



# HAVNTED GREECE AND ROME

*Ghost Stories  
from  
Classical Antiquity*

D. FELTON

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*Talking of ghosts, he said, "It is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it; but all belief is for it."*

JAMES BOSWELL  
*Life of Johnson*

*The same ignorance makes me so bold as to deny absolutely the truth of the various ghost stories, and yet with the common, though strange, reservation that while I doubt any one of them, still I have faith in the whole of them taken together.*

IMMANUEL KANT  
*Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*

*Should Latin, Greek, and Hebrew fail,  
I know a charm which **must** prevail:  
Take but an ounce of Common Sense,  
'Twill scare the Ghosts and drive 'em hence.*

*Public Advertiser*  
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## PREFACE

WHILE I WAS DOING GRADUATE WORK IN CLASSICS AT THE University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I was introduced to one of the most famous ghost stories from antiquity, Pliny the Younger's tale of a haunted house at Athens. One of the requirements in the program was a course on Latin composition, and our professor, Larry Stephens, had assigned Pliny's story to illustrate the different uses of the imperfect and perfect tenses in a narrative. I had little talent for Latin composition; with apologies to Dr. Stephens, I must admit that I found the supernatural content of the story far more interesting than the technicalities of Pliny's excellent prose style, and I was soon wondering whether there were many more ghost stories like Pliny's surviving from Greece and Rome. As it turned out, there were a great many ghost stories of all kinds. I wanted to write a dissertation on the topic, but as the amount of available material could easily have filled an encyclopedia, I decided to concentrate only on the haunted-house stories. For this book, the dissertation has been greatly revised and expanded to include other types of haunting as well.

There are still many kinds of ghost story excluded from this study. Some people may be disappointed to find that tales of necromancy, of spirit possession, of trips to the underworld, and of witchcraft are not discussed in any detail in these pages. The ghost of Darius from Aeschylus's *Persians*, invoked by his people after their defeat by the Greeks, is mentioned only in passing. The witch Erictho from Lucan's *Pharsalia*, who compels a corpse to speak in what must be the most gruesome necromantic scene ever written, does not make an appearance here. Nor does the wounded werewolf from Petronius's *Satyricon*. The shades of the dead who inhabit the White Isle, too, are absent. Instead, this book focuses on hauntings, cases of revenants and apparitions that come back from the dead of their own accord, appearing to people of this world in order to warn them of danger, to prophesy, to take revenge, to request proper burial, or simply to comfort the living.

Although this study of ghost stories originated as a dissertation written

in fulfillment of a Ph.D. in Classics, in its current form the book is intended to appeal not only to classicists but to a wider audience, including folklorists and students of English literature and, ideally, anyone interested in a good ghost story. To make this book accessible to nonclassicists, I have moved nearly all of the Greek and Latin passages into the notes and have provided my own translations of them for the main text.

I am grateful to many people for their assistance and patience during the writing of this book. I thank my original dissertation committee, particularly Kenneth Reckford and George Houston, for allowing me to write on a folkloric topic and for their careful direction. I owe a particular debt to Bill Hansen, who for years now has been a mentor to me concerning folklore in classical literature. I would also like to thank Adrienne Mayor for bringing many of these ghost stories to my attention, Don Lateiner for spending so much time discussing crisis apparitions with me, and Sylvia Grider for generously allowing me to preview her paper on haunted houses in literature and culture. Jeff Carnes, Dave Johnson, Marybeth Lavrakas, Joan O'Brien, Shawn O'Bryhim, and Lisa Splittgerber read the manuscript at various stages, and I am very grateful for their valuable comments and suggestions. I thank the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C., for a fellowship that allowed me the time and resources to concentrate on parts of this book during the summer of 1996. Thom Thibeault of Southern Illinois University provided technical support during the final stages of writing. I am particularly grateful for the expert guidance of several people associated with the University of Texas Press, including Ali Hossaini, Jim Burr, Leslie Tingle, and copyeditor Sherry Wert.

Finally, I wish to thank my family and friends, without whose encouragement, support, and patience this book would not have been completed.

## INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT HAUNTINGS—HAUNTINGS RECORDED TWO thousand years ago by the writers of ancient Greece and Rome. Stories of hauntings and other kinds of ghostly manifestation seem to have been as popular in antiquity as they are today,<sup>1</sup> and reports of hauntings are found in many different types of literature surviving from the classical world. They appear in the epic poetry of Homer and Vergil, the tragedies of Aeschylus and Seneca, the histories of Herodotus and Tacitus, the geography of Pausanias, the biographies of Plutarch, and many other genres. The comedies of Plautus, the letters of Pliny the Younger, and the satires of Lucian contain some of the best-known tales of hauntings from ancient times.

“Haunting” is the repeated manifestation of strange and inexplicable sensory phenomena—sounds, tactile sensations, smells, and visual hallucinations—generally said to be caused by ghosts or spirits attached to a certain locale.<sup>2</sup> Hauntings are the appearances of ghosts to people who were not actually trying to summon them, and in this respect hauntings differ greatly from necromantic ceremonies and *katabaseis*, or trips to the underworld, both of which involve intentional visitation and consultation with the dead. The term “haunt” is related to the word “home,” and typically a haunted location is the former home of the deceased or the spot where the deceased died. Haunted sites can also include places that were frequented or favored by the deceased. But as folklorists and parapsychologists point out, there is really no general pattern to a haunting. Some phenomena manifest themselves periodically or continually over time, whereas others occur only on “anniversary dates,” such as the date of death.<sup>3</sup> Though most hauntings involve apparitions, some involve only noises, such as mysterious footsteps or groaning. Others are characterized only by curious odors or chill breezes. And although hauntings are generally distinguished by their recurrent quality, some types of apparition that appear only once, at a crucial time, are often considered to be hauntings.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the apparent popularity of these tales in antiquity, few studies of

ancient ghost stories exist, and little has been written about ghosts as folkloric or literary figures in antiquity. Because relatively few stories of any length have survived, researchers are left almost no context in which to analyze them. The corpus available for study seems limited, because the longer stories—such as those of Plautus, Pliny, and Lucian—are only a few paragraphs in length, whereas the majority of ghost stories are only a few sentences long.

Another possible reason for the lack of critical attention given to ancient ghost stories is the corresponding lack of classification of supernatural phenomena—how, for example, to distinguish ghost stories from stories dealing with other types of supernatural being. This reflects a certain amount of confusion about how to define what constitutes a “ghost.” Nowadays a ghost is often defined as “a disembodied figure believed to be the spirit of a living being who has died,”<sup>5</sup> but in antiquity both the terminology used to describe such beings and the concept of “spirits of the dead” itself were much more generalized. Some ghosts were indeed considered to be the insubstantial spirits of the deceased, but the general title of “ghost” was also applied to all sorts of impersonal semi-divine apparitions, *daimones*, and other kinds of supernatural being, none of which were considered to be the spirits of people who had died.

This lack of specific categorization is largely due to the ancients’ perception of the supernatural. There were often no functional distinctions between the gods and other types of supernatural being, and many phenomena that modern folklore attributes specifically to ghosts were, in antiquity, considered communications from the gods. For example, odd phenomena such as showers of stones, doors opening by themselves, and disembodied voices are nowadays generally classified as poltergeist activity by folklorists and parapsychologists. In antiquity, however, such phenomena were considered portents.<sup>6</sup> That the Greeks and Romans did not divide things up the way we do is reflected in the lack of a distinct vocabulary to describe these phenomena. In Greek, for example, the words δαίμων (*daimōn*) and φάσμα (*phasma*) were used to describe nearly every type of supernatural activity, from gods to ghosts. In Latin as well, there was little distinction. Words such as *monstrum*, used in Roman state religion to refer to prodigies of nature, were also used to describe ghosts, which were usually not considered prodigies. But an examination of various ghost stories from antiquity shows that there were certain folkloric traditions associated with disembodied spirits of the dead, and different traditions associated with other types of supernatural being.

Although there has been little written about hauntings in antiquity, there

has been a great deal written about Greek and Roman perceptions of death, the soul, and the afterlife.<sup>7</sup> These studies discuss in depth the various conflicting views of the underworld in antiquity, such as those found in Homer and Vergil.<sup>8</sup> The inconsistencies were nicely expressed by Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682) in his *Hydriotaphia* (“Urn Burial”):

The departed spirits know things past and to come, yet are ignorant of things present. *Agamemnon* fortells what should happen unto *Ulysses*, yet ignorantly enquires what is become of his own Son. The Ghosts are afraid of swords in *Homer*, yet *Sibylla* tells *Aeneas* in *Virgil*, the thin habit of spirits was beyond the force of weapons. The spirits put off their malice with their bodies, and *Caesar* and *Pompey* accord in Latine Hell, yet *Ajax* in *Homer* endures not a conference with *Ulysses*: And *Deiphobus* appears all mangled in *Virgil's* Ghosts, yet we meet with perfect shadows among the wounded ghosts of *Homer*.<sup>9</sup>

Such inconsistencies in beliefs about the survival of the soul after death were accompanied by a lack of consensus in antiquity as to whether ghosts even existed. Some ancient Greeks claimed to see ghosts, whereas others, such as the Epicureans, were highly skeptical, trying to find material explanations for such phenomena. As Hopkins observes, the Greek and Roman beliefs “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 recognisable form.”<sup>10</sup> Roman beliefs about life after death were extraordinarily varied. No single orthodoxy dominated; polytheism was supplemented by philosophical speculation and by individual sects such as Stoicism, Mithraism, Judaism, and eventually Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Particular attention has also been paid to ghosts in Greek and Roman drama, where they often motivate the action. Whitmore (1915) presents a general study on the supernatural in tragedy, briefly mentioning the role of the supernatural in classical drama. Klotsche (1918) gathers many examples of supernatural events in the tragedies of Euripides and discusses them in a religious context, and Braginton (1933) does the same for Seneca’s tragedies. Probably the most important and thorough study of ghosts in classical drama is Hickman’s *Ghostly Etiquette on the Classical Stage* (1938), which examines the function of ghosts as stage characters in Greek and Roman tragedy and comedy, including even the fragmentary plays. The work takes into detailed consideration many well-known stage ghosts, such as Darius in Aeschylus’s *Persians*, Polydorus in Euripides’ *Hecuba*, and Tantalus in Seneca’s *Thyestes*. Also analyzed are references to less familiar ghosts in the

remnants of Roman tragedies by Ennius, Pacuvius, and Accius, and possible allusions to ghosts in the fragments of several Greek and Roman comedies. In addition to discussing ghosts that appear onstage in classical drama, Hickman points out the roles of ghosts that are only reported by other characters and never appear onstage. Hickman analyzes many aspects of the ghostly characters, including, for example, their physical appearance and clothing (when described), whether they speak or remain silent, which other characters are able to see them, what their motive is for appearing, and whether any physical phenomena, such as earthquakes or thunder, accompany their appearance. The work concludes with a brief look at ghosts in world drama and how later dramatists imitated the ghostly technique of classical writers.

The ghosts in Greek and Roman tragedy have perhaps had more appeal for scholars because they are dramatic characters with a substantial context for analysis, unlike other ghosts in the extant classical literature, which are mentioned only briefly in short local legends.

Outside of drama, Nardi has done detailed work on the legal aspects of ancient and modern haunted houses, and Radermacher discusses haunted houses briefly in his article on Lucian's supernatural stories and their religious implications.<sup>12</sup> Aside from these studies, however, we have only basic collections of ancient ghost stories with little or no interpretation of them. Such collections include Wendland's "Antike Geister- und Gespenstergeschichten" (1911), which gathers many stories of supernatural phenomena together under various headings; Collison-Morley's *Greek and Roman Ghost Stories* ([1912] 1968), which retells many of the stories from antiquity and provides modern British equivalents; W. M. S. Russell's "Greek and Roman Ghosts" ([1980] 1981), which selects a few stories and places them in a folkloric context; and Kytzler's *Geister, Gräber und Gespenster: Antike Spukgeschichten* (1989), another collection of Greek and Roman supernatural tales. Other than Russell's essay, none of these studies deals with the ancient ghost stories from a folkloric point of view, and none of them includes literary analysis. But stories of hauntings have been popular for a very long time, and, as Hickman notes, since ghosts have continued in popularity for nearly three thousand years, they surely merit a special study.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, modern writers of ghost stories are indebted to the Greek and Roman innovations, and it is surprising that classical scholars generally disparage ancient ghost stories. One commentator says, for example, "No one can help being struck by the bald and meagre character of these stories as a whole. They possess few of the qualities we expect to find in a good modern ghost story."<sup>14</sup> Another remarks on the "feebleness of many ancient ghost stories" *when judged by modern standards*.<sup>15</sup> This attitude, I sus-

pect, is partially responsible for the lack of critical attention given to the ancient ghost stories. Aside from the unfairness of judging classical stories by modern standards, these comments show that the ancient ghost stories have not been recognized as being, for the most part, recorded folk legends rather than fully developed literary fiction. Furthermore, the few longer ghost stories that remain, such as those of Pliny and Lucian, influenced the supernatural fiction of many great modern ghost-story writers—an influence that goes largely unrecognized when we dismiss the ancient ghost stories with only superficial analysis.

Though scholars in the field of classics have been slow to acknowledge the importance of ancient ghost stories to later literature, such has not been the case with scholars of English and American literature. Penzoldt, Briggs, and Lovecraft, among others who discuss the development of the modern ghost story, point out the importance of Greek and Roman ghost stories in their opening chapters.<sup>16</sup> And although classicists might not have considered ancient ghost stories from a literary or folkloric point of view, several of them have been interested from a parapsychological standpoint. One of the main classicists to show interest in ghost stories from antiquity was E. R. Dodds, who from his early youth “was actively interested, like his predecessor Gilbert Murray, in psychical research; he served on the council of the Society for Psychical Research from 1927, and was President from 1961 to 1963. He found evidence for telepathy convincing, but though retaining an open mind about the subject he was never persuaded by the alleged evidence for survival after death.”<sup>17</sup> Dodds did not find as much evidence in classical literature as he had hoped to, and as Collison-Morley points out, “The Greek and Roman [ghost] stories hardly come up to the standards required by the Society for Psychical Research. They are purely popular. . . . Naturally, they were never submitted to critical inquiry, and there is no foreshadowing of any of the modern theories” about what might cause such phenomena.<sup>18</sup>

This study undertakes to examine stories of hauntings from classical antiquity, giving particular attention to the longer tales of Plautus, Pliny, and Lucian, which center on haunted houses. I do not intend this book to be an exhaustive listing of ghost stories in the extant Greek and Roman literature; rather, I hope to give a representative sampling of the kinds of ghostly phenomena most frequently found therein, providing a folkloric perspective for such an analysis. As Dundes notes, the literary critic without proper knowledge of folklore can go wrong in identification and consequently in interpretation; conversely, too many folklorists, attempting to study literature, do little more than read for motifs without attempting to evaluate how an author uses folkloric elements and how those elements function in the

literary work as a whole.<sup>19</sup> By examining classical ghost stories in a folkloric context, we can see the importance of identifying and interpreting the presence of folkloric elements in literature.

The first chapter of this study explains the folkloric context of ghost stories by discussing various beliefs and rituals concerning ghosts in antiquity. Many of the folk-beliefs about ghosts recorded by the Greeks and Romans can still be found today—for example, the beliefs that certain animals are able to detect the presence of ghosts, that certain kinds of ghost tend to appear at midnight and others at midday, and that ghosts vanish at cockcrow. Though these folk-beliefs were widespread in the ancient world, as were various festivals to honor and appease the dead, there was at the same time skepticism expressed about the nature of apparitions, and many scientists and philosophers such as Aristotle and Lucretius tried to find physical explanations for these alleged supernatural events.

The second chapter examines problems in defining and classifying different sorts of ghostly phenomena. Because the Greeks and Romans generally made no specific distinctions between ghosts, semi-divine apparitions, and other daimones, Greek and Latin words for ghosts and other apparitions are generally interchangeable: a word such as *phasma* or *simulacrum* might be applied to the spirit of a dead person appearing in a dream as well as to a minor divinity appearing as a waking vision. This is because all such phenomena were part of “nature” as the Greeks and Romans knew it.<sup>20</sup> Today, folklorists and parapsychologists classify diverse paranormal phenomena, and looking back at the ghost stories from antiquity, we can see that differences existed between the kinds of supernatural phenomena described by the Greek and Roman writers, even if those writers and their societies saw no need to point out such distinctions. The main types of ghost involved in hauntings include revenants (or “embodied ghosts”), warning apparitions, poltergeists, and “continual” apparitions.

Evidently the most popular of the ghost stories were those concerning haunted houses, which are the focus of the third chapter in this book. From the few haunted-house stories surviving from classical times, it is possible to extract a basic narrative structure, as well as to examine details of the stories in the folkloric context already established. Of particular interest are the realistic details that often appear in such stories, for example, specifics regarding the difficulty in selling or renting out a haunted property. From accounts of haunted houses in antiquity, we can see that disclosure laws regarding haunted property have not changed much in two thousand years.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this study examine in detail some of the best-known stories of hauntings that survive from antiquity: the haunted-house

story from the *Mostellaria* by the comic playwright Plautus; the ghost stories from the letters of Pliny the Younger, including his famous account of a haunted house at Athens; and the supernatural tales from the dialogue *Philopseudes* of the satirist Lucian. The works of these authors are particularly significant because we can see in them a development toward the ghost story as a work of literary fiction rather than the ghost story as recorded folk-legend.

We should not ignore the influence of these ancient stories on the modern literary ghost-story tradition. The stories from Greece and Rome had a strong effect on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers of ghost stories, and the last chapter in this book looks at some specific examples of this. As Dorothy Scarborough wryly observed in explaining the lasting appeal of ghost stories, the appearance of ghosts "has always elicited considerable interest on the part of humanity. Their substance of materialization, their bearing, dress, and general demeanor are matters of definite concern to those who expect shortly to become ghosts themselves."<sup>21</sup>

HAUNTED  
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## CONTENTS

	Preface	<i>ix</i>
	Introduction	<i>xi</i>
ONE	The Folklore of Ghosts	<i>1</i>
TWO	Problems of Definition and Classification	<i>22</i>
THREE	Haunted Houses	<i>38</i>
FOUR	Plautus's Haunted House	<i>50</i>
FIVE	The Supernatural in Pliny's <i>Letters</i>	<i>62</i>
SIX	Lucian's Ghost Stories	<i>77</i>
SEVEN	The Fate of the Ghost Story	<i>89</i>
	Notes	<i>99</i>
	Bibliography	<i>129</i>
	Index of Passages Cited	<i>141</i>
	General Index	<i>143</i>

THE FOLKLORE  
OF GHOSTS

THE GREEKS AND ROMANS HAD NO CONCEPT OR ENCOMPASSING term for folklore as such, although they did recognize and have names for many of the traditional forms of expression now classified as genres of folklore.<sup>1</sup> Folklore, generally defined as the traditional beliefs, practices, and tales of a people, subsists mainly on oral tradition, with the key word being “tradition.” Folklore is characterized by various units of traditional material that are memorable and consequently repeatable, and “tradition” is the main idea that links together the many subtypes we can distinguish within the field of folklore, such as proverbs, riddles, ballads, greeting and leave-taking formulas, anecdotes, jokes, tall tales, tongue-twisters, and other categories under the heading of verbal art.<sup>2</sup> Under this heading we also find the several areas of folklore with which classicists may be the most familiar: folktales, myths, and legends,<sup>3</sup> three areas generally classified as narratives, to distinguish them from other types of verbal art, such as proverbs and riddles.<sup>4</sup>

Though these three categories can overlap to a certain extent, they do have specific characteristics that allow us to distinguish among them. Bascom, summarizing many decades of discussion on this issue, explains the difference as follows.<sup>5</sup> Folktales, also known by the German term *Märchen*, are narratives regarded as pure fiction; they have conventional openings, such as “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away,” which usually fix the story as timeless and placeless; and the principal characters may be human or nonhuman. The various subgenres of folktales include fables, animal tales, and trickster tales. Myths, on the other hand, are narratives considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past; in many cultures they are sacred, and usually associated with theology and ritual. Their main characters are often not human beings, but may have human attributes; they are deities or culture heroes, for example, whose actions are set in an earlier time, when the earth was different from what it is today. Myths are often etiological, accounting for the origin of the world and everything in it. Legends, finally, are narratives that, like myths, may be regarded as