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## “Though I was alone with the unseen, I comprehended it not”: The Relationship Between the Dead and the Living in Margaret Oliphant’s *A Beleaguered City*

**Abstract:** Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897) is best remembered today as one of the important practitioners of the domestic fiction, with her “Chronicles of Carlingford” series considered to be her most enduring achievement. Oliphant’s other interesting group of works are ghost stories and other spiritual tales known as the “Stories of the Seen and Unseen”. *A Beleaguered City*, a novella first published in 1879, is generally considered to be Oliphant’s most successful supernatural tale. Set in Semur, France, and told by five different narrators, the story focuses on the inhabitants of Semur, who are evicted from their town by the spirits of the dead. This paper aims to demonstrate that Oliphant uses the supernatural not only to cope with her own experiences of bereavement, but that she also engages with contemporary themes: she comments on gender roles, reveals the shortcomings of society that places its faith in progress and material wealth, and exposes the limitations of the scientific or the mechanistic worldview which cannot provide an adequate explanation of “the true signification of life”.

**Keywords:** Victorian prose, Margaret Oliphant, supernatural tales, spiritualism

Reputed to have been Queen Victoria’s favorite novelist (Sutherland 1989: 477), Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897) was one of the most prolific Victorian writers. Widowed at the age of 31, she was compelled to write to support her children, and her brother’s family, and she produced ninety two novels, over twenty biographies, numerous short stories, essays, and reviews which appeared in *Blackwood’s* magazine, a well-regarded *Literary History of England* (1882), a history of Blackwood’s publishers, *Annals of a Publishing House* (1897), and a posthumously issued *Autobiography* (1899). She also turned her hand to travel writing and historical

romances. As John Sutherland puts it, she “contrived to combine mass production with a high degree of artistry”, and “she pleased the leading critics of the day” (Sutherland, 476–77). During her lifetime, she was called “the most remarkable woman of her time” who had made happy the millions of her readers (Skelton 1883: 80, 76); at her death, the publisher William Blackwood wrote: “Mrs. Oliphant has been to the England of letters what the Queen has been to society as a whole. She, too, was crowned with age and honour in her own empire” (qtd. in Terry 1983: 68). Henry James said of her that she “understood life itself in a fine free-handed manner” (qtd. in Leavis 1974: 10). Today, Oliphant is best remembered as one of the important practitioners the domestic fiction, with her “Chronicles of Carlingford” series of provincial life considered to be her most enduring achievement. The seven tales — from *The Executor* published in 1861 to *Phoebe Junior* published in 1876 — are set in a quiet town near London, and “examine with wit and sympathy the lives of the professional, religious, and trading classes during the mid-Victorian period” (O’Mealy 1996: 63).

Oliphant’s other interesting group of works, written from 1876 to the year she died, are ghost stories and other spiritual tales. Such forms became particularly popular in the Victorian era: Charles Dickens was an early practitioner of the genre with his *Christmas Carol* (1843) and *The Haunted Man* (1848). Dickens’s journals *Household Words* and *All The Year Round* came to specialize in ghost stories that filled the pages especially of their Christmas editions which contained the tales penned, among others, by Wilkie Collins and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. In a nineteenth-century review Oliphant was hailed as “one of the greatest writers of ghost stories this country has ever produced” (qtd. in Dalby 1988: 346). The tales are known as the “Stories of the Seen and Unseen.” The “Seen” represents the material, ordinary world of the living, and the “Unseen” stands for the extraordinary world of spirits. Although these world are separated by boundaries, in special circumstances these boundaries can be crossed, spirits can contact and influence the living, and the living can open themselves to the experience of getting in touch with the dead. As Elizabeth Jay points out, in the “Stories of the Seen and Unseen” Oliphant is “allowing the imagination to create a liminal world, where past, present, and future can coexist, permit[ing] the unseen to find a point of entry,” through the door created by Oliphant, a door that “both is there and is not there” (Jay 1995: 170). *A Beleaguered City*, a novella first published in 1879, is thought to be Oliphant’s most successful supernatural tale. John Stock Clarke, the author of comprehensive *Margaret Oliphant Bibliographies* available online, calls it “one of the most sophisticated of Victorian ghost stories” (Clarke 1986: 12). Oliphant, who wrote about her dissatisfaction with her own work, and even questioned her own abilities, regarding herself as “rather a failure” (qtd. in Sutherland, 477), valued *A Beleaguered City*: “It is a story which I like — a thing which does not always happen with my own productions — and I should like to republish it” (Oliphant 1974: 286).

*A Beleaguered City* — like other “Stories of the Seen and Unseen” — arose of Oliphant’s experience of bereavement: she lost her husband, two of her children as infants, and her beloved daughter Maggie at the age of 10. The sense of profound loss moved Oliphant to reflect upon the relationship between the dead and the living. After Maggie’s death in 1864, she writes: “Oh, my darling, my Maggie. I feel as if I could go down on my knees and pray for her not to forget her poor mother” (Oliphant 1974: 4). She continues:

The more I think of it, the less I am able to feel that those who have left us can start up at once into a heartless beatitude without caring for our sorrow. God who is Love cannot give immortality and annihilate affection; that surely, at least we can take for granted as sure as they live they live to love us. Human nature in the flesh cannot be more faithful, more tender, than the purified human soul in heaven. Where, then, are they, those who have gone before us? Some people say around us, still seeing, still knowing all that occupies us; but that is an idea I cannot entertain either. It would not be happiness but pain to be beside those we love yet unable to communicate with them, unable to make ourselves known. Where are you, oh my child, my child. I have tried to follow her in my imagination, to think of her delight when from the fever, wandering and languor of bed she came suddenly into the company of angels and the presence of the Lord. But then the child was but a child and death is but a natural event; it changed her surroundings, her capabilities, but it could not change the little living soul. Did she not stop short there and say “where is Mamma?” did not the separation overwhelm her? This thought of very desolation. Did she not think the sad horror, the heart that was breaking for her? God knows. (Oliphant 1974: 6–7).

According to June Sturrock, Oliphant found it difficult to artistically express her experience of loss, for “[a]s a domestic novelist she felt silenced by the discourse of *In Memoriam*, privileged both as a formal elegy and as part of the ancient tradition of male poet mourning male poet” (Sturrock 2002: 2). Indeed, Oliphant writes: “I may put the long musings of my agony into words, but Tennyson has done it already far better than I can” (Oliphant 1974: 11). It took her fourteen years to discover for herself a form through which could convey her feelings and anxieties concerning God, the dead and the living — the supernatural tale. Oliphant uses the supernatural to cope with her own experiences of bereavement, but she also engages with contemporary themes: she comments on gender roles, she reveals the shortcomings of society that places its faith in progress and material wealth, and she exposes the limitations of the scientific or the mechanistic worldview which cannot provide an adequate explanation of “the true signification of life” (Oliphant 1900: loc 362).

Oliphant considered the tales as a kind of fiction that was much different from her typical professional writing, as her 13 November 1884 letter to her publisher William Blackwood reveals: “Stories of this description are not like any others. I can produce them only when they come to me” (Oliphant 1974: 321). The supernatural tales arose out of inspiration rather than a need to publish another commercially successful piece. *A Beleaguered City* was first published in the Christmas issue of the *New Quarterly Magazine* in 1879, and it appeared,

significantly expanded, in book form by Macmillan in 1880, and went into a second edition in 1881. John Stock Clarke writes that “*A Beleaguered City* aroused a chorus of enthusiasm. ... The realistic setting within a convincing French town, the unforced supernaturalism, the poetic mysticism, the use of multiple narrators, the avoidance of didacticism, all aroused admiration” (Clarke 2006: 17). A highly laudatory review in the *Spectator* of February 7, 1880, praised Oliphant for her “wonderful mastery of the borderland of the natural and the supernatural,” and compared Oliphant’s tale with Coleridge’s “The Ancient Mariner.” Richard Holt Hutton — the author of the review and the *Spectator*’s coeditor — wrote that the story was composed “with the view of throwing upon ... [mankind] some new and imaginary light, and judging by the mingled aid of experience and fancy, what they would be transformed into under the magic of that light” (qtd. in Colby 1962: 283).

The events depicted in *A Beleaguered City* take place in the walled city of Semur in the Burgundy region, the setting inspired by a lengthy visit Oliphant made to France in 1871. The sedate, comfortable bourgeois life of Semur gets disrupted when its inhabitants are expelled from their homes by the city’s dead. The story is told by five different narrators, three men and two women, with Semur’s mayor, Monsieur Dupin, being the main narrator. He functions as the editor of other narratives — those of Paul Lecamus, a widower and the town’s visionary; of Monsieur de Bois-Sombre, an impoverished aristocrat, and those of Dupin’s wife, Agnes, and his mother, Madame Veuve Dupin. These narratives, commissioned by Dupin, present the events from various points of view; however, Dupin explains that it is his “duty to arrange and edit the different accounts of the mystery, as to present one coherent and trustworthy chronicle to the world” (Oliphant 1900: loc 133). The tale, with its full title *A Beleaguered City, being A Narrative of Certain Recent Events in the City of Semur, in the Department of the Haute Bourgogne* and with its simple and clear language, is styled as a kind of document that would be filed in the archives of the Municipal Building. The mayor — whose point of view dominates and frames the story — is a modern rationalist, who considers religion to be a kind of superstition: “I am a man of my century, and proud of being so; very little disposed to yield to the domination of clerical party,” he describes himself (Oliphant 1900: loc 120). At the very beginning, he firmly establishes his position in the community as well as his authority in telling the story:

I, Martin Dupin (de la Clairière), had the honour of holding the office of Maire in the town of Semur, in the Haute Bourgogne, at the time when the following events occurred. It will be perceived, therefore, that no one could have more complete knowledge of the facts — at once from my official position, and from the place of eminence in the affairs of the district generally which my family has held for many generations — by what citizen-like virtues and unblemished integrity I will not be vain enough to specify. (Oliphant 1900: loc 14).

As a man representing the rational order, Dupin narrates the story according to realistic conventions, yet what happens defies both realism and rationality. What is more, he comes to recognize that the chronicle of unusual events, as told by different

narrators, although more complete with each narrative, becomes less coherent: “in their accounts there are naturally discrepancies owing to their different points of view and different ways of regarding the subject” (Oliphant 1900: loc 1544).

The story begins on a sunny day in June 1875, when the mayor comes across a procession led by the priest carrying the last rites to a dying man, and he witnesses the town’s atheist, the vulgar Jacques Richard, trying to block its path, saying that “There is no *bon Dieu* but money. With money you can do anything.” A woman in the street cries: “It is enough to make the dead rise out of their graves” (Oliphant 1900: loc 47). Richard embodies materialism of the people of Semur, who have made god of money and neglected their spiritual life and religious responsibilities. Dupin himself observes that “the thirst for money and for pleasure has increased among us to an extent which I cannot but consider alarming” (Oliphant 1900: loc 103). Oliphant makes it clear that “the devotion of the community at large to this pursuit of gain — money without grandeur, and pleasure without any refinement” (Oliphant 1900: loc 114) can wreak havoc on the whole town: the excessive interest in material wealth leads to a spiritual degradation and collapse of social order, as it brings about the invasion of the dead.

Soon a strange mist shrouds the town: “there suddenly came upon us a darkness as in the depth of winter” (Oliphant 1900: loc 133). The inhabitants offer different explanations of this unusual phenomenon: the rationalists claim that it might be a result of a solar eclipse or an infestation by insects while the religious fear that it is God’s punishment for the blasphemy. Other mysterious occurrences follow: boats sail down the river propelled by unknown forces, the cathedral bells are heard to toll, although there is no one inside; mysterious signs appear on the façade of the cathedral:

Thus from moment to moment there appeared before us, in letters that seemed to blaze and flicker, something that looked like a great official placard. ‘*Sommation*’ — this was how it was headed. ... It was a summons to the people of Semur by name — ... to yield their places, which they had not filled aright, to those who knew the meaning of life, being dead. NOUS AUTRES MORTS — these were the words which blazed out oftenest of all, so that every one saw them. And ‘Go!’ this terrible placard said — ‘Go! leave this place to us who know the true signification of life’. (Oliphant 1900: loc 356)

The mayor, who values science, asks the local scientist, Monsieur de Clairon, to examine the cathedral and produce a report explaining how the spectral messages were created. Although M. de Clairon considers the illumination to be a trick “most cleverly done,” he remains “baffled altogether” about its nature (Oliphant 1900: loc 401). Oliphant shows that science cannot provide adequate tools for understanding or even describing the complexities of life. In an essay published in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, she criticized “the pretensions of science”, that were claiming the possibility of classifying and explaining everything. She considered science to be the enemy of both imagination and religion. She maintained that “[t]his poor world requires a vast deal of balance to keep it steady. We are not all

intellect ... and there are other kinds of power recognized among us that even the power of genius, or the inferior gifts of cleverness and talent” (Oliphant 1855: 319). These unexplainable things are the province of God, but also of human sensitivity and imagination.

Some inhabitants imagine that they have seen their dead beloved. It is significant that it is mainly the women of the town — less materialistic and more religious than men — who are able to see and hear the spirits while most men are not. As Dupin puts it, “Those who were thus transported by a knowledge beyond ours were the weakest among us; most of them were women, the men old or feeble, and some children” (Oliphant 1900: loc 518). The spirits are associated with the private family life: Dupin’s wife sees and hears their dead daughter, others encounter the ghosts of their husbands or parents. The appearance of spirits undermines the mayor’s masculine authority, for he can neither control what happens in town nor understand what is happening to him and to the citizens he is supposed to govern:

There was in the air, in the night, a sensation the most strange I have ever experienced. I have felt the same thing indeed at other times, in face of a great crowd, when thousands of people were moving, rustling, struggling, breathing around me, thronging all the vacant space, filling up every spot. This was the sensation that overwhelmed me here — a crowd: yet nothing to be seen but darkness, the indistinctive line of the road. We could not move for them, so close were they around us. What do I say? There was nobody — nothing. (Oliphant 1900: loc 222)

The inhabitants of Semur feel themselves to be pushed out of the city gates against their will and locked outside the town walls by some unknown and unseen forces. Soon some people begin to suspect that the siege is a divine punishment for Dupin’s refusal to allow the nuns to say mass in the local hospital — a decision he made because of the complaints of some patients that the service was too noisy for comfort.

Although most people fear the Unseen, there are some characters in the story who derive spiritual comfort from the encounters with the spirits of their loved ones. Often it is women who are involved in a positive interaction with the dead. As Merryn Williams puts it, “most of those who manage to make contact with the unseen are women, the ‘half of God’s creatures’ who are treated with contempt” (Williams 1988: xi). In *A Beleaguered City*, Oliphant gives women a voice: Agnes Dupin as well as her mother-in-law create their own narratives in which they can express their beliefs. When Agnes, the mayor’s devout wife who is grieving the loss of her young daughter, has a vision of her deceased child, “her face lighted up, her eyes were suffused with tears — with light — ... they became like the eyes of angels. A little cry came from her parted lips — she lingered a moment, stooping down as if talking to someone less tall than herself, then came after us, with that light still in her face” (Oliphant 1900: loc 434). Her secular and rational husband is unable to experience the consoling presence of his daughter’s spirit. By his own account, Dupin is a materialist, and a rationalist, who knows that “all sensations of the body must have their origins in the body” (Oliphant 1900: loc 294). What is



required to communicate with the Unseen are qualities such as unquestioning love and acceptance of the irrational — culturally associated with the feminine. The spirits do not reveal themselves either to avowedly rational characters or to those who occupy the positions of power and authority — culturally associated with the masculine. As Richard Dalby has noted, in Oliphant’s *Tales of the Seen and Unseen*, male characters are confronted with the inadequacy of their knowledge and arrogance it engenders. In order to interpret the events, they are forced to rely instead on “humility, tolerance, love, care and forgiveness — all the virtues which the age prescribed to the feminine sphere, the realm of the mother” (Dalby 1988: xviii). In the world created by Oliphant, women’s spiritual receptivity constitutes their strength.

Another man of authority who is precluded from negotiating with the Unseen is the Curé of the cathedral, who considers himself “the representative of the Unseen, the vice-regent with the power over heaven and hell” (Oliphant 1900: loc 797), and he becomes humiliated and angry when he finds out that the spiritual domain becomes the province of Paul Lecamus, the town’s visionary and dreamer, and a man of uncommon sensitivity, bereft of his wife, who becomes a kind of conduit between different spheres — those of men and women, and those of the dead and the living. He is the only one who can remain in Semur when others are ushered out of their homes. Having spent three days with the town’s dead, he is chosen to deliver their message to the living:

They who have sent me would have you know that they come, not in anger but in friendship: for the love they bear you, and because it has been permitted — ... They are not the dead. They are immortal. They are those who dwell — elsewhere. They have other work, which has been interrupted because of this trial. They ask, “Do you know now — do you know now?” this is what I am bidden to say. (Oliphant 1900: loc 811)

The dead have to return to their former community to remind the complacent living that their material world lacks important values. In order to regain their town, they have to recognize the significance and power of faith and feeling.

Lecamus has been allowed to remain in the town, to experience the presence of the dead, and he has been chosen as their messenger, because he is capable of empathy. He can communicate directly with the Unseen through his spiritual connection with his dead wife. A widower who constantly longs for her, he reflects on the mystery that surrounds the relationship between the dead and the living and he finds it impossible to accept the finality of death:

Why should it be a matter of wonder that the dead should come back? The wonder is that they do not. ... How one can go away who loves you, and never return, nor speak, nor send any message — that is the miracle: not that the heavens should bend down and the gates of Paradise roll back, and those who left us return. All my life it has been a marvel to me how they could be kept away. (Oliphant 1900: loc 852)

He believes that the life of the beloved dead continues in some other form and he experiences a moment of intense happiness when he feels his wife’s spiritual

presence: "Her presence wrapped me round and round. It was beyond speech. Neither did I need to see her face, nor touch her hand. She was more near to me, more near, than when I held her in my arms" (Oliphant 1900: loc 880).

Yet, even the sensitive and emphatic widower cannot fully grasp the meaning of what he has heard. The song of the Unseen "was more beautiful than any of our music, for it was full of desire and longing, yet hope and gladness; whereas among us, where there is longing, it is always sad." He "labored after the meaning," but in "the middle of a phrase, in a world half breathed, a sudden barrier would rise" (Oliphant 1900: loc 921). "Though I was alone with the unseen," says Lecamus, "I comprehended it not; only when it touched upon what I knew, then I understood" (Oliphant 1900: loc 928). Commenting on Lecamus's role in the narrative, Philip Davis writes that "Mrs Oliphant herself confronts in Lecamus the extreme imaginative dilemma of the Victorian visionary novelist working within the world of realism: how to give a sense of the unknown, when even *that* can only be registered through what we already know" (Davis 2002: 354). *A Beleaguered City* resists a narrative and interpretive closure: "We are made so. What we desire eludes us at the moment of grasping it," says Lecamus (Oliphant 1900: loc 888).

Lecamus manages to convince the mayor that the Unseen came to Semur as friends, not enemies, thus Dupin together with the priest, decide to go to the town to persuade the spirits to end its the siege. When they come into the possessed town, they find nobody there, yet there are a few traces of the presence of the Unseen: on entering the library of his house, Dupin finds that the old bureau had been moved; in his wife's room "a branch of olive, with silver leaves" is laid on the frame of the picture of his dead daughter (Oliphant 1900: loc 1054). Other than the "silent sign" there is no message from the Unseen addressed to Dupin (Oliphant 1900: loc 1046). Yet, suddenly the Latin words "*Laetatus sum*" spring from his tongue: "It was an inspiration from above" says the mayor, "and no thought of mine" (Oliphant 1900: loc 1075). Moved by a strange impulse, Dupin and the Curé go to the cathedral and celebrate the Mass, which has a profound effect on the mayor: "The days of my childhood seemed to come back to me. All trouble, and care, and mystery, and pain seemed left behind. ... My heart grew soft within me as the heart of a little child. ... I knelt ... on the steps of the altar and wept" (Oliphant 1900: loc 1082). He drops the façade of a rational and controlling authority figure, and opens himself up to feelings. The mayor's metamorphosis marks the end of the siege of the town: the cathedral bells ring, the strange pall is lifted, and the inhabitants return to their town. They appear to be changed by the experience: if only for a moment, they abandon their materialistic pursuits, they celebrate Mass together, and the whole town goes through a brief religious revival.

However, Oliphant makes it clear that the change is only temporary, and the miraculous transformation of the town will not last. As Dupin says,

The wonderful manifestation which interrupted our existence has passed absolutely as if it had never been. We had not been twelve hours in our houses ere we had forgotten, or practically



forgotten, our expulsion from them. ... There was for some time, a greater respect shown to religion in Semur, and a more devout attendance at the sacred function; but I regret to say this did not continue. Even in my own case — I say it with sorrow — it did not continue. (Oliphant 1900: loc 1630, 1637).

Once the Unseen have departed, the people of Semur return to their normal routine — the door between the two worlds was ajar only briefly. Although the town was saved by spirituality and empathy of its women and of Paul Lecamus, who were able to “see” the Unseen and convey their message to the living, the men neither change their attitudes to women nor abandon their materialistic values.

Although Oliphant does not seem to believe in a possibility of a profound change in the nature of the living, she appears to believe that the dead have a role and purpose in the world of the Seen. She shares with other Victorians their fascination with the supernatural and the possibility of an afterlife which gave rise to the spiritualist movement. According to Jennifer Bann, the “rapid spread and popularity of the spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth contributed a new model of the ghostly to supernatural literature, and — influenced by the active, power figures of the séance room — the specters of the ghost story changed” (Bann 2009: 664). Bann argues that “ghosts became active figures empowered rather than constrained by their deaths” (Bann, 664), they were “varied and psychologically complex” and possessed an “ability to act within a physical sphere” (Bann, 673). Oliphant was not directly influenced by spiritualism with its séances and materializations; however, her representation of the spirits who are active figures, who can guide the living, influence them and even effect their — if only temporary — spiritual regeneration owes much to spiritualist beliefs. The spirits in *A Beleaguered City* are not “the less-than-human apparitions” who are “constrained by their deaths” (Bann, 665, 664). Instead, they become more than human, for they understand “the true signification of life,” they continue to care for the living and they want to help them. Yet, the contact between the dead and the living is only partial, and turns out to be largely ineffectual — the miracle of spiritual transformation of the inhabitants of Semur does not last — because Oliphant is too much of a realist to fully believe in miracles.

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