de la Plaza, and the main subject matter is not her reproach, but the lover’s frustrated desire.

#### THE GHOST OF THE BELOVED IN JAIME GIL DE BIEDMA

The poet Jaime Gil de Biedma (1929-1990), a member of the poetic generation of the 50’s<sup>40</sup>, was homosexual, but he had a love relationship with an attractive young woman, named Isabel Gil Moreno de Mora (1938-1968) but known by the nickname “Bel”. She was a Muse (together with Teresa Gimpera) of an intellectual and political group, called the “gauche divine” (*divine Left*)<sup>41</sup>. He dedicated at least two poems to Bel. While she was alive, the poet wrote “A una dama muy joven separada” for her. Bel died tragically in December 1968 as her car was dragged away by a flash flood; Gil de Biedma attempted to commit suicide (by cutting his veins), which prevented him from attending her funeral. In his poem “Conversación” the poet imagines that her ghost appears to him in a dream<sup>42</sup>:

<sup>40</sup> See Riera 1988.

<sup>41</sup> On this group, see Vázquez Montalbán 1971, Regàs 2000, Moix 2002.

<sup>42</sup> For this elaboration, see Laguna Mariscal 2002 and 2005.

CONVERSACIÓN

Los muertos pocas veces libertad  
alcanzáis a tener, pero la noche  
que regresáis es vuestra,  
vuestra completamente.

Amada mía, remordimiento mío, 5  
*la nuit c'est toi* cuando estoy solo  
y vuelves tú, comienzas  
en tus retratos a reconocerme.

¿Qué daño me recuerda tu sonrisa?  
¿Y cuál dureza mía está en tus ojos? 10  
¿Me tranquilizas porque estuve cerca  
de ti en algún momento?

La parte de tu muerte que me doy,  
la parte de tu muerte que yo puse  
de mi cosecha, cómo poder pagártela... 15  
Ni la parte de vida que tuvimos juntos.

Cómo poder saber que has perdonado,  
conmigo sola en el lugar del crimen?  
Cómo poder dormir, mientras que tú tiritas  
en el rincón más triste de mi cuarto? 20

It is my contention that Propertius' elegy 4. 7 was a conspicuous reference in contemporary letters and the main model for the development of this ghostly episode<sup>43</sup>. Contrary to Propertius, Gil de Biedma does not lend Bel a voice; but, like Propertius, he describes the circumstances of her visit and her difficulty fleeing the realm of the dead (1-4). He also describes her physical appearance (9-10: mouth, eyes) and he remembers their past intimacy (11-12, 16). Although the voiceless lady cannot reproach him for anything, he feels partially responsible for her past life and death (5, 13-15). The fact that the poet was unable to attend Bel's funeral reminds us of Cynthia reproaching Propertius for neglecting her funeral. The consequence is that Bel haunts the nights<sup>44</sup> of the poet (5-8, 17-20) as an act of retaliation, like Cynthia haunted Propertius' sleep. While Cynthia reproached Propertius for sleeping, Biedma acknowledges his inability to sleep (19-20). The evocation of Propertius' elegy 4. 7 is clear, but Biedma retorts the classical motif to express his feelings of remorse.

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<sup>43</sup> Laguna Mariscal 2002. García Jurado 2010 has explored the creative use of Propertius by Proust.

<sup>44</sup> As in the title of a novel by Joaquín Leguina: *Tu nombre envenena mis sueños* (1992).

## THE POETIC CYCLE OF RITA IN LUIS ALBERTO DE CUENCA'S POETRY

The poet Luis Alberto de Cuenca (1950), who belongs to the Spanish poetic group of the 70's, develops many motifs coming from the Classical Tradition in his poetry<sup>45</sup>. When he was a teenager and during three years he had a relationship with a girl named Rita Macau Fárrega (1951-1970). Tragically, she died in a car accident<sup>46</sup>. De Cuenca was acquainted and familiar with the main texts that have transmitted the episode of the ghostly visit, since he published a translation of Propertius 4. 7<sup>47</sup> and included the sonnet "Cuando a su dulce olvido me convida" by Luis Martín de la Plaza in his anthology *Las cien mejores poesías de la poesía castellana*<sup>48</sup>. Against this background, Luis Alberto has written a cycle of poems dealing with the memory of Rita<sup>49</sup>: his main hypotext is Propertius 4. 7, but he is also inspired by the feeling of frustration featuring in Luis Martín de la Plaza's sonnet.

In the poem "El fantasma" ("The Ghost"), included in the book *Necrofilia* (1983), the poet asks the ghost of Rita for sexual intimacy, only to discover that this is impossible, since she is only an apparition in a dream. This poem echoes the sections of Propertius 4. 7 where Cynthia remembers the physical intimacy of the lovers and where Propertius tries vainly to embrace her image:

### EL FANTASMA

Cómeme y, con mi cuerpo en tu boca,  
hazte mucho más grande  
o infinitamente más pequeña.  
Envuélveme en tu pecho.  
Bésame.  
Pero nunca me digas la verdad.  
Nunca me digas: «Estoy muerta.  
No abrazas más que un sueño»

5

In the poem "Rita", belonging to the book *El otro sueño* (1987), the lyric subject dreams again about Rita. De Cuenca takes two elements from Propertius: he imagines Rita alive in a dream (9: "tan viva como entonces"); and he yields to the evidence that she cannot flee the grave and the realm of the dead:

<sup>45</sup> As explored by Suárez Martínez 2008, and Martínez Sariego – Laguna Mariscal 2010.

<sup>46</sup> This story is told by the poet himself: Cuenca 1997 and 2015: 37. See Lanz 2006: 241 and Peña Rodríguez 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Cuenca – Alvar Ezquerro 2004: 94-97.

<sup>48</sup> Cuenca 1998: 184-185.

<sup>49</sup> Lanz 2006: 241, 309, 404, Martínez Sariego – Laguna Mariscal 2010: 390.

RITA

Rita, ¿qué vas a hacer el domingo? ¿Hay domingos  
donde vives? ¿Hay citas? ¿Se retrasa la gente?

No sé por qué te agobio con preguntas inútiles,  
por qué sigo pensando que puedes contestarme.

Sé que te gustaría tener voz y palabras

5

en lugar de silencio, y escapar de la tumba  
para contarme cosas del país de los muertos.

Pero no puedes, Rita, no yo debo soñarte  
una noche de agosto tan viva como entonces.

Hay que guardar las formas. Al cabo, los domingos  
son los días peores para salir de casa.

10

The last poem by De Cuenca we are going to explore is “Qué complaciente estabas, amor mío, en la pesadilla” (“How obliging you were, honey, in the nightmare”), included in the book *Por Fuertes y Fronteras* (1996):

QUÉ COMPLACIENTE ESTABAS, AMOR MÍO, EN LA PESADILLA

El problema no es tener que abandonarlo  
todo a cambio de ti.

El problema es tener que abandonarte a ti  
a cambio de un fantasma.

Son las cosas que ocurren cuando sueñas que vuelve  
la mujer que no ha de volver.

5

Like Propertius, Luis Alberto de Cuenca narrates that the ghost (4: “fantasma”) shows up to him in a dream/nightmare (title: “en la pesadilla”, 5: “cuando sueñas”), but in contrast to Cynthia’s message, he acknowledges that dead people cannot return from the afterlife (6: “la mujer que no ha de volver”)<sup>50</sup>. In a way, De Cuenca is correcting (*oppositio in imitando*) both Propertius, who thought that ghosts existed; and Cynthia, whose ghost asserted that ghostly apparitions in dreams are authoritative.

Besides this clear evocation of Propertius, Luis Alberto de Cuenca follows on the footsteps of Martín de la Plaza. Like Martín de la Plaza, De Cuenca refuses to accept the reality of the ghost, so the ghostly visit only exacerbates his hapless longing for the dead beloved.

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<sup>50</sup> This idea is well known in classical and modern literature. Catullus wrote: *qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum / illuc, unde negant redire quemquam* (3. 11-12). De Cuenca himself translated those lines: “Ahora marcha por un camino tenebroso / hacia el país de donde nadie regresa” (Cuenca – Alvar Ezquerro 2004: 27). It is remarkable that De Cuenca inserts in his translation an echo of the phrase “The undiscovered Country, from whose Borne / no Traveler returns,” (W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* A3 S1 79-80). For this blending of sources (*contaminatio*) see Laguna Mariscal 2007.

## THE MOTIF IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

The modern film *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (2009)<sup>51</sup> tells the story of Connor, a young womanizer unable to engage with women. The ghost of his deceased uncle, uncle Wayne, tries to persuade him to change his attitude. Uncle Wayne announces that Connor will be visited by three female ghosts, coming from the past, the present, and the future. The three ghosts reproach Connor for his misbehavior towards women and eventually succeed in making him change his attitude. Lastly, he decides to engage in a faithful relationship with his first girlfriend, Jenny. While the general scheme of the plot is obviously based on Charles Dickens' famous story *A Christmas Carol*, the erotic application is a development of the classical motif explored in this paper. We mention this film not because of its quality, but because it proves that the classical motif is alive today, even in mass culture.

## CONCLUSIONS

The ghostly visit of the sweetheart first appeared in a passage by Homer, where the soul of Patroclus showed up to Achilles, which established the main elements of the episode: apparition of the ghost in a dream, difficulty to escape the realm of Hades, aspect of the ghost similar to the aspect he/she had when living, speech by the ghost (usually conveying reproach and instructions), general discussion about afterlife existence, and impossibility to embrace the fading ghost.

Propertius drew inspiration from Homer to describe the apparition of the deceased Cynthia to him in elegy 4. 7: Cynthia's main purpose is to reproach him for his unfaithfulness. The present research has shown that the Propertian elegy was the main reference for modern treatments.

Petrarch, who was very fond of Propertius and therefore likely took the motif from the Roman elegiac poet, dedicated numerous poems of his *Canzoniere* to represent the late Laura appearing to him in dreams: but Laura is not a hellish ghost but rather a heavenly angel, whose purpose is to comfort, not to reproach. Luis Martín de la Plaza writes about the visit of a female ghost in a dream: the impossibility to embrace her causes frustration in him. Contemporary poets like Jaime Gil de Biedma and Luis Alberto de Cuenca, who also picture their late girlfriends appearing to them in dreams, use the motif to deploy their own anxieties. The apparition of Bel to Gil de Biedma awakens feelings of guilt. Luis Alberto de Cuenca translated Propertius and edited Martín de la Plaza: like in

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<sup>51</sup> *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*. 2009. Nationality: USA. Director: Mark Waters. Script: Jon Lucas, Scott Moore. Cast: Matthew McConaughey (Connor Mead), Jennifer Garner (Jenny Perotti), Michael Douglas (uncle Wayne).



the sonnet of Martín de la Plaza, the ghostly visit of the deceased girlfriend stirs up despair and frustration.

The film *Ghost of Girlfriends Past* deals with the classical motif, confirming that it is alive in contemporary culture. Classical culture continues to be a living code for conveying ideas, feelings, and anxieties.