

“The Dying Mother:” Historical Citations of Mary Goffe’s Seventeenth-Century Near-Death Apparition

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ABSTRACT: Traditionally, certain cases have been of particular importance to students of near-death phenomena. Such cases are more than mere examples or research data; they are resources that are generally used to defend particular theoretical ideas, such as the projection of the spirit or of some subtle body from the physical body around the time of death. One such case was that of Mary Goffe, a seventeenth-century apparition of a dying woman that Richard Baxter reported in his book *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691). This paper includes a reprint of the original case report and a discussion of how later writers used the case to defend the idea that something may leave the body during near-death states.

KEY WORDS: Mary Goffe; apparitions of the dying; apparitions of the living; Richard Baxter; case studies

Over the years there have been many efforts to study psychic phenomena through attention to individual cases. Examples of this practice come from the seventeenth (Glanvil, 1682), nineteenth (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886), and twentieth centuries (Stevenson, 1974). In fact, one may say that many cases of apparitions, hauntings, and other phenomena have been essential to the development and construction of psychical research and its theories, as have been the performances of well-known mediums (Alvarado, 1993). Some cases are continuously cited as examples of the phenomena they represent.

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These include several nineteenth-century apparition cases such as the one concerning an apparition of a dead person with a scratched cheek (Myers, 1889), the recurrent haunting apparition at Cheltenham (Morton, 1892), the Wilmot case of an apparition of a living person (Sidgwick, 1891), and poltergeist cases such as that of Angélique Cottin (Tanchou, 1846). Cases like these not only have become classic but have become resources by which to defend particular theoretical explanations.

Such reports, including the case discussed in this paper, have been used over the years in relation to near-death phenomena. As Carol Zaleski (1987) discussed, many accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) were frequently cited in the Middle Ages to illustrate particular religious views. In later times the NDE cases of Wiltse (1889) and Bertrand (Myers, 1892), as well as more recent cases (Ring & Lawrence, 1993) including the famous Pam Reynolds case (Sabom, 1998), have been used by many authors to defend particular theoretical views.

The apparition case discussed in this paper provides an example to illustrate how some reports, and their continued citations, have been used in the past by students of the subject, a situation that continues to some extent to recent days.

The Mary Goffe Case

Writing in *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts*, Scottish author and folklorist Andrew Lang (1897) referred to the case discussed in this paper as “The Dying Mother” (p. 100). In this seventeenth-century case, a dying woman named Mary Goffe was seen at a distance while she seemed to have been conscious of the fact before she died. In this paper I will reprint the original account of the case and will make some comments about its citation in the literature. Rather than focus on the actual occurrence of the apparitions, or on its evidentiality, my interest is to briefly discuss how the case has been used in the literature to support a particular theoretical view.

The case was first published by English Puritan preacher and writer Richard Baxter (1615–1691) in chapter 7 (pp. 147–151) of his book *The Certainty of the Worlds of the Spirits. Fully Evinced by the Unquestionable Histories of Apparitions and Witchcrafts, Operations, Voices, &c. Proving the Immortality of Souls, the Malice and Miseries of the Devils, and the Damned, and the Bleffedness of the Justified. Written for the Conviction of Sadduces and Infidels* (1691; see Figure 1).

The Certainty of the
WORLDS OF SPIRITS.
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Proving the Immortality of Souls, the
 Malice and Miseries of the Devils and the Damned,
 and the Blessedness of the Justified.

Written for the Conviction of Sadduces & Infidels,
 By **RICHARD BAXTER.**

Eph. 6. 12. *We wrestle not against Flesh and Blood, but against Principalities, against Powers, against the Rulers of the Darkness of this World, against Spiritual Wickednesses in high Places. (in Celestials.)*

Matth 8. 31, 32. *The Devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the Herd of Swine. And he said, Go.*

Luk. 10. 18, 20. *I beheld Satan, as Lightning, fall from Heaven, &c.*

Heb. 2. 14. *Are they not all (the Angels) ministering Spirits, &c.* *Ls. 7*

LONDON, Printed for C. Baskhurst at
 the Bible and Three Crowns in Cheap-side;
 and J. Salusbury at the Rising Sun
 over against the Royal Exchange. 1691.

Figure 1

The book, consisting of 12 chapters plus a preface, a conclusion, and a postscript, presented a variety of cases of apparitions and other phenomena, as well as witchcraft (on the book, and its historical context, see Handley, 2005; and Searle, 2007).

Like other seventeenth-century writings (e.g., Glanvil, 1682; More, 1653), Baxter's work had as its purpose to convince people of the reality of a spiritual world and to combat skepticism. Alison Searle (2007) described it as a manifestation of Baxter's "prophetic voice," by which she meant religious preaching that offered "extra-scriptural proofs that will convince the unbeliever or sceptic about the supernatural truth of Christianity" (p. 66). As another author stated, Baxter's work was part of "an appeal to the wondrous activity found in nature . . . which required the constant, creative involvement of a hierarchy of spiritual agents" (Mandelbrote, 2007, p. 452; see also Handley, 2005).

Baxter (1691) saw apparitions and other phenomena as "a means that might do much with such as are prone to judge by Sense" (p. 5, preface, unnumbered). Such literary ministry was common in the seventeenth century (Finucane, 1984; Mandelbrote, 2007; Searle, 2007), representing an "invaluable weapon in the hands of both churchmen and conventionally Christian scholars" (Maxwell-Stuart, 2006, p. 164). This point does not mean that authors such as Baxter were not dealing with actual experiences, or that the cases were fictitious, a topic beyond the scope of this paper.

The case consists of a letter Thomas Tilson, a minister in Aylesford, Kent, sent to Baxter on July 6, 1681 about an apparition that reportedly had taken place in Rochester in the same year. Reflecting the ministerial use of these cases, Tilson wrote to Baxter that he wished "that God would bless your pious endeavours for the conviction of atheists and sadduces, and the promoting of true religion and godliness" (Baxter, 1691, p. 151). In reprinting the original account, I have kept the original spelling, capitalization, and the frequent use of italics in the text. It may be argued that Goffe should be spelled Gosse, but I have kept the former because it is the spelling that appears consistently in the literature.

Mr. Thomas Tilson, Minister of Aylefworth in Kent, his Letter concerning an Apparition in Rochester, this present year, 1691
Reverend Sir,

Being informed that you are writing about Witchcraft and Apparitions, I take the freedom, though a Stranger, to fend you this following Relation.

Mary, the Wife of *John Goffe* of *Rocheſter*, being afflicted with a long Illneſs, removed to her Father's Houſe at *West-Mulling*, which is about nine Miles diſtant from her own: There ſhe died, *June* the 4th this preſent Year, 1691.

The Day before her departure, She grew impatiently deſirous to ſee her two Children, whom ſhe had left at home, to the Care of a Nurſe. She prayed her Husband to hire a Horſe, for ſhe muſt go home, and die with the Children. When they perſuaded her to the contrary, telling her ſhe was not fit to be taken out of her Bed, nor able to ſit on Horſe back, ſhe intreated them however to try: *If I cannot ſit*, ſaid ſhe, *I will lie all along upon the Horſe, for I muſt go to ſee my poor Babes.*"

A miniſter who lives in the Town was with her at Ten-a-clock that Night, to whom ſhe expreſs'd good Hopes in the Mercies of God, and a willingneſs to die: *But*, ſaid ſhe, *it is my Miſery that I cannot ſee my Children.*

Between One and Two-a-Clock in the Morning, ſhe fell into a Trance. One Widow *Turner*, who watched with her that Night, ſays, that her Eyes were open, and fixed, and her Jaw fallen: She put her Hand upon her Mouth and Noſtrils, but could perceive no Breath; ſhe thought her to be in a Fit, and doubted whether ſhe were alive or dead.

The next Day this dying Woman told her Mother, that ſhe had been at home with her Children. *That is impoſſible*, ſaid the Mother, *for you have been here in bed all the while.* Yes, replied the other, *but I was with them laſt Night, when I was aſleep.*

The Nurſe at *Rocheſter*, widow *Alexander* by Name, affirms, and ſays, ſhe will take her Oath on't before a Magiſtrate, and receive the Sacrament upon it, that a little before Two a Clock that Morning ſhe ſaw the Likeneſs of the ſaid *Mary Goffe* come out of the next Chamber (where the elder Child lay in a bed by it ſelf, the Door being left open, and ſtood by her Bed-ſide for about a quarter of an Hour; the younger Child was there lying by her; her Eyes moved, and her Mouth went, but ſhe ſaid nothing. The Nurſe, moreover ſays, that ſhe was perfectly awake; it was then Day-light, being one of the longeſt days in the Year. She ſate up in her Bed, and looked ſteadfaſtly upon the Apparition: In that time ſhe heard the Bridge-Clock ſtrike Two, and a while after ſaid, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghoſt, what art thou?* Thereupon the Appearance removed, and went away; ſhe ſlipp'd on her Cloaths and followed, but what became on't ſhe cannot tell. Then, and not before, ſhe began to be grievouſly affrighted, and went out of doors, and walked upon the Wharf (the houſe is juſt by the River ſide) for ſome Hours, only going in now and then to look at the Children. At Five a-Clock ſhe went to a Neighbour's Houſe, and knocked at the Door, but they would not riſe: At Six ſhe went again, then they aroſe and let her in. She related to them all that had paſs'd: They would perſuade her ſhe was miſtaken, or dreamt: But ſhe confidently affirmed, *If ever I ſaw her in all my Life, I ſaw her this Night.*

One of those to whom she made the Relation (*Mary*, the wife of *John Sweet*) had a Messenger [who] came from *Mulling* that Forenoon, to let her know her Neighbour *Goffe* was dying, and desired to speak with her; she went over the same day, and found her just departing. The mother, amongst other Discourse, Related to her how much her Daughter had long'd to see the Children, and said she had seen them. This brought to Mrs. *Sweet's* mind, what the Nurse had told her that Morning, for till then, she had not thought to mention it, but disguised it, rather as the Woman's disturbed Imagination.

The Substance of this, I had Related to me by *John Carpenter*, the Father of the Deceased, next day after the Burial: *July* the Second: I fully Discourfed the Matter with the Nurse and two Neighbours, to whose House she went that Morning.

Two days after, I had it from the Mother, the Minister that was with her in the Evening, and the Woman who sat up with her that last Night: They all agree in the same Story, and every one helps to strengthen the others Testimony:

They all appear to be Sober Intelligent Persons, far enough from Designing to impose a Cheat upon the World, or to manage a lye, and what Temptation they should lye under for so doing, I cannot conceive (pp. 147–151).

Citations of the Case

As was the case with many other seventeen-century writings on unusual phenomena, later authors dismissed Baxter's (1691) writings. For example, in a biography of Baxter, Orme (1831, Vol. 2) stated that Baxter's cases were the result of the experiencers' "diseased imagination," coming from "imposition," and the "operation of natural causes" (p. 31). However, many other writers interested in psychic phenomena cited the Goffe case to support their belief in apparitions and, more specifically, in the projection of the spirit or some other principle from the confines of the physical body. In the discussion I will mention some examples published during the nineteenth century and, to a less extent, during the twentieth.

Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore cited the case in *Phantasms of the Living* (1886, Vol. 2, pp. 558–559). They presented it together with two other cases to show the existence of old cases of apparitions of the living while the person was dying. Presumably the authors were seeking validation of the type of experience they studied in their book by showing historical precedents. But this was by no means the first citation of the case in the nineteenth century (in addition to the citations mentioned below, see Brown, 1889,

pp. 45–47; Ennemoser, 1854, Vol. 2, pp. 433–435; Ingram, 1886, pp. 212–215; and Lang, 1897, pp. 99–102).

Many of the individuals using the case presented it to support the idea that the spirit, or some subtle body, could leave the body at some moments, such as when the person was close to death. Whereas there is a long history of belief in such an “excursion” from antiquity to the late Middle Ages (Poortman, 1954/1978; Zaleski, 1987), there were also many similar ideas during the nineteenth century (e.g. Crowe, 1848; Jung-Stilling, 1808/1851), which is the period on which I am focusing (see also Alvarado, 1989, 2005, 2009a, 2009c; and Deveney, 1997).

In 1848, novelist Catherine Crowe included an account of the Goffe case in her famous book *The Night-Side of Nature* (1848, Vol. 1, pp. 230–231). It appeared in the book’s seventh chapter entitled “Wraiths,” which opened with the idea “that the spirit is freed from the body, when the latter becomes no longer a fit habitation for it” (p. 223). In some conditions of the body, Crowe continued,

the spirit, in a manner unknown to us, resumes a portion of its freedom, and is enabled to exercise more or less of its inherent properties. It is somewhat released from those inexorable conditions of time and space, which bound and limit its powers . . . (pp. 227–228)

The case was seen as an example of the emancipation of the spirit when close to death, a topic that was repeated in further citations over the years.

German student of mystical and religious phenomena Johan Joseph von Görres (1854, pp. 268–269) also cited the case. He referred to two bodies other than the physical, the “spectre of the soul, and . . . its plastic envelope” (p. 270). Görres believed that these two bodies may separate from the physical body at death and that there were states other than death that allowed for such a separation.

Social reformer and politician Robert Dale Owen included the case in a chapter on dreams in his book *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (1860, pp. 187–190). Far from considering the case a simple dream, he referred to evidence about “the appearance of a living person at a greater or less distance from where that person actually is, and perhaps usually where the thoughts or affections of that person may be supposed, at the moment, to be concentrated . . .” (p. 194). This passage referred to a discussion of apparitions of the living in a later chapter in the book. The Goffe case was a distinct type of cases in which “during a dream or a trance, partial or complete,

the counterpart of a living person may show itself, at a greater or less distance from where that person actually is," and generally, "this counterpart appears where the thoughts or the affections, strongly excited, may be supposed to be" (p. 358).

An author writing in *Catholic World* presented the case as one of "presumably natural projection" (Anonymous, 1874, p. 163). A similar view regarding the separation of the spirit from the body came from English publisher and spiritualist William H. Harrison who, writing about apparitions of the dying, mentioned the case in his book *Spirits Before Our Eyes* (1879, pp. 34–36). According to Harrison:

When the spirit of a man is partially loosened from his body at the approach of death, and when that spirit can make itself visible to a distant friend, the bodily powers are sometimes not so far destroyed but that the lips of the sufferer can tell those around the bed, that the far-off person has been seen by him. Thus direct evidence of the reality of the phenomenon is presented at both ends of the line. Similarly valuable evidence is, of course, not obtainable in connection with post-mortem apparitions. (pp. 33–34)

Linguist Adolphe D'Assier used the case in his *Posthumous Humanity* (1883/1887, pp. 58–62) to support his contention that every human being had a fluidic phantom in the physical body that could project out of the body under certain circumstances and in some special individuals. In his view, the fact that Goffe's phantom's mouth moved and said nothing suggested that the "phantom had exerted all the vital force which still animated the dying woman It is presumable that the phonetic powerlessness of the image reflected the exhaustion of the dying woman" (pp. 61–62).

Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater presented the Goffe case in his book *Clairvoyance* (1899, pp. 66–68) in the context of a discussion of intentional astral traveling. As he wrote: "This paying of intentional astral visits seems very often to become possible when the principles are loosened at the approach of death for people who were unable to perform such a feat at any other time" (p. 66).

Twentieth century authors also have discussed Goffe's case. Leaving aside G. G. Greenwood's (1903, pp. 277–280) skeptical examination, several other writers mentioned the case in contexts supporting the idea of a distant action or projection (e.g., Barrett, 1926, pp. 84–87; Davies, 1998, pp. 43–45; Evans, 2002, pp. 36–37; Hart & collaborators, 1956, pp. 162–163).

An interesting discussion was that of French magnetizer Hector Durville who summarized the Goffe case in a section of his book *Le Fantôme des Vivants* (1909, pp. 108–110) about the manifestation of the phantom or double of the dying. According to Durville: “The soul, covered in the exterior with its astral body, and by its etheric body, goes with the swiftness of light” (p. 107, my translation) towards the persons that concern the person represented by the apparition. Those individuals with some psychic sensitivity could perceive the phantom. But the apparition, Durville believed, could also make its presence known through telepathy and physical effects.

Goffe’s phantom, Durville noted, was one of those cases on which the “doubled” individual “remembered perfectly everything that they saw” (p. 137). In other cases in which percipients had seen “doubled” individuals, the individuals themselves had only vague or no recollections of being in another location.

In a popular course of psychic phenomena, Swami Panchadasi (1916), pp. 217–219) cited the case. Just before presenting the case, the author stated:

In many well authenticated cases, we may see that the soul of a dying person, one whose physical end is approaching, visits friends and relatives in the astral body, and in many cases materializes and even speaks to them. In such cases the dying person accomplishes the feat of astral manifestation without any special occult knowledge; the weakened links between the physical and the higher phases of the soul render the temporary passing-out comparatively easy, and the strong desire of the dying person furnishes the motive power necessary. Such visits, however, are often found to be merely the strongly charged thought of the dying person, along the lines of telepathy, as I have previously explained to you. But in many cases there can be no doubt that the phenomenon is a clear case of astral visitation and materialization (pp. 216–217).

Similarly, the Goffe case was cited by a recent author whose purpose was not to demonstrate the reality of the apparition (Maxwell-Stuart, 2006, p. 127). Nonetheless, the author commented: “It may be significant that Mary was in a trance-like state and about to die, for this peculiar condition could have loosened the bond between her body and ‘something other’—her soul, her spirit, her doppelgänger—which would then have freed this ‘something other’ to move temporarily beyond its usual limitations” (pp. 127–128).

Concluding Remarks

Although Baxter presented the Goffe case as part of his ministry, many writers have used it over the years to support the idea that something is capable of leaving the physical body when the human organism is close to death. In fact, it is precisely the way past writers cited the Goffe case, and others like it, that has kept such a concept alive over the years.

The case certainly is not unique; many apparitions of the dying have been reported in the psychical research literature (e.g., Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886). However, Goffe's account is particularly interesting for its emotional content. As Lang (1897) put it, the case involves a dying mother, and more than that, with her concern for her children. As such, the case also represents, and evokes, universal values regarding motherhood and family love. Such aspects may have been an important factor leading past writers to select the case for citation.

Interest in veridical phenomena associated with the dying continues to recent times. Some of it depends in part on the continuing citation of old cases, such as those of visual and other sensory impressions about a distant dying person recorded in Gurney, Myers, and Podmore's *Phantasms of the Living* (1886; e.g., Alvarado, 2006; Evans, 2002). Others have focused on more recent cases (e.g., Ring & Lawrence, 1993). In fact the recent controversy surrounding the Pam Reynolds case shows the continuing importance veridical cases have for those seeking to understand the meaning of the near-death experience. This importance is exemplified by Keith Augustine's (2007a) critique of the case, of several counter-criticisms (Greyson, 2007; Sabom, 2007; Sharp, 2007; Tart, 2007), and of Augustine's (2007b) reply.

Like clinical cases in the histories of psychology and psychiatry (Alvarado, 2009b; Ellenberger, 1970), cases such as Goffe's have been instrumental in the development of conceptual aspects of near-death phenomena studies. In addition to evidential considerations (which are not strong in Goffe's case), such accounts have supported and maintained belief in the idea that there are aspects of these phenomena that cannot be easily reduced to conventional explanations. My discussion of the Goffe case has illustrated a historical example of this process.

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