From Folkloric Phantoms to Sidereal Spectres:
Contexts for Reading Ghosts in Harry Potter

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Introduction

One of the first things we need to establish is the definition of 'ghost' that we are using, and this must be one that is coherent with the concept of ghosts in the Harry Potter universe. One from the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* seems to work well when it defines a ghost as a 'dead person appearing to the living'. While this definition has not been historically constant, nor is it incontestable, it is, probably, the most widely accepted usage of the term in contemporary English. I would further suggest that the word is synonymous, both in current usage and in Rowling's books, with the idea of a soul. It is within a shared context for interpreting the ghosts that we can begin to read them within the framework of signification in which they should be understood, and the definition of what a ghost is forms the central pivot for that framework. Indeed, the use of this definition is why Rowling does not classify Peeves as a ghost, something we will address later.

This paper will not be attempting to trace a full genealogy for the various spectres it examines; that would be beyond the scope of this study. What it will do is initially provide the contexts against which these figures, particularly those of spectral nuns, Nearly Headless Nick, and Peeves, should be read, including some examination of the way these traditions develop out of folklore.[1] There are certain shared traditions of ghosts that both the writer and readers, at least in Britain, have access to, and it is in the context of these traditions that the ghosts are normatively interpreted.[2] As we will see below it is possible to misread the ghosts by unfamiliarity with some of these ideas. In the section on sidereal spectres, I will suggest a possible context against which we might read some of the ghostly, and semi-ghostly, entities that we encounter in more recent books.

Ghostly Nuns

Spectral nuns only float around the edges of the Potter universe; in particular we encounter them at Nearly Headless Nick's Death Day Party. Rowling describes how Harry, Hermione and Ron 'passed a group of gloomy nuns, a ragged man wearing chains, and the

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[1] There is, of course, an underlying question here about where folklore, as a discipline examining tales about ghosts, ends and psychical research, which concerns itself with alleged supernatural phenomena, begins. However, as Hufford and Bennet point out since experience, of whatever sort, may underlie folk traditions we may tentatively see alleged accounts as falling into the remit of folklore. See Hufford and Bennett 16 ff.

[2] Other than the example of the nuns there is no space to look at meanings that may be generated by these texts being read in a non-British cultural background, but it is probable that readers in other cultures will interpret the ghosts differently against their own cultural folklore, and possibly generate new meanings because of these contexts. After all, the act of interpretation is a process of negotiation between the reader and the text. I am therefore assigning the shared culture of the author and the readers in the country of first publication the label of 'normative' for the purposes of this study.

Fat Friar, a cheerful Hufflepuff ghost, who was talking to a knight with an arrow sticking out of his forehead' (*CoS* 101). However, despite their fleeting appearance, they have drawn comment from the former new-ager and Catholic apologist Matthew Arnold, who objects to the portrayal of them

> as a dark and gloomy party of obviously tortured souls — but why a friar and nuns? ... they could have been anything, but she made this choice, why? Did Rowling think this was cute? Or did she mean to give an insult ... these are things that will obviously give offence to one group, and one group only. (Arnold disc 1)

And so Arnold accuses our author of being purposefully offensive to Catholics. I would suggest that Arnold's unfamiliarity with certain aspects of British culture led him to misinterpret these references. Spectral nuns are a familiar feature in English folklore, and even today first-hand sightings of such apparitions are still recounted: in 2003 Claudia Schiffer is reported to have seen the ghost of a young nun at her Suffolk home, Coldham Hall (*My Nottinghill*). No English reader would readily interpret such figures as ostensibly anti-Catholic, being familiar with the stories of spectral religious figures which are common throughout the length and breadth of the land, and one could cite that of Abbess Editha at Tamworth Castle, or the ghostly nuns of Usk Priory in Monmouthshire, South Wales.

However, in some of the folklore there seemingly persists the vestiges of an anti-Catholic tradition, and Arnold may be sensitive to this in his reading of the spectral religious that appear in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. It was part of the polemic of the Reformation to argue for the depravity of the Religious Orders, and while there had, no doubt, been slackness in some orders, all were uniformly painted as greedy, worldly, and immoral. Elements of this myth continued to appear in various sources throughout the succeeding centuries.[3] It is a common narrative that the apparition of a nun was that of an individual who had been walled up alive because she had been discovered either in a tryst with a lover, or trying to elope (occasionally the lover is a monk). Narratives of this sort can be found lying behind the ghost of the Grey Nun reported to haunt 'The Lanes' in Brighton, the lady who haunts Chicksands Priory in Clophill, Bedfordshire, as well as one of the most famous British ghosts, the phantom Nun of Borley Rectory.[4] Folklorist Theo Brown is generally dismissive of the historical accuracy of such narratives, believing them to be based on the practise of burying deceased nuns in the walls of large recusant houses, in order to avoid drawing attention to illegal religious activity, as Catholicism was after the Reformation, and tales of continental nuns being walled up in their cells as a penance (they were later released). She points out that other allied traditions have proved to be groundless. For example, what were believed to be the bones of children from the nuns' illicit liaisons, found in the walls of an old nunnery in Exeter, were found to be ox bones, which were frequently used to strengthen walls. Brown also recorded belief in an ancient seven-mile underground tunnel connecting Buckfast Abbey to the convent at Syon Abbey, which was used for romantic liaisons, although Syon was a private house until 1923. (Brown 10-11) The

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[3] Myth being used in the sense employed by Hayden White who argues that history itself is only a narrative construct which is constructed by those who, in any given period, have the authority to structure and interpret the events of the past. For White's theories employed as a tool to analyse a historical situation see Newton, 'Heroick Stranger' 159ff.

[4] Notably one website records the evolution of this piece of ghostlore into 'frightening images of skeletal nuns' ('Beltsville Ghosts').

Chicksands narrative appears to be within this tradition of polemic.[5] Thomas Cromwell is reputed to have received a report of the problems at the Priory from Dr Richard Layton, who informed him that two nuns were pregnant one by a servant, and the other by a canon (Ellis). This scandalous behaviour was then seen as grounds for justifying the Priory's dissolution at the Reformation. While there does not appear to be any historical evidence to support such narratives, it is always possible that one of them may have its roots in some form of fact. One would be surprised if novices never fell pregnant in the medieval period. Nevertheless, being bricked up alive does not give one much to be cheerful about, and may explain the gloominess of those at the Death Day Party. This gloominess should probably be seen in the context of the awful death so many ghostly nuns befall in folk tales. However, I would suggest that a British reader in the late twentieth, or early twenty-first century, who is now largely unfamiliar with the polemical dimension to this tradition, except perhaps superficially through some piece of folklore involving ill-doing in a local convent, would not read Rowling's nuns as anti-Catholic invective. However, we must remember the traditions from which they come were part of a mythic narrative reinforcing a negative view of Catholicism, which has its roots in Reformation polemic.[6] While this reading is not the most obvious, as Arnold has shown, it is possible for those elements to still influence a reading, but I would suggest that this is not a reading that is synonymous either with the author's intent, nor representative of the way most readers would interpret the reference.

Headless Ghosts

Britain's ghostlore is rich in decapitated figures, and includes among them a headless monk at Tilty Abbey (Foreman 105-6), a headless cyclist, reported in Northampton in the 1940s (Moss 61), as well as the better known depictions of figures from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Anne Boleyn is possibly the best-known example, much popularised throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth, especially through musical hall numbers such as 'With Her Head Tucked Underneath Her Arm', as well as a series of stories about her appearing at the Tower of London, and other royal palaces. Notably on the anniversary of her death, she is reputed to return to Blickling Hall in a carriage driven by a headless coachman and drawn by headless horses. It is interesting to note that, in common with many of these famous figures, actual reports of these headless spectres only begin to be written down in the nineteenth century. This is quite remarkable and needs some comment. From the 1640s onwards, there had been a gradual increase in the number of publications that considered cases of apparitions, the climax of which is Joseph Glanvill's *Sadducismus Triumphatus* in 1681. However, none of the figures who lost their lives on the block were ever seriously reported as appearing headless at the time, despite the presence of satirical literature which presses beheaded figures into service for the purposes of lampoon. Among the figures who were brought back by the precursors of Grub Street were the headless shade of Stafford which appeared to Lord Howard whilst imprisoned in the Tower (*A Vision In the Tower* 1-2). Perhaps it was because of the satirical use of such figures that scholars of the

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[5] The persistence of polemic is not confined to folkloric depictions, and one could mention the Bleeding Nun of Matthew Lewis' The Monk.

[6] At the Reformation the religious orders had been derided as leeches, milking the people of money, and this rhetoric and anti-monasticism ran through many texts, beginning with Simon Fish's Supplication of Beggars in 1529.

supernatural found it difficult to take cases involving headless spectres seriously; after all, the publisher James Collin stated in the publisher's preface to *Sadducismus Triumphatus* that the cases included were those that 'contain nothing but what is consonant to right Reason and sound philosophy' (Glanvill sig. A3+I). It would be fruitless speculation to wonder if cases involving headless ghosts were in that pile omitted from the work, and other similar works, because they were not interpreted as being consonant with right reason and sound philosophy. However, it must also be seriously considered that genuine apparitions of this nature were unknown until much later. One would have thought that a well-attested story of a headless political figure walking would have merited reporting, especially when those that involved such figures who were still capitated were printed, and the story of Buckingham's ghost appeared in several sources. The legend of the headless Earl of Strafford appearing to Charles I, the night before he lost the battle of Naseby, and warning the King to march northwards to raise more followers, would surely have become popular in the Restoration, given the high status which the deceased King, who was perceived as a martyr, generally enjoyed. As it is, the earliest written account of this can be found on Henry Martin's *History of Naseby* in 1886 (Haining 167-8). It was certainly not concealed for fear of upsetting Royalist sympathies: the dead King Charles I had been depicted as appearing in a number of pamphlets published in the Interregnum, many of which were royalist in tone and content. Although, despite the mode of his execution, Charles was depicted as appearing with his head still firmly on his shoulders.

Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington belongs to this tradition of headless spectres that apparently has roots in the satirical writings of the seventeenth century, and which has established itself in alleged sightings by the late nineteenth century, including some, such as that of Strafford, which are (apparently) teleologically assigned to an earlier era. Certainly, his appearance is very much that of the stock headless figure that we find in folklore, one that became frequently used in various literary depictions, notably in the juvenile comics of the mid twentieth century. Nick is described simply as wearing 'ruff and tights' (*PS* 86), and this is exactly what any reader would expect a headless ghost to be wearing; see for example the illustrations from 'The Spooks of St Lukes' and 'Rent-A-Ghost Ltd'. While the former trades tights for a ghostly tail, we can still see that these are stock elements in how one typically expects to see a headless ghost. The dress belongs to what we popularly imagine to have been worn in Tudor and Stuart times, and this fits with Nick being executed in 1492 under Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch. Indeed this links back to the body of lore that locates most of the ghosts such as Anne Boleyn and Strafford as from this historical period. Nick's title also fixes him into this tradition, headless ghosts usually being of high birth, since beheading was reserved for aristocracy, on the grounds that it was quicker and less painful than being hanged. In Nick's case his execution was bodged: 'Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but had not done it properly' (*PS* 92). Even this has resonances with Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, who stalks Dunstanburgh Castle with his severed head. While his head was eventually removed from his body, it took eleven strokes. So Rowling, while innovating with Nick, is still drawing from the popular tradition of headless ghosts.

Poltergeists

We first meet Peeves shortly after Harry arrives at Hogwarts (*PS* 96), and Peeves is always depicted as mischievous; in the *Goblet of Fire* he is described as wreaking 'havoc and mayhem' and sending 'pots and pans everywhere' (*GoF* 161). Rowling sees Peeves as distinct from the other characters, and from the outset we are told that he 'is not really even a

ghost' (*PS* 86), a position we will explore further later. However, the fact that Peeves is shown to have a visual form — 'a little man with wicked dark eyes and a wide mouth' (*PS* 96) — and a personality, albeit limited, is both part of the unique crafting of this character and the inheritance of other literary precursors.

Allegedly genuine poltergeist cases are generally characterised as 'annoyances rather like the tricks of a mischievous imp' (Crowe 292). These commonly involve 'percussive sounds' and the 'movement of objects', and may also feature other elements including the apparent attempt to communicate by a series of raps, the cutting or tearing of furnishings, spontaneous inundations of water or outbreaks of fire, and a whole host of other phenomena (Gauld & Cornell 4). More recent theories about the nature of poltergeists have tended to stress that such phenomena are associated with an adolescent experiencing puberty, and either see the phenomena as originating with such an individual, or that the individual is a focus for some sort of spirit that is the cause (See Owen). In early modern Britain they were the subject of much debate, but such events were generally ascribed to witchcraft. Our current understanding of poltergeists, as described above, dates from the early nineteenth century when the folklorist and German speaker Catherine Crowe's 1848 work *The Night Side of Nature* introduced both the word and a new understanding of the phenomenon into English from the German.

However, in all of these descriptions the poltergeist lacks the more developed personality which we find in Peeves. Although in some cases there are apparitions, these are unusual, and most phenomena occur without the obvious presence of a personality, unlike Peeves. The first inklings of a poltergeist with personality I could trace was in Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem of 1869, *Phantasmagoria*. In the fourth canto the little ghost who appears in the gentleman's study describes how his mother, a fairy, thought it was better to bring his siblings up to be different types of ghosts. While he is a phantom, he numbers among his immediate kin a pixy, two fays, a banshee, and so on including 'a Poltergeist and Ghoul' (Carroll 753). While no more is seen or heard of this noisy brother or sister, by implication Carroll is suggesting a personality being the poltergeist, and in doing so may be introducing this idea in literature, two decades after Crowe introduced the word into English. It was a word that endured and entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1910 (Price 2).

It is worth mentioning in passing the eponymous poltergeist in *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe*; although he does not appear corporally, nevertheless the phenomena is associated with an explicit personality. This may have fed into the notable development of the poltergeist tradition that came in the 1970s BBC children's television series, *Rentaghost*, in the character of the medieval jester Timothy Claypole. In the scene that introduces him, Claypole admits to Hubert Davenport, his fellow applicant for a job at the Rentaghost agency, ''Twas always my nature to jest, to mock, to make mischief, that is why when I entered the spirit world I automatically qualified as a ... poltergeist!' (Block episode 1). In introducing a recurrent character who is a poltergeist for the first time into children's literature, *Rentaghost* went some way to paving the way for Peeves. *Rentaghost* initially shows poltergeists as relatively similar to the other ghostly characters, the only significant difference being their powers which include being able to change appearance and throw psychic energy. Although notably in the book, which followed five years later, and in later series, he is described as 'a Sprite — a mischievous kind of spirit who possessed far greater supernatural powers than the average ghost' (Block 8). The book avoids any mention of the more serious paranormal references that peppered the first series of the television programme. Episode four showed Mr Claypole moving into more traditional poltergeist territory, heralded by Davenport announcing: 'I'm afraid Mr. Claypole is still going through an occult phase, which means the

mischievous side of his nature has become dominant'. Claypole's activities do include many established poltergeist phenomena. He frequently performs apportations and asportations,[7] and is not unknown to make himself invisible, although visibility is his default state, and in this he may be seen as a type of Peeves.

       J. K. Rowling's view of her creation, while developing these depictions of poltergeists yet again, has another take on the concept. Rowling has stated that 'Peeves isn't a ghost; he was never a living person. He is an indestructible spirit of chaos, and solid enough to unscrew chandeliers, throw walking sticks and, yes, chew gum' (Rowling, 'J.K. Rowling Official Site'). This also opens up a fascinating question about canonicity, which we do not really have space to explore here. Certainly, statements such as these by definition possess 'authority' as being issued by the author, but represent positions which are never made explicit, or in some cases never stated either way, in the book. This view of Peeves, while stated by Rowling, is not explicit in any of the books so far.[8] Certainly, it clarifies the Friar's remarks about Peeves not really being a ghost, but it goes far beyond these, defining exactly how he is different. The view of Peeves advanced by Rowling reflects one that is popular within spiritistic and mediumistic circles, that poltergeists are not discarnate spirits but 'lower elemental spirits' (Price 4). She has synthesised elements from a tradition of popular children's literature with more new-age thinking on the phenomena of poltergeists, and it is against both of these contexts that Peeves should be read; although the latter is never explicit in the text, it remains as a gap, so while it coheres with authorial intention for this character it is not necessarily an essential given for making sense of Peeves.

Sidereal Spectres

       It is to the seventeenth century that we must return for a consideration of sidereal spirits. They make their first entry into English with the *Discourse Concerning Devils and Spirits* added to the 1665 edition of Reginald Scot's *The Discovery of Witchcraft*.[9] It described the human being as consisting of three parts, the physical body, the soul and, separate from either of these, the sidereal spirit. This idea came from Thomas Willis' *De Anima Brut*, where he argued that a fine material vapour transfused the body, forming the interaction of the soul with the physical frame (Jobe 354). The additions to the *Discourse* counselled readers that

> to every man, and woman, while they live the natural Life, there belongs
> a *Syderial* or *starry Spirit*; which takes its original wholly from the
> elemental property; And according to the weaker, or Stronger capacity of
> the party, it hath the longer, or shorter continuance, after the bodyes
> decease... Such persons as are secretly murthered, and such as secretly
> murthered, and such as secretly murther themselves, do most frequently

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[7] That is, making things disappear and reappear.

[8] One might suggest a model for dealing with extra-textual authorial information. Firstly, the text must take primacy since Rowling's extra-textual information has, on occasion, contradicted that contained in the books, but beyond that it could be seen as deutro-canonical, providing additional information not supplied in the primary canon (the books), and therefore generally authoritative since it comes from the same creative source.

[9] Added by an unknown hand and standing in contradiction to the more sceptical attitudes expressed in Scot's work which was first published in 1584.

> appear again, and wander near the place where their Carcase is, till the radicall moisture be totally consumed.

After this the spirit is 'resolv'd into their first being or *Astrum*' (Scot 42).

I would suggest that the concept of the sidereal spirit can help us to explain the quasi-ghosts, and perhaps even the concept of human beings, that Rowling is setting up in the latter books, particularly in *The Order of the Phoenix*. We are informed by Nick that a 'Wizard can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth to walk palely where their living selves once stood' (*OotP* 758). This imprint is presumably synonymous with the life which the portraits enjoy. As Rowling herself has commented:

> They [the portraits] are all of dead people; they are not as fully realised as ghosts... The place where you see them really talk is in Dumbledore's office, primarily; the idea is that the previous headmasters and headmistresses leave behind a faint imprint of themselves. They leave their aura, almost, in the office and they can give some counsel to the present occupant, but it is not like being a ghost. They repeat catchphrases, almost... as Nick explained... there are some people who would not come back as ghosts because they are unafraid, or less afraid, of death. (Rowling, Interview with Lindsay Fraser)

I would suggest that there is a distinction between pictures, and portraits — the latter, being of an individual who has lived at some point, are imbued with the sidereal spirit of the deceased, or some part of it. Even the portraits seem to enjoy different levels of action. While Phineas Nigellus enjoys a considerable degree of cognition and autonomy, even passing between pictures, Mrs Black operates like a broken record, apparently unable to do anything more than insult and anger.[10] The life and death of the person influence what is left imprinted on the sidereal energies. This might also make sense of the Dementor's kiss, which appears to suck out the soul without killing the victims. Something remains, leaving the body alive, but it is bereft of any obvious spark or feeling. We might speculate that what is left after the kiss is a mono-dimensional fear, the fear caused by the experience of the kiss itself, which is more powerful than any other feeling and characteristic, and so overpowers all others and becomes dominant. Just as the mono-dimensional hatred of Mrs Black is all that we see of her — her hatred having been more powerful than any of her other emotions or characteristics, so that that is all that we see of her in her portrait — so the fear from the kiss is all that is imprinted on the sidereal spirits of those who survive. There is no reason why a sidereal hypothesis should not encompass the wide range of effects and states which we find in the books.

I would also suggest that we could also identify the sidereal with the echoes of the departed that appear from Voldemort's wand in *The Goblet of Fire* (*GoF* 575-580). These are described by Dumbledore as echoes which retain the dead's appearance and character (*GoF* 606), which seems to be in the same mode as the impressions in the paintings. This all appears to suggest that in the Harry Potter series, human beings, or at least Wizards, are composed of three parts, and that there is a third part distinct from soul or body, very similar to the sidereal spirit which was popular during the seventeenth century.[11] (If correct, this

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[10] For Nigellus see *OotP* 62, 92, 112, 162, 4-17-9, 549, 725, 728.

[11] Certainly, if correct, the sidereal concept would have implications for the Changeling Hypothesis and similar theories. See Red Hen (http://www.redhen-publications.com/Changelling.html), and various pages on Mugglenet

understanding may have implications for what occurred at Godric's Hollow: it is possible that a transfer of some part of Harry or Voldemort's sidereal spirit to the other (perhaps Voldemort survived by using a small part of Harry's spirit, for perhaps it is the sidereal that the *Avada Kedavra* extracts? or even a mutual exchange may have occurred when the curse was used.) The exact details of how this sidereal framework may translate to the Harry Potter books is a question that cannot be entirely settled until the last line of the last book sees print, for it is the within the gift of the author to shape and refine the sources she is drawing on as she sees fit. And, it is always possible that while the sidereal concept seems to fit the paradigm, there may be an altogether different source that Rowling is drawing from, possibly from the same classical ideas that informed the sidereal concept.

Conclusion

I have suggested that both writer and normative reader draw on a common pool of shared concepts concerning ghosts that inform both the construction and interpretation of these figures. Although several are, in themselves, unique developments, the ghostly figures still draw on an established tradition, and are only normatively read within this context. In some cases, such as the Fat Friar, these are drawn directly from the folkloric tradition with practically no modification of the stock figure. There is also the possibility that Rowling is drawing on sidereal notions, or something similar, and that those aspects of the books should be read in the light of these. However, this is still a speculative hypothesis, and perhaps they are part of a bigger mystery in the books, and perhaps, like the ghostly Simon de Canterville to Virginia, they will reveal what Life is, what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both (Cf. Wilde 214).

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