

Felicitas Guerrero, an Argentinian legendary character: history, tragedy and femicide.

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Abstract.

In this presentation, we will deal with an Argentine female ghost, associated with a real young lady, Felicitas Guerrero, from the perspective of Folkloristics and Gender Studies.

Felicitas Guerrero (1846-1872) has been a historic character from an Argentinian aristocratic family, who was first married to a rich man in his fifties, who died, along with the son of the couple, both victims of yellow fever. A short time later, Felicitas knew a younger man, Samuel Sáenz Valiente, to whom she ought to get married. But the same day of her marriage engagement, she was (has been) killed by another young man, Enrique Ocampo, who had been (has been) her lover. (Enrique Ocampo.) Her family had a beautiful church built in her memory, named St. Felicitas – which was also the name of a Roman saint of the 2nd. Century- declared as part of the cultural heritage of Buenos Aires city.

Her tragic decease inspired different legendary versions regarding her ghostly apparition and to a filmic recreation of her biography we will deal with in this paper, from the perspective of Folkloristics, Discourse Analysis and cultural heritage. The analytical approach is oriented to highlight how her high social position and untimely death transformed her into a paradigmatic character, which favoured a process of identification with young women who had been victims of gender violence. Being aware that conflicts with the dead express living conflicts in the real world, and that the act of telling legends has the potential of affirming local cultures, we consider the ghost of this young lady as a symbol of vernacular identity who claims (for) justice for her femicide.

Keywords: Felicitas Guerrero, Legendary Discourse, Argentina, Folklore, Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction

Here, we will deal with an Argentine female ghost, associated with a real young lady, whose name and place of birth and death can be historically traced. From the corpus of legends already analyzed (Palleiro 2004, 2018) we will revisit here the one of Felicitas Guerrero, (1846-1872) a real young woman coming from an Argentinian aristocratic family, whose tragic history has been recreated both in oral, written, and virtual versions, and it has also inspired a film, *Felicitas*, based on her biography, which we will deal with in the following sections.

2. Methods

We used the comparative approach as a method to compare different versions of Felicitas's history and legend, interpreted with the methodological approach of discourse analysis; as well as the ethnographic observation of the places linked to Felicitas's life and history, which are part of Buenos Aires cultural heritage. We also worked with documental sources (including both written sources), oral registers obtained in fieldwork and filmic material and iconic images of her figure embodied in the buildings which are included in the tourist circuits of the International Day of Monuments and Sites circuit held on April 18th of each year.

3. Discussion

3.1. Felicitas Guerrero: a historic character

Felicitas Guerrero, born in Buenos Aires, capital of the Argentine Republic, in 1846 and died in the same city, in 1872, was the elder of eleven daughters of the Spanish merchant Carlos Guerrero, who arrived at Argentina in the XIXth century and was described by those who knew her as the cutest lady of the whole of the Argentine. This merchant wanted his young daughter to be married to a rich man in his fifties, named Martin de Alzaga, who belonged to an aristocratic family. However, Felicitas had a young lover, named Enrique Ocampo, who also wanted to marry her. Despite her own desires, she was compelled to obey her father, so she married Martin de Alzaga. In this way, she became firstly a wife and then a mother of a child named Felix, who died at the age of six, during the (epidemic) yellow fever epidemic in Buenos Aires city. Felicitas lost another baby as well and, a short time after, also her husband died, so she became a young widow. Her lover Ocampo tried to marry her at this second opportunity, but this time she decided to marry another wealthy young man, Samuel Sáenz Valiente. The same day of her engagement with Sáenz Valiente, Enrique Ocampo went to the party, asked to talk to Felicitas, and then killed her. This tragic event gave rise to different versions of events. One refers that Ocampo shot himself after having murdered Felicitas. Another tells that Felicitas's cousin killed Ocampo, while the last one affirms that Ocampo's killer had been Samuel Sáenz Valiente. The historic fact is that both Felicitas and Ocampo died tragically and were buried together in the aristocratic Recoleta Cemetery. This fact made for another oral version, told by the young Julia Torres Peltzer in 2020, who affirmed to have seen the ghost of Felicitas in a visit to the Recoleta Cemetery asking for revenge for having been buried in the same place as her murderer. After the tragedy, the parents of Felicitas built a Catholic church in her memory and placed inside the church a beautiful statue of her holding her little son Felix by the hand. In her honor, the church was named St. Felicitas, which is also the name of a Roman martyr of the second century.

This tragic history has been recreated both in oral, written, and virtual versions. It has also inspired a film, whose title is *Felicitas*, based on her biography, which focuses the attention on the historic facts which surrounded this tragic death. This terrible decease favored as well legendary narratives dealing with her ghostly apparition both in the cemetery and in the church built in her honor, which is part of the cultural heritage of Buenos Aires city

3.2 Felicitas Guerrero a legendary character.

A version of Felicitas's legend can be found in the virtual channel of Internet, hosted in the blog entitled "Toni's page" ("*La página de Toni*"). As a virtual device, the blog offers the possibility of changing the contents from time to time. Blogs, in fact, offer the owners a changing way of

registering information. Virtual narratives share in fact some common features with oral ones such as this spontaneous style, as well as the heterogeneous mixture of historic and legendary topics. Another distinctive feature is the combination of verbal and iconic discursive strategies, along with the technological resources provided by the virtual channel, such as the possibility of adding new links or cancelling information from one day to another.

As a distinctive feature of this virtual channel, the blog offers the possibility of including visual material. Hence, the blog includes also visual images such as a photograph of young Felicitas Guerrero, in an old pink color which imitates the old style of photographs, as well as a visual image of the church and a photograph of the statue of Felicitas, inside the temple. It includes too a photo of her tomb in Recoleta cemetery. All these visual resources, which cannot be reproduced in this article due to copyright reasons, encourage the virtual receivers to visit the blog, where there is also a lot of other information regarding different matters.

This virtual version mirrors the mixture between history, fiction and social beliefs which is the distinctive feature of the legend. The verbal discourse connects the tragic history of Felicitas with popular beliefs which make the young couples avoid choosing St. Felicitas Catholic church when they want to get married. It includes as well an allusion to the legend of the lady ghost “in a white dress” who can be seen and heard crying and walking around in a specific place and time: every January 30th, since 1872, the date of the anniversary of her death, in the neighborhood of St Felicitas’s church in Buenos Aires city.¹ It refers as well to the ritual action of touching the iron entrance of the church, performed by young girls who also tie up white handkerchiefs to make their lost love come back. As aforesaid, the legend is told in a colloquial style, close to orality, with frequent repetitions and the polyphonic use of reported speech, endorsing the authorship of the discourse to a plural, impersonal voice, through the clause “It is said that”:

Although it is a beautiful church, St. Felicitas is not chosen for marriages, because of a tragic history.

It is said that ... if you touch the iron door of the entrance [or you tie up a white handkerchief], your lost love will turn back to you forever. The neighbors say that the ghost of the young widow can still be seen wandering around, and that every January 30th, which is the date of the anniversary of her death, she can still be seen with her white dress, crying desperately just at the entrance of the church.²

This text refers a “case” as well regarding the strange self-broken wings of the angels of the church, connected with the mysterious episode of the self-ringing bells, when they were about to be repaired:

It is also said that in stormy nights the bells of the church begin to ring by themselves...

In 1981, the city became the owner of the church, and it began to be restored by an architect named Devincenzi. In that occasion, the wings of the five angels which decorated the church were broken. These wings fell down to the floor, in a symmetric position and, when the architect began to restore them, the bells began to ring again by themselves, too...

The concrete allusion to the architect Devincenzi, located in a concrete period of time, which provides the exact date and name in which the church has been actually repaired, in 1981, is used as an argumentative resource to create an illusion of reality.

The circulation of this version on the *Internet* reveals the recreation of folk narrative legends in virtual channels, not only in complex messages with iconic resources articulated by a plural emitter, but also in individual blogs whose owners are interested in belief narratives. In this way, each virtual

¹ For a study of the different itineraries of the legend of “The lady ghost”, one of whose name is “Lady in white”, in different contexts, see Palleiro (2004, 2018).

² This citation corresponds to the English translation of the text included in the virtual link: [el-fantasma-de-felicitas-guerrero-de.html](http://toni2836.blogspot.com/). (2011), retrieved September 22, 2011, from the web page <http://toni2836.blogspot.com/>, and retrieved for the last time on January 19th, 2021. The original text is written in Spanish.

reader can approach some mysterious places of the cultural landscape of Buenos Aires city, such as St. Felicitas Church.

3.3 Felicitas's history in a filmic recreation.

Felicitas's history has been recreated in the film *Felicitas*; an Argentinian movie directed by Teresa Costantini in 2009, with the actress Sabrina Garcarena in the role of Felicitas, Gonzalo Heredia as Enrique Ocampo, and the actor Luis Brandoni as Martin de Alzaga. The distinctive feature of this filmic recreation is the contextualization of Felicitas's tragic life in the Argentinean social context of the late XIXth. Century.

The focus of the narrative plot is the love affair between young Felicitas and Enrique Ocampo, which begins before her marriage with Martin de Alzaga, while in other oral versions (Palleiro 2004, Palleiro, 2018: 260-274), this love affair takes place after Alzaga's death. These variants and changing details are the distinctive features of folk message (Mukarovsky 1977, Palleiro 2004, Palleiro 2018), which in this case reveal the folklorist process of Felicitas' history.

The climactic point of this version is the moment in which Ocampo kills Felicitas and, in this filmic recreation, he then commits suicide. This is the last sequence of the movie, contextualized in a party, in which Felicitas was celebrating her second marriage engagement with Samuel Sáenz Valiente. As well as in the oral versions, there is an antithetical tension between the lively atmosphere of the party, and the terrible end of Felicitas and Ocampo.

The film emphasizes the tragic events connected with Felicitas' history, who is presented as a young woman whose beauty and youth, along with her aristocratic condition, makes more terrible her violent death. In the film, under such antithetical dynamics she is presented by means of a hyperbole, which underlines at the same time her condition of metaphorical archetype of female beauty and her tragic end. In this way, she is characterized (d) as an emblematic symbol of the fragile female condition, whose existence can be destroyed by human passions and ambitions. In fact, both the ambitions of her father, who compelled her to marry an old rich man, and the jealousy of her lover transformed the life of the young and bright Felicitas into a tragedy.

All these aspects, dealing with the social and cultural position of women in traditional societies, are emphasized in the film by means of visual images that show young Felicitas enjoying her life in the country, or kissing her young lover Ocampo in erotic scenes. Such visual scenes have as an antithetical counterpart other images regarding the agony of her young son, the weakness of her old husband, and the climactic moment of her own death, along with the suicide of Ocampo. The film includes as well lovely images of old Buenos Aires, presented with a visual rhetoric which reveals a poetic process of recreation of history (White, 1973). The axis of the film is in fact the aesthetic recreation of Felicitas's history, from the standpoint of her tragic love affair, without any reference to the ghost or to other supernatural phenomena connected with rites and popular beliefs. In the film, there is an accumulative enumeration of realistic historic details, by means of a mixture of verbal and iconic resources, in a multi-semiotic discourse, whose distinctive features are the visual effects, oriented to underline Felicitas's tragedy, which can be considered as a femicide.



Santa Felicitas Historical Complex: from legend to tangible cultural heritage

Felicita's legend, which belongs to the intangible cultural heritage of Buenos Aires, is anchored in the tangible cultural heritage of the city, which comprises not only St Felicitas church but also the Museum, close to which there is a Catholic primary school, named "Santa Felicitas school. The legend, as intangible cultural heritage, enhances the cultural value of the Santa Felicitas.

The church, built in 1873, is a paradigmatic work of the German neo-Romanesque style designed by the architect Ernesto Bunge who was trained at the Royal School of Arts in Krefeld and the Royal Academy of Architecture in Berlin, being the most important German-influenced building of Buenos Aires city. As explained above, the church was built by the heartbroken parents of the young Felicitas Guerrero de Alzaga, in her memory. Both the church, the Museum and the school are placed in the same area of Barracas district. Another place inside the Historical Complex is the place in which the main house of Alzaga's family was placed in the past, occupied nowadays by Colombia Square, where Felicitas Guerrero was murdered in 1872. In 1937, Buenos Aires Town Hall decided to demolish the old aristocratic buildings for the opening of the public square. The old tunnels connecting the Guerrero residence with the church and the Hidden Temple Built in neo-Gothic style inside the Church, are currently kept underground and can be visited in a guided tour. In the centre (center) of the square there is a sculpture made in 1940 by the Argentine artist Julio César Vergottini. Both the legend and the historical complex belong to the cultural landscape of Buenos Aires city, favoring the sense of belonging to a social group, whose bounds are reinforced by collective beliefs enhanced by rituals such as the ones connected with Felicitas's memory.



Santa Felicitas's Church Ph Comisión Nacional



Alzaga's House. Ph Historical Complex Santa Felicitas

4. Conclusion and results.

The tragic history and the high social position of Felicitas Guerrero transformed her paradigmatic character, which favored a process of identification with other young women who had been victims of gender violence and gave rise to legendary narratives.

From the initial standpoint that conflicts with the dead express living conflicts in the real world (Valk 2006), and aware that the act of telling legends has the potential of affirming group identity, we are able to affirm that the ghost of this young lady can be considered as a symbol of differential collective identity (Bauman, 1972) and her tragic history mirrors the horrors of femicide,

highlighted by her wealthy and aristocratic position. Such position favored the construction of the church and the statue which preserves her memory, along with her grave in a luxurious cemetery such Recoleta, these monuments being part of the Cultural Heritage of Buenos Aires city. Her living memory in the legendary discourse and ritual, instead, belongs not only to the aristocracy but also to ordinary people, especially women who can see reflected in the terrible decease of this Argentinian young lady the ghost of femicide.

An important result of this research was the Cultural Heritage Declaration in homage to Felicitas Guerrero, it is 'The Santa Felicitas Historical Complex' at Historical Protection Area No. 5, in the Barracas neighborhood of Buenos Aires. (Peltzer, 2010). It covers 1500 m², on two levels and consisting of the Santa Felicitas Church that was declared "National Historical and Artistic Monument" in 2012 by The National Commission of Monuments and Historical Sites. This resort is included in the Cultural Tourist Circuit of the city and is also used for events and musical gatherings. Several people collaborate *ad honorem* in the cultural project *Complejo Histórico Santa Felicitas*, (St. Felicitas Historical complex) with the conviction that historical values are fundamental to strengthening the community's bonds. As aforesaid, both history and legend are part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the city, anchored in the material historical complex, which is an important part of the urban cultural landscape.

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