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Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture

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WRAITHS, REVENANTS AND RITUAL IN MEDIEVAL CULTURE*

I

INTRODUCTION

When a human being dies . . . the body that gave comfort to many people while it was alive, provokes horror in the same people after death. Hence the saying:

Human flesh is viler than a sheep's skin.
When a sheep dies, its remains (*ruina*) are still worth
something,
The skin is stretched and written on, both sides.
When a human being dies, both flesh and bones die.¹

As this fourteenth-century preacher placed nib to parchment, he was moved to reflect upon the durability of the words he put down, as contrasted with the destruction of his body to come. His melancholy thoughts were realized, for although the manuscript still exists, the author's name, along with the details of his bodily existence, are lost. This particular writer's musing on the eternity of death is deceptive, however, for the finality of his tone contrasts sharply with the fluid conceptions of death and afterlife that are expressed in other medieval texts. Indeed, the last line in particular — "when a human being dies, both flesh and bones die" — actually contradicts a significant body of evidence about medieval attitudes towards life, death and afterlife. This article is about that body of evidence.

In the following pages I explore the ongoing processes of construction, dissolution and reconstruction of the life/death boundary in European culture roughly between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. I shall argue that definitions of death and of life may be grouped into two broad models that competed with one another, even as they overlapped within various cultural milieux: a spiritual model of life and afterlife, characteristic of

* I should like to acknowledge the kind encouragement of Diane Owen Hughes, Lester Little, Richard S. Cohen and Michael MacDonald.

¹ *Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, i.13, ed. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park, 1989), p. 98.

the theological and learned medical traditions, and a material model prevalent among lay sectors of society that were less concerned with the theological issues of spirit and soul. In so arguing, I hope to throw light upon the diversity of cultural traditions within the Middle Ages.

Despite the large bibliography on the history of attitudes towards death that has developed since the 1970s, especially in France,² few studies discuss the multiplicity of relevant traditions, at least for the Middle Ages. This neglect is in part caused by the problematic nature of the evidence. The obvious places to look for data — wills, monumental sepulchres, the provision of masses, the *artes moriendi* — describe the fears and practices of the wealthy, the literate and the religiously committed. Sources for the reconstruction of alternative traditions about death and afterlife are more difficult to exploit, for the textual genres closest to the oral or “popular” milieu — exempla collections, penitentials, inquisitorial proceedings, hagiographies — have been preserved mainly through the activities of ecclesiastical collectors and redactors.³ And though the ecclesiastical sphere preserves much valuable data for the historian, it is also “the creator of a universality *a posteriori*”.⁴ That is to say, even as ecclesiastics preserved notice of variant traditions, they also reinterpreted them to conform to their own cultural standards and beliefs, leaving the impression of universality where diversity existed.

² For a bibliographical sampling, I refer the reader to the review essay by Stephen Wilson, “Death and the Social Historians: Some Recent Books in French and English”, *Social History*, v (1980), pp. 435–51; Jane Taylor (ed.), *Dies illa: Death in the Middle Ages* (Liverpool, 1984); *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxi (1976), *passim*; Herman Braet and Werner Verbeke (eds.), *Death in the Middle Ages* (Louvain, 1983); and the remaining notes throughout this article.

³ For discussion of exempla, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Martin Thom (Cambridge, 1983); Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Religione, folklore, e società nell'Occidente medievale*, trans. Lucia Carle (Rome, 1988); Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu and Jacques Berlioz, “Exempla: A Discussion and Case Study”, in Joel Rosenthal (ed.), *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History* (Athens, Ga, 1990), pp. 37–65. On penitentials, see Aron Gurevich, “Popular Culture in the Mirror of the Penitentials”, in his *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 78–103. For hagiography, the best source is André Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident au derniers siècles du Moyen Age* (Rome, 1981). For inquisitorial proceedings, see Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1989), pp. 156–64. Of general interest is André Vauchez (ed.), *Faire croire: modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XII^e au XV^e siècle* (Paris, 1981).

⁴ Hugues Neveux, “Les lendemains de la mort dans les croyances occidentales (vers 1250–vers 1300)”, *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxiv (1979), p. 249.

The task of the historian is to undo this process, to recover multiplicity when hints of it exist by unravelling the different strands of cultural interpretation that are woven into the evidence. As Jonathan Z. Smith has noted, the historian's role is "to complicate, not to clarify".⁵

Indeed, the process of reconstructing non-canonical beliefs is fraught with complications rather than clarity. Not least among these complications is the fact that "popular culture" does not, as such, exist.⁶ As a set of discursive terms, the dichotomy of popular and élite has been created and maintained by historians as a means to differentiate the canonical ideals of the literate few from the less well-documented mentalities of the *populus*. Yet popular culture is invariably defined by what it is not — literate, urban, clerical — rather than by what it is.⁷ One result of this imprecision has been a tendency to overemphasize the position of normative, high culture in relation to popular beliefs and practices. This has occurred in two distinct ways: either the popular is seen as an inferior version of an élite norm; or else popular culture is envisaged as largely cut off from high culture, resulting in a "two-tiered model".⁸ In either case, the culture split is often constructed along the lines of intellectual dogma or belief versus daily ritual and praxis. This is in turn a loose replication of indigenous medieval categories of orthodoxy versus *superstitio*.

⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Chicago, 1993), p. 290.

⁶ See Jean-Claude Schmitt, "'Religion populaire' et culture folklorique", *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxi (1976), pp. 941-53; Francis Rapp, "Réflexions sur la religion populaire au Moyen Age", in Bernard Plongeron (ed.), *La religion populaire dans l'Occident chrétien* (Paris, 1976), pp. 51-98; Gábor Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Karen Margolis, trans. Susan Singerman (Princeton, 1990), pp. 1-9; Mary R. O'Neil, "From 'Popular' to 'Local' Religion: Issues in Early Modern European Religious History", *Religious Studies Rev.*, xii (1986), pp. 222-8; John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem", *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, xci (1986), pp. 519-52; for a response to Van Engen, see Schmitt, *Religione, folklore, e società nell'Occidente medievale*, pp. 1-27. An informative discussion of the issues from a slightly different perspective may be found in Catherine Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture: Toward an Assessment of 'Popular Religion'", *History of Religions*, xxix (1989), pp. 35-57.

⁷ For a comparative perspective on how binary discursive categories can impede, rather than expedite, analysis of religious culture in the past, see Richard S. Cohen, "Discontented Categories: Hinayana and Mahayana in Indian Buddhist History", *Jl Amer. Acad. Religion*, lxiii (1995), pp. 1-25.

⁸ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981).

Although it is useful to maintain contrastive distinctions between “popular” and “élite” culture, we should not make the mistake of confounding discursive categories with an actual historical dualism. When discussing cultural variance in the Middle Ages, it is important to recognize that these different perspectives are largely relational: “popular” and “élite” come into play through analysis of social dynamics, rather than as pre-existent data. These categories must be seen as expressing ideological tensions between models of cultural interpretation, rather than as static strata or levels of culture in opposition. However, to define popular and élite *only* relationally is also an enterprise fraught with hazard. As Christopher Herbert has noted, following E. B. Tylor, culture is difficult to define as other than a set of abstract relationships among the elements of a “complex whole” embracing religion, social mores, art, politics and so forth. Yet these relationships are not actually observable: they are simply theorized as a basis of cultural coherence.⁹ This realization adds yet another caveat to the historian’s task. On the one hand, we must avoid essentializing our analytic tools by imputing a false sense of historical concreteness to them. On the other, we must recognize “medieval culture” as a conceptual abstraction and the idea of “popular and élite medieval cultures” as a second-generation abstraction.

Fortunately, abstractions are not inappropriate to academic discourse, even when they are problematic and difficult to define. “Culture” has been and continues to be a useful conceptual category in the humanities and social sciences; so too can terms such as “popular” and “élite” continue as tools in the discussion of past societies, for they represent a pragmatic strategy of interpretation. However, I shall deliberately allow these terms to remain undefined: they are simply discursive markers for discriminating among different viewpoints, rather than historical actualities that can be precisely delimited through empirical data. Indeed, the very idea of formulating specific historical definitions of popular and élite culture is a paradox, for the production of an abstraction by definition involves a slippage from the observable to the non-observable.

⁹ Christopher Herbert, *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 4, 10.

II

DEFINING DEATH

The social significance of death is constructed with great variety and complexity within different cultural contexts.¹⁰ Medieval conceptions of death were fluid: as I shall demonstrate, one could die a “good” or a “bad” death; one could undergo a temporary or a more permanent death; and one could die a partial death — that is, a death of the personality without a death of the body, or vice versa. Patrick Geary has defined the dead in the Middle Ages as an “age class”:¹¹ this neatly encapsulates the social reciprocity between the living and the dead, and the continued influence that the latter exerted over the former throughout medieval society. Intimacy between the living and the dead was possible because death was not envisaged as a full extinguishing of either body or spirit. In doctrinal terms, the body awaited resurrection even as it decayed,¹² while the soul entered one realm of a tripartite afterlife.¹³ In some local, popular traditions too, both spirit and body were believed to live on — though in rather different ways than those elaborated by the theologians of the time.

I turn first to the learned tradition, for it possessed a well-articulated set of medical definitions and theological doctrines of death and the afterlife. Central to medieval medical theories of life was the notion of *spiritus* as the principle of human vitality, a doctrine that has significant implications for social and religious history as well.¹⁴ Derived from Galenic models and enhanced by

¹⁰ Cf. Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham (Glencoe, Ill., 1960); Robert Hertz, “Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort”, in his *Sociologie religieuse et folklore*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1970), pp. 1-83; Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982); Jack Goody and Cesare Poppi, “Flowers and Bones: Approaches to the Dead in Anglo-American and Italian Cemeteries”, *Comp. Studies in Society and Hist.*, xxxvi (1994), pp. 146-75.

¹¹ Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 36.

¹² Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York, 1994).

¹³ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1981); Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca, 1993); Aron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. Jana Howlett (Chicago, 1992), pp. 50-89; Aron Gurevich, “Popular and Scholarly Medieval Cultural Traditions: Notes in the Margin of Jacques Le Goff’s Book”, *Jl Medieval Hist.*, ix (1983), pp. 71-90. For English translations of primary source documents on purgatory, see *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, trans. Eileen Gardiner (New York, 1989).

¹⁴ The main works that I will rely on in the following discussion are: Nancy G. Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils: Two Generations of Italian Medical Learning*

(cont. on p. 8)

Arab influences, *spiritus* was often subdivided into three classes or physiological systems: *spiritus animalis*, *spiritus naturalis* and *spiritus vitalis*.¹⁵ The animal spirit was held to reside in the brain, and was responsible for psychic phenomena and the nervous system; the natural spirit had its basis in the liver and regulated involuntary systems.¹⁶ Both these kinds of spirit derived from the vital spirit, which was manufactured in the left ventricle of the heart from inhaled air and thence diffused throughout the body via the arteries.¹⁷ In the process, *spiritus* regulated the vital signs: heartbeat, pulse, respiration and maintenance of proper body temperature.¹⁸ *Spiritus* could also be seen in the form of tears, which were held to be an effusion of spirit caused by an excess of emotion constricting the heart; its effects could be felt in fevers and chills, since it was responsible for the generation of body heat.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, *spiritus* was considered instrumental in the processes of vision, in provocation to laughter, falling in love and penile erection.²⁰ Thus, rather than being an abstract or numinous entity, the *spiritus* was considered a material (albeit highly refined) substance within the body, one that interacted with the body's internal organs and moved along its pathways. Indeed, *spiritus* was thought to regulate all the most important physiological systems in the human organism: medicinally defined, *spiritus* constituted the principle of life itself.

By contrast, in theological parlance the soul was traditionally held to be the principle of life. Yet the great scholastic theologians,

(n. 14 cont.)

(Princeton, 1981); Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago, 1990); Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, trans. Rosemary Morris (New Brunswick, 1990); Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Princeton, 1988); James Bono, "Medical Spirits and the Medieval Language of Life", *Traditio*, xl (1984), pp. 91-130; M. D. Chenu, "*Spiritus*: vocabulaire de l'âme au XII^e siècle", *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, xli (1957), pp. 209-32; G. Verbeke, *L'évolution de la doctrine du pneuma du stoïcisme à S. Augustin* (New York, 1987); Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance* (London, 1975).

¹⁵ Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, pp. 48-50; Bono, "Medical Spirits and the Medieval Language of Life", pp. 92-4.

¹⁶ Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, pp. 48-9; Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils*, p. 166; Pouchelle, *Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, p. 117.

¹⁷ Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils*, p. 166.

¹⁸ Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*, p. 107.

¹⁹ Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils*, p. 228.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 218, 228; Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, pp. 84, 83.

from Hugh of Saint-Victor to Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, desired to harmonize the natural and the divine orders. As a result, throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries theologians increasingly broadened the definition of *spiritus* so as to ally it with the soul, thus uniting the realms of theology and medicine.²¹ For example, it was speculated that at the general resurrection the heart would be the first part of the body to resurrect, presumably because this seat of the vital *spiritus* was necessary above all for the return of the soul and of life.²² Ultimately, although *spiritus* was formally understood to be the operative intermediary between the materiality of the body and the immateriality of the soul, and thus to share in the properties of each, it came to be regarded as a “special” category unto itself. What in medical terms was conceived as a barely material substance was rendered even more insubstantial within the religious sphere. As James Bono has noted:

As a spirit-matter dichotomy became a dominant category for analyzing relationships among things . . . *spiritus* was no longer just a rarefied form of matter, like air or blood; it became a kind of substance essentially different from the ordinary matter out of which the body is formed . . . Latin authors . . . wished to create a language embracing both the phenomenon of life and the experience of salvation within a unified conceptual framework.²³

In short, the spiritual model of life, death and afterlife increasingly emphasized the incorporeality of the vital principle by contrast with the material nature of the body and the tangible world. *Spiritus* even came to be associated with celestial spirits and the divine image. Thus the salvific history of the individual was linked both to the celestial macrocosm and to the physical microcosm.²⁴ This incorporation of *spiritus* within the soteriological system that Pierre Chaunu has dubbed “the religion of the soul”²⁵ has broad implications for the religious history of the period. As

²¹ See Bono, “Medical Spirits and the Medieval Language of Life”; Chenu, “Vocabulaire de l’âme au XII^e siècle”.

²² Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII on the Division of the Corpse”, *Viator*, xii (1981), p. 240.

²³ Bono, “Medical Spirits and the Medieval Language of Life”, pp. 98-9.

²⁴ For more on this, see Nancy Caciola, “Discerning Spirits: Sanctity and Possession in the Later Middle Ages” (Univ. of Michigan Ph.D. thesis, 1994).

²⁵ Pierre Chaunu, *La mort à Paris, XVI^e, XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1978). See also Pierre Chaunu, “Mourir à Paris (XVI^e-XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles)”, *Annales E. S. C.*, xxxi (1976), pp. 29-50.

I shall demonstrate, however, this spiritual model was not the only definition of life, death and afterlife in the Middle Ages.

III

THE POSSESSED CORPSE

People who move their arms and hands from their sides when they walk about do much harm . . . [for] by moving their arms about in such a way, they knock many souls of the dead (*animas deffunctorum*) to the ground.²⁶

This quotation exemplifies the problems that beset much of the evidence for medieval attitudes towards death. On the one hand, there exists a set of tales and fragments that points to the centrality of the dead within the syncretist thought-systems of certain medieval communities. On the other hand, as I have noted above, nearly all this evidence is transmitted through ecclesiastical writers who both transcribed and reinterpreted the meanings of these tales to fit with their own theological certainties. In the present case the remark is actually fourth-hand: it is the Latin translation of the vernacular testimony of a village woman, who was reporting the speech of a friend. Although the wording of the statement may not represent the way in which this community actually spoke about the deceased, it nevertheless testifies to a mental outlook on the coinciding worlds of the living and the dead. The seen world is interspersed with another, quite crowded level of unseen reality, and the two may collide with ease.

Similarly, recovering both the seen and the unseen aspects of medieval religious mentalities involves negotiating seen and unseen levels of the texts: reading “against the grain” both for what is said too markedly, and for what is left unsaid. A primary means of reading against the grain is to separate the interpretations of ecclesiastical authors from the basic “cultural facts” of the story. By “cultural facts” I mean the most minimal description of what actions are reported to have occurred (hence “facts”) and were held as true by the communities that circulated the report (hence “cultural”). For example, in the quotation above there is a contradiction between the immateriality of the soul (as the word *anima* was used by Latin writers) and the fact that these “souls of the dead” may be physically knocked over by those

²⁶ *Le registre d'inquisition de Jacques Fournier, évêque de Pamiers (1318-1325)*, ed. J. Duvernoy, 3 vols. (Toulouse, 1965), i, pp. 544-5. I would like to thank Miriam Shadis for helping me obtain this text swiftly at a crucial juncture.

among the living insensitive enough to walk about with their arms swinging. The use of the word *anima* by the notary — even if cognate to the lost vernacular of the witness — represents an interpretation, a translation of one semantic system into another.²⁷ The “cultural fact”, by contrast, is that this community believed that the dead had a tangible form that could be hit, and that they could in consequence fall down. This idea hints at an alternative conception of the basis of vitality than the spiritual model discussed earlier, one that views the principle of (after)life not only as material, but as embodied. It is to this model that I now turn.

Consider the following anecdote:

In the town of Nivelles I saw a virgin worthy of God . . . She rose in the early morning to go to church, observing the stipulated hours [for prayer]. It happened one time that the dead body of a certain deceased man was brought to the church in the evening without her knowing about it. Getting up in the middle of the night, the virgin went to church and found the dead man, but she was hardly afraid, or just a little, so she sat down and began her prayers. When the Devil saw this he looked upon her with malice (*invidet*), and entering the dead body he moved it at first in the coffin. The virgin therefore crossed herself and bravely shouted to the Devil, “Lie down! Lie down, you wretch, for you have no power against me!” Suddenly the Devil rose up with the corpse and said, “Truly, now I will have power against you, and I will revenge myself for the frequent injuries I have suffered at your hands!” When she saw this, she was thoroughly terrified in her heart, so with both hands she seized a staff topped with a cross, and bringing it down on the head of the dead man she knocked him to the ground. Through such faithful daring she put the demon to flight.²⁸

This tale, with its complex intertwining of local popular and of clerical beliefs, was first written down in the mid-thirteenth century by the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré in his manual for preachers, *Bonum universale de apibus*. Thomas probably adapted the tale from gossip he had heard in Nivelles, an area within his sphere of mobility, in order to teach certain points of dogma about unclean spirits and, more importantly, about the death of the human body. Alongside these teachings, however, a delicate reading of the story may reveal much about local ideas that conflicted, even as they coexisted, with ecclesiastical teachings. To explore these other ideas, we must extricate Thomas’s

²⁷ For a thoughtful collection of essays on this theme within modern anthropological discourse, see James Clifford and George Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986).

²⁸ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Bonum universale de apibus*, ii.57.8: *Thomæ Cantimpratani, S. Th. Doctoris, Ordinis S. Dominici, et Episcopi Suffraganei Cameracensis, Miraculorum, et exemplorum memorabilium sui temporis, libri duo* (Douai, 1597), p. 452.

interpretation of the incident from the cultural facts that he is reporting.

Two questions of boundary transgression are at issue here: between the living and the dead, and between flesh and spirit. First, Thomas, consistent with ecclesiastical doctrine, is emphasizing the fact that the corpse itself does not come to life: it is mere dross moved by the demon. The body is uncoordinated, stiff and unnatural. Neither the flesh nor the spirit of the dead man is an active principle, as Thomas repeatedly emphasizes in such redundant phrases as “the dead body of a certain deceased man”. Thus the body is usable by any spirit, not just the original human spirit of the deceased. In fact, bodies are often referred to as a sort of clothing in hagiographers’ descriptions of spiritual dislocation: entering and exiting the body is like “putting on a tunic” or “shedding a garment”.²⁹ Even Augustine had likened the body to a piece of clothing or jewellery, one “worn” in a particularly intimate manner.³⁰ This conception is linked, of course, both to the medical concept of the spirit as the principle of life or vitality, and to the theory of the general resurrection at the end of time, when the bodies of the dead will rise and be reunited with their original human spirits: the garment, once abandoned, will be put on again. The resurrection is the inverse of this possessed corpse: a glorious return of the human spirit, as opposed to an unclean spirit slipping inside the body and using it. Iconographic evidence also suggests a basic parallelism in medieval conceptions of how a human spirit and a demon might use the body: the exit of the human spirit at death was portrayed in precisely the same way as the exit of an unclean spirit in exorcism scenes. Either spirit may leap out through the mouth, the gateway to the body’s spiritual system in medieval physiological terms. The body, as some sort of envelope or tool, could be put on by any spirit and used as a means to interact more directly with the tangible world.

Thomas’s language emphasizes the demon’s manipulation of the body as an object: “[The Devil] moved [the body] at first in the coffin . . . suddenly the Devil rose up with the corpse”. There is a clear subject/object distinction between the unclean spirit as mover, and the body as inert matter. Nor was Thomas alone in

²⁹ See, for example, *Vita Venerabilis Idaae Virginis*, ii.5.26, ed. Daniel Papebroch, in *Acta Sanctorum*, Aprilis, ii (Antwerp, 1675), p. 178.

³⁰ Brown, “Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages”, p. 223.

this particular emphasis: other ecclesiastical authors also interpreted the movement of a corpse after death in precisely the same way. For example, a tale from the anonymous *Life of Ida of Louvain*, another thirteenth-century virgin from the northern Low Countries, emphasizes the way in which a dead body's limbs may be manoeuvred by an unclean spirit:

One time at night she beheld as if a bier was placed before her . . . and on it . . . the corpse of a certain deceased man. Leaping into it, the skin-changing inventor of all evil stood the body on its feet, and thus moving forward inside it and together with it (*sic in ipso simul cum ipso progrediens*), he approached the maidservant of God.³¹

The passage explicitly describes how the demon enters the body, props it up on its feet and then makes it take a few steps. One can easily picture it gracelessly shambling forward. Like Thomas of Cantimpré, the author of this story also emphasizes a strong subject/object distinction between unclean spirit and dead body. In so doing, both authors emphasize the point that the only animate force is the possessing spirit, the demon; the man, by contrast, is only a thing, a mere cadaver. In essence, this "official" view of reanimated corpses denies any transgression between the living and the dead, and instead makes the central action a transgression between flesh and the demonic spirit. Corpses cannot come back to life, but they may temporarily be inhabited by an unclean spirit that takes the place of the departed human spirit. Only at the resurrection may the dead truly be said to live again.

This opposition between different ways of reanimating the body was even invoked in an ecclesiastical ritual for consecrating cemeteries, which prayed God to protect the body's safety from demonic misuse or reanimation until the true and final resurrection; a blessing which evokes the extraordinary image of medieval demons seeking out cemeteries in order to rob graves of their occupants: "Grant, distributor of kindnesses, a seat of repose for the bodies of your menservants and womenservants entering into this cemetery, a place fortified against all incursions of evil spirits, so that at the resurrection of their bodies and spirits . . . they may be worthy to receive the eternal blessing".³²

³¹ *Vita Idae*, i.2.8 (ed. Papebroch, p. 160).

³² "Famulorum famularumque tuarum corporibus in hoc cimiterium intransibilibus quietis sedem ab omni incursionem malorum spirituum defensis benignis largitor tribue ut post animarum corporumque resurrectionem . . . beatitudinem sempiternam percipere mereantur": Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Borghese MS. 35, "Ordo ad benedicendum coemeterium", fo. 74^{r-v}.

Other macabre tales emphasized the total death of the body in slightly different ways. For example, the mid-thirteenth-century Dominican Jean de Mailly tells an exemplum of a demon animating the corpse of a beautiful young woman in order to tempt a pious man.³³ On the one hand, the tale is a meditation on the transitory nature of secular delights, but the fact that the girl's body turns putrid as soon as the demon leaves it also emphasizes the death of the body, as opposed to the illusory life given it by the unclean spirit. More explicit on the theme of demonic possession versus the living dead is another tale from Thomas of Cantimpré. This exemplum tells of the animate corpse of a knight who appears to his former servant, asks him to remove from his wound the point of the lance that killed him (as verification of his own materiality), and then lectures him on the evils of tournaments.³⁴ Thomas follows up his lesson against institutionalized violence, however, with an explanation of how the movement of a corpse might come about, utilizing the theological metaphor of the body as garment:

Since the structure (*organismo*) of a dead body remains behind, just as a man can [use] a structured body (*corpus organisatum*) like a garment, so the Devil can sneak into it and can mould the mouth to voices and words again, and recall the tendons to the movement of its members.³⁵

Again, it is not the body which moves and gives life, but the spirit.

This interpretation of revenants as possessed by demons is in accord with the broader intellectual background of these ecclesiastical authors. Their cultural construction of animate corpses as demonically possessed was supported both by the learned medico-theological tradition, with its model of the spiritual basis of life and the inertia of corporeal matter, as well as by more general anxieties of the ecclesiastical milieu about the predations of demons. Even within a didactic work such as Thomas's *De apibus*, however, the very terms of the argument reveal the beliefs that the preacher was attempting to eradicate. For example, we see in Thomas's relentless insistence on the absolute non-vitality of the corpse that attacked the virgin ("the dead body of a certain deceased man"), an argument against the opposite proposition:

³³ Jean de Mailly, *Abrégé des gestes et miracles des saints*, cxix.16, trans. A. Dondaine (Paris, 1947), pp. 338-9.

³⁴ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De apibus*, ii.49.6: *Thomæ Cantimpratani . . . Miraculorum*, pp. 367-8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, ii.49.7: *Thomæ Cantimpratani . . . Miraculorum*, pp. 368-9.

that the dead *do* have a continuing vitality of their own. If we separate the ecclesiastical interpretations of these events as caused by demons from the basic “cultural facts” that they report, we are left with a different set of ideas: dead men sometimes roam from their graves and attack the living. As I shall demonstrate, such terrifying events — minus the possessing demon — were well within the realm of plausibility for certain medieval cultural milieux.

IV

THE LIVING CORPSE

Belief in corpses coming back to life is well attested for parts of medieval Europe, most notably Iceland, but also England, the Low Countries, northern France and parts of Germany. The Icelandic saga literature presents the most extensive portrayal of this set of beliefs. The importance of revenants within Icelandic culture is attested by the existence of a specific word for the undead in Old Icelandic: *draugr*.³⁶ Most famous, perhaps, is the revenant Glam of *Grettis saga*.³⁷ In life, Glam was a widely disliked shepherd who was killed violently — possibly by another (unnamed) *draugr*. After Glam’s body was buried, it nevertheless wandered from its grave at night, stamping on the rooftops and storehouses and terrifying the local inhabitants. Eventually, Glam’s corpse killed two living men. The *draugr* was only put to rest after a terrific battle with Grettir (the saga’s protagonist), who beheaded the revenant and reburied it with its head between its legs.³⁸ The same saga contains another such confrontation, this time between Grettir and the *draugr* Kar, for the sake of a treasure the corpse watches over. Kar, too, is subdued by beheading.³⁹ More peaceable is the revenant of Thorgunna in *Eyrbyggja saga*, who cooked dinner for those bearing her corpse away for burial. However, Thorgunna’s death also brought on what might be called an epidemic of aggressive revenants back at the farm where

³⁶ For a discussion of the word, see Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. Howlett, pp. 116–21.

³⁷ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, chs. 32–5, trans. George Ainslie Hight (London, 1914), pp. 86–100; for the original, see *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Íslenzk Fornrit, vii, Reykjavík, 1936), pp. 107–23.

³⁸ For the frequency of this means of disposal of revenants, see Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death* (New Haven, 1988), p. 25.

³⁹ *Grettis saga*, ch. 18 (trans. Hight, pp. 42–6; ed. Jónsson, pp. 56–61).

she had lived. The first to die mysteriously was the farm's shepherd. His *draugr* in turn killed another man named Thorir Wood-Leg and the two of them were seen together at night. Then six more men perished in the vicinity, followed by six who drowned at sea and came back to the farm, dripping seawater. The two bands of revenants had a fight, the sailors against Thorir Wood-Leg's troop; next, a local witch died and was seen walking about with her dead husband. Finally, the whole lot was banished through a formal legal procedure against them for trespassing, along with an exorcism of the house.⁴⁰ Earlier in *Eyrbyggja saga* the case of the *draugr* Thorolf is recounted: after dying from sheer rage he, too, killed so many men that the valley he haunted was abandoned by the living — though the area was well populated with revenants, who wandered about with Thorolf.⁴¹ *Laxdaela saga* tells of the extreme violence of the revenant Killer-Hrapp thus: "Difficult as he had been to deal with during his life, he was now very much worse after death, for his corpse would not rest in its grave; people say he murdered most of his servants".⁴² Hrapp's body was finally dug up and reburied far from the district. These tales represent only a few of the numerous references to *draugr* in Old Icelandic literature.

Yet although the Icelandic phenomenon of living corpses has been widely studied and discussed,⁴³ its counterpart on the northern European mainland, and in England and Scotland, has been

⁴⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga*, chs. 51-5, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Harmondsworth, 1989), pp. 131-41; for the original, see *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Íslenzk Fornrit, iv, Reykjavík, 1935), pp. 139-52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, chs. 33-4 (trans. Pálsson and Edwards, pp. 92-5; ed. Sveinsson and Þórðarson, pp. 91-5).

⁴² *Laxdaela saga*, ch. 17, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 78; for the original, see *Laxdaela saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Íslenzk Fornrit, v, Reykjavík, 1934), pp. 39-40.

⁴³ For an introduction to this voluminous body of literature, see, in general, Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*; Claude Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1986); Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, "The Restless Dead: An Icelandic Ghost Story", in Hilda R. Ellis Davidson and W. M. S. Russell (eds.), *The Folklore of Ghosts* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 155-75, 256-9; Reidar Christiansen, "The Dead and the Living", *Studia Norvegica*, ii (1946), pp. 3-96; Juha Pentikäinen, "The Dead without Status", in Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf (eds.), *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies* (Bloomington, 1989), pp. 128-34; Kathryn Hume, "From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature", *Studies in Philology*, lxxvii (1980), pp. 1-25.

largely neglected.⁴⁴ While this oversight may be due to the fact that the undead are less pervasive in the continental and insular contexts than in the Icelandic, there is nevertheless a body of evidence about these revenants that is strikingly similar to tales of the Icelandic *draugar*.

Numerous “horror” stories of the undead may be found in chronicles and exempla collections from northern Europe from the late twelfth century on. The tales I examined in the previous section about demonically animated revenants are not isolated instances, but part of a longer continuum of stories about reanimated corpses, many of which are told with a high degree of local detail and verisimilitude. In most cases, the dead are presented not as possessed, but as coming back to life on their own.

The thirteenth-century scholastic and bishop of Paris Guillaume d’Auvergne, for example, captured the essence of this belief in refreshingly minimalist fashion. He referred to tales he had heard, “many times, about certain dead men who kill other men from among the living”.⁴⁵ Even while he ridicules the notion that the dead can come back to life, he testifies to how widespread the belief was: certain dead men can move and act, and they are malevolent, even murderous, towards the living. The possessed corpses discussed in the previous section would fit nicely within Guillaume’s definition of this phenomenon, but he might equally well have had in mind incidents like that in the thirteenth-century *Historiae memorabiles*, a text from Colmar by the Dominican Rudolf von Schlettstadt. In a tale entitled “On Henry, who was seriously wounded by dead men”, we are told of a man travelling

⁴⁴ Most studies of death in the Middle Ages do not deal specifically with the idea of revenants. See Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les revenants: les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris, 1994); Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants au Moyen Âge*; Neveux, “Lendemain de la mort dans les croyances occidentales”; Karl Frölich, “Germanisches Totenrecht und Totenbrauchtum im Spiegel neuerer Forschung”, *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde*, xliii (1952), pp. 41–63; Nikolaus Kyll, *Tod, Grab, Begräbnisplatz, Totenfeier* (Bonn, 1972); Ronald Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (New York, 1984). All these works discuss revenants in part (the French word *revenant* also applies to ghosts). Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, gives a cross-cultural view. For a critique, see Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Die Gegenwart der Toten”, in Braet and Verbeke (eds.), *Death in the Middle Ages*, pp. 19–77. Oexle disbelieves in the notion of the *lebende Leichnam* as a medieval phenomenon (pp. 58–65), but he presents an interesting point of view none the less. Oexle’s critique is based largely upon the work of Günter Wiegmann, “Der ‘lebende Leichnam’ im Volksbrauch”, *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, lxii (1966), pp. 161–83.

⁴⁵ Guillaume d’Auvergne, *De universo*, ii.3.24: *Guilielmi Alverni episcopi Parisiensis . . . opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1674, repr. Frankfurt-on-Main, 1963), i, p. 1069, col. b.

near a river who is suddenly attacked by three dead men mounted on horseback, whom he recognizes and later names. One is a recently murdered knight. After beating him savagely, the revenants leave Henry for dead, but he survives.⁴⁶ These blood-curdling dead men certainly tried their best to kill Henry, yet despite their malicious nature, they are not associated with demonic possession in any way.

Similarly, the thirteenth-century Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach provides an illuminating glimpse into the dominant themes of local revenant belief in his *Dialogus miraculorum*. Like Thomas and the anonymous hagiographer of Ida of Louvain, Caesarius interpreted a few such incidents as demonic reanimation of the body: two tales speak of dead bodies “living with an evil spirit in place of the soul”.⁴⁷ In the second of this pair the departure of the demon prompts the long-dead body to crumble, theatrically, into dust.⁴⁸ Caesarius, however, is more commonly rather sanguine about the undead: they appear in the world of the living with no explanation other than their own volition. And, as Guillaume d’Auvergne noted, they were often believed to have evil intentions.

Consider the following narratives. A servant is supervising her master’s children while they answer a call of nature at dusk. Suddenly she notices a “monster” in the form of a woman with a pallid face and tattered clothing emerge from a cemetery, stare at her over the fence, then enter the household next door. The apparition soon re-enters its grave, but the entire family of neighbours dies soon after.⁴⁹ In Caesarius’s next tale, the emergence from a sepulchre of another dead “monster” in human form is a portent of impending death for the living as well: two canons who witnessed the event die shortly after.⁵⁰ More detail is given in a later exemplum that discusses the corporeal, but invulnerable, revenant of a knight named Henry:

He was extremely wicked, and judged rapes, adultery, incest, lying and

⁴⁶ Rudolf von Schlettstadt, *Historiae memorabiles: Zur Dominikanerliteratur und Kulturgeschichte des 13. Jahrhunderts*, ch. 47, ed. Erich Kleinschmidt (Cologne, 1974), pp. 110–11.

⁴⁷ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, xii.3–4, ed. Josef Strange, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1851), ii, p. 317.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.4 (ed. Strange, ii, pp. 317–18).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.63 (ed. Strange, ii, pp. 313–14). The previous tale identifies this apparition as “Mors”, Death personified: *ibid.*, xi.62 (ed. Strange, ii, p. 313).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.64 (ed. Strange, ii, p. 314).

similar things to be virtues. After he had died . . . he appeared to many people wearing the sheepskin that he used to wear when he was alive, and he especially frequented the home of his daughter . . . He was often felled (*caedebatur*) with a sword, but could not be wounded: he emitted a sound as if a soft bed were being hit.⁵¹

The terrified girl eventually rid her home of the revenant through an aspersion of holy water. Similarly, another dead man, this time a usurer, pounded on the door of his son, who wisely refused him entry: the corpse then hung on the door some snakes and toads — universally considered venomous in medieval thought — as proof of his evil intention.⁵² In these examples, there is no indication of demonic intervention: the dead simply come back to life on their own and interact with the tangible world. Like the Icelandic *draugar*, they have three dimensions and material capabilities. Most importantly, they are presented as ill-intentioned from their own desires or instinct — not as animated by the Devil for the downfall of the human race.

Indeed, many tales of the undead explicitly reject the demonic interpretation. The demonic-possession school of thought about revenants, as best represented by Thomas of Cantimpré and the hagiographer of Ida of Louvain, was distinctly a minority viewpoint. Texts such as chronicles and histories, which lack the same didactic agenda as exempla collections or hagiographies, universally reject or ignore the possibility of demonic animation in regard to revenants. For these more historical authors, the transgression involved in a corpse coming back to life is one between life and death, rather than between flesh and unclean spirit. For example, several entries in Walter Map's twelfth-century English chronicle *De nugis curialium* tell of the predations of living, not possessed, corpses. The chronicler's tone gives these tales in particular an air of immediacy: for Walter and his contemporaries, these were strange, but real events. One incident concerns a revenant ravaging its former neighbourhood. A local knight, William Laudun, complains to the bishop about it:

"Lord, I take refuge with you seeking advice. A certain evil Welshman quite recently died irreligiously in my village, and immediately after four nights he took to walking back to the village each night, and will not stop calling out by name each of his neighbours. As soon as they are called they take ill, and within three days they die, so that already very few are left."

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xii.15 (ed. Strange, ii, p. 327).

⁵² *Ibid.*, xii.18 (ed. Strange, ii, p. 328).

Interestingly enough, the bishop suggests that the body may in fact be demonically reanimated, and advises William to open the tomb and sprinkle the corpse with plenty of holy water. However, this strategy is a dismal failure: the revenant continues its nightly visits, demonstrating that an indwelling demon is not the source of the problem. The corpse moves under its own power. Only when the knight William himself chases the corpse back to its grave, and cleaves open its head “to the neck”, does it cease its troublemaking. In conclusion, Map himself explicitly sets aside the demonic viewpoint, and instead opines that the cause of the phenomenon is unknowable: “We know about the true circumstances of this event, but we do not know the cause”.⁵³ Another of Map’s tales describes the vagabond corpse of a man, “who they say died irreligiously”,⁵⁴ that wanders for over a month before being cornered at the town limits by a crowd of local townspeople. Only after the corpse receives a proper burial — that is, when a cross is placed to mark the grave — does it cease its wandering.

Belief in the living dead, rather than the possessed dead, is also attested in medieval Brittany. An anonymous Breton revenant story raises the possibility of demonic animation, but then dismisses the idea. The subject of this tale is a gentler revenant, a baker who comes back ostensibly to help his widow knead the bread, though she is frightened rather than gratified by its assistance. After several nightly visits, some young men chase the cadaver through the town, and it throws stones at them to ward off pursuit. They explicitly ask the corpse whether it is a dead man or the illusion of an evil spirit. However, the revenant manages to slip away without answering. The next day, the community disinters the body and decides that it was indeed a living corpse when they find its legs covered with the fresh mud that it had run through the night before. At first the locals heap heavy stones on the grave, but the cadaver’s nightly wanderings only cease after the community later dismembers it.⁵⁵

Still more revenant tales may be found in William of Newburgh’s chronicle *Historia rerum Anglicarum*. In discussing the case of a wandering corpse in Buckingham in 1196, William

⁵³ Walter Map, *De nugis curialium: Courtiers’ Trifles*, ii.27, ed. M. R. James, rev. C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1983), pp. 202–4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ii.28 (ed. James, rev. Brooke and Mynors, p. 204).

⁵⁵ Schmitt, *Revenants*, p. 173.

notes that “such things often happened in England”,⁵⁶ and then gives three additional examples of terrifyingly disruptive revenants.⁵⁷ The Buckingham case concerns the corpse of a sinful man that is aggressive towards its remaining family. It crawls into bed with its widow, nearly crushing her with its weight, then attacks other family members when they try to intervene. Although the locals suggest to the bishop that the corpse must be disinterred and burnt to ashes, he convinces them that a letter of absolution for the man’s sins, if laid in the tomb, will be just as effective — and it is. The second case, in Berwick, concerns the cadaver of a wealthy man that wanders abroad at night, terrifying the people and causing the dogs to howl loudly at its malign presence. This time, the expedient of burning the revenant is undertaken by some local youths, who dig up the offending corpse, dismember it and cremate its remains. The third case is that of a too-secular chaplain in the vicinity of Melrose Abbey: this man, known in life as the *hundeprest* because of his love of hunting, returned to give his attentions to his former mistress. Terrified, she recruited some young men to watch by the cemetery for her. Upon the corpse’s return to its hideout, one of them “killed” the revenant by hitting it with an axe. When the grave was later opened, the gaping wound was clearly visible, and appeared as fresh as if the corpse were alive. Despite this incapacitating wound, however, the locals burned the cadaver for good measure. William’s final case is perhaps the most frightening: a wicked and choleric man died suddenly in a fall from his rooftop, after he spied his wife in bed with another man. He, too, wandered at night, attacking all he met and leaving them on the point of death, while a pack of dogs followed after him, howling and whining. The locals, in fear of the revenant’s malice as much of a possible pestilence from the corruption of the air caused by the rotting corpse, began to leave the district in droves. Finally, two brothers dug up the cadaver and burned it to ashes.

William of Newburgh seems to have studied revenants at some length: he explains how he searched in vain for parallel incidents in earlier literature and emphasizes the newness of the phenomenon. Yet he, too, like the authors of many of the other texts we

⁵⁶ William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, v.22, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, ed. Richard Howlett, 4 vols. (Rolls Ser., London, 1884-9), ii, p. 475.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, v.23-4 (ed. Howlett, pp. 476-82).

have examined, professes perplexity as to the mechanism by which the re-animation of a corpse might come about, and hesitates to ascribe it to demonic intervention:

Certainly the fact that cadavers of the dead, having got out of their graves, should be borne about by I know not what spirit to terrorize or injure the living . . . would not easily be accepted as true if there were not so many examples at hand from our own time, and if the testimony were not so abundant . . . If I wanted to write about every incident of this sort . . . it would be too complicated and onerous.⁵⁸

Despite the frequency William ascribes to these events, he remains puzzled by them. The explanation that demons possess dead bodies and move them does not entirely satisfy him, as his use of the open phrase, “borne about by I know not what spirit”, indicates. Ultimately William, like Walter Map and Caesarius of Heisterbach, fails to assign a cause to the corpses’ wanderings.

A Yorkshire collection of twelve revenant stories, dating from about 1400, shows marked similarities to William’s histories. Although in this text the Latin word used to refer to these beings is “spirit” (*spiritus*), all the tales involve tangible bodies. In one anecdote, for example, a woman “catches” a spirit and unaccountably decides to carry it home on her back. An observer notes that “the woman’s hands were sinking deeply into the spirit’s flesh, as if the flesh of the spirit were putrid and not solid, but illusory”.⁵⁹ This is an interesting contradiction: on the one hand, the being is a “spirit” and “illusory”; on the other, it can be caught and carried home, and it has flesh (for which two different words are used: *carne* and *caro*). A case with parallels to William of Newburgh’s *hundeprest* has the rector of Kerby leaving his grave at night and molesting his former concubine, until his corpse is disinterred and thrown, along with its coffin, into a local body of water.⁶⁰ One tale builds to a dramatic conclusion:

Concerning the spirit of Robert, the son of Robert de Boltebo of Killebourne, who was caught in the cemetery. The younger Robert died and was buried in the cemetery, but he used to go out from his grave at night and terrify and disturb the townspeople, and the dogs of the town used to follow him and howl mightily. Finally, some young men . . . decided to catch

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, v.24 (ed. Howlett, p. 477).

⁵⁹ M. R. James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories”, *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xxxvii (1922), p. 418.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* On the disposal of potential revenants in water, see Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, pp. 147–53; Schmitt, *Revenants*, also discusses water as a boundary between the living and the dead, throughout.

him somehow if they could, and they met at the cemetery. But when he appeared, they all fled except two, one of whom was named Robert Foxton. He seized him as he was going out from the cemetery and put him on the church-stile, while the other shouted bravely, "Hold him fast until I can get there!" But the other one answered, "Go quickly to the parish priest so that he can be conjured!" . . . The parish priest came quickly and conjured him in the name of the Holy Trinity . . . Having been conjured in this way, he answered from the depths of his entrails; not with his tongue but as if from an empty jar, and he confessed various trespasses.⁶¹

There are several parallels here to earlier tales, especially those of William of Newburgh. Like William's first story, absolution of sins puts the revenant to rest; like some of William's other tales, the howling of the local dogs is a sign of the thing's malign nature. An interesting and unusual detail, however, is the discussion of the corpse's voice: although clearly endowed with a body that can be grasped and held, the revenant speaks, eerily, from its depths. Again, it is worth noting here that no outside agency, spiritual or otherwise, is posited as the cause of the corpse's wanderings: the dead man is sentient and comes back to life of his own fierce volition.

An anecdote from the thirteenth-century Scottish *Chronicon de Lanercost*, which has been attributed to an Augustinian monk,⁶² also leaves aside the possibility of demonic animation of the corpse. Again, the protagonist is a man of the church who did not live up to his calling:

At that time a certain man wearing the habit of holy religion, who had lived perversely, died in the worst way, being bound by sentence of excommunication . . . For a long time after his body had been buried it vexed many people in the same monastery with a sensory illusion (*sensibili illusione*) in the shade of night. The child of darkness transferred himself to the house of . . . a knight in order to test the faith of the simple, and it terrified [the family] by contending against them in broad daylight . . . Having assumed a body (whether natural or aerial is uncertain, but it was hideous, gross and tangible) he used to come at noonday in the habit of a black monk and settle on the highest parts of the homes or storehouses . . . He so savagely threw to the ground and battered those who attempted to fight him as nearly to shatter all their joints . . . One evening while the head of the family was settled around the hearth along with his household, this deadly thing (*funestus*) came into their midst, throwing them into confusion with missiles and blows.⁶³

⁶¹ James, "Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories", p. 418.

⁶² James Wilson, "Authorship of the Chronicle of Lanercost", *Scot. Hist. Rev.*, x (1912-13), pp. 138-55.

⁶³ *Chronicon de Lanercost*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (Edinburgh, 1839), pp. 163-4 (a. 1295). I should like to thank Hans Broedel for bringing this reference to my attention.

The revenant succeeds in killing the family's heir on this occasion, underlining its brutal and vengeful nature. Although the unknown chronicler does not inform the reader whether the creature was ever disposed of, it is plainly a corporeal revenant, with its "hideous, gross and tangible" body.⁶⁴ Moreover, the guiding force of the "malignant creature" is its own internal will. The author specifies that the corpse was permitted to wander by God, but there is no question of demonic possession or reanimation by anything other than the creature's own residual life-force.

Horror at the potential life of the corpse is also supported by a variety of non-textual evidence throughout northern Europe — indeed, one can still see in cemeteries and churches paintings of revenants quite similar to those described in literary texts. I am referring here to the dance of death motif, the late medieval iconography in which grinning, half-decomposed corpses frenetically lead away a varied procession of humans; and to the related theme of the three living / three dead.⁶⁵ The latter theme made its way into French literature in the thirteenth century, and spread into iconography during the fourteenth.⁶⁶ The tale describes a pleasure-party of three young noblemen who suddenly find themselves in a cemetery. There they are confronted by a group of three decaying corpses: these revenant dead are upright and animate, with their emaciated limbs showing through their

⁶⁴ The reference to its body possibly being "aerial" is a theological speculation that was probably inspired by familiarity with Augustinian theories about the bodies of supernatural creatures: this is the word Augustine used to describe the bodies of angels and demons. See Augustine, *De divinatione daemonum*, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia latina* (hereafter P.L.), 221 vols. (Paris, 1844-64), xl, cols. 581-92; trans. Ruth Wentworth Brown, "The Divination of Demons", in Augustine, *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Fathers of the Church, xxvii, New York, 1955), pp. 421-40.

⁶⁵ On the dance of death motif, see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York, 1977), ch. 3; Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Late Middle Ages. A Study of Medieval Iconography and its Sources*, ed. Harry Bober, trans. Marthiel Mathews (Princeton, 1986); Helmut Rosenfeld, *Der mittellaterliche Totentanz: Entstehung — Entwicklung — Bedeutung*, 2nd edn (Cologne, 1968); Wolfgang Stammer, *Die Totentänze des Mittelalters* (Munich, 1922); James Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance* (Glasgow, 1950); Karl Künstle, *Die Legende der Drei Lebenden und der Drei Toten und der Totentanz nebst einem Exkurs über die Jakobslegende* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1908); Leonard Kurtz, *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature* (Geneva, 1975); Florence Whyte, *The Dance of Death in Spain and Catalonia* (Baltimore, 1931); *The Danse Macabré of Women: Ms. fr. 995 of the Bibliothèque Nationale*, ed. Ann Tukey Harrison (Kent, Ohio, 1994); Jean Batany, "Un image en négatif du fonctionnalisme social: les danses macabré", in Taylor (ed.), *Dies illa*, pp. 15-28.

⁶⁶ Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, ed. Bober, p. 324.

tattered shrouds. The famous lines, “What you are, we once were; what we are, you will become”, derive from this tale, which was popular in vernacular and in Latin literature, as well as in iconographic depictions. The speech of the dead indicates a continuity between the living and the dead communities. By the fifteenth century, the story had been appropriated by clerical patrons and writers, who disseminated the tale as a meditative exemplum on the brevity of this life.⁶⁷

Although the *danse macabre* has sometimes been interpreted as deriving from the three living / three dead theme,⁶⁸ Emile Mâle sees its origins in literature reaching back earlier, in germinal form, to the twelfth-century work of the poet Hélinand.⁶⁹ Whatever its precise origins, by the beginning of the fourteenth century the *danse macabre* existed in the form of a morality play, to be publicly performed with actors playing dead men in their winding-sheets and taking the hands of the living from all walks of life.⁷⁰ Although there is debate about the earliest pictorial depictions of the dance of death,⁷¹ the earliest fresco that can be positively dated was painted in the cemetery of the Innocents in Paris in 1424.⁷² Eventually, the theme spread throughout northern Europe, with important representations in Brittany (Kermaria-en-Isquit), Germany and England.

It is important to note that, contrary to the widespread belief that the *danse macabre* and the three living / three dead motifs depict skeletons, in fact the medieval iconography only rarely involved bony figures.⁷³ Invariably the figures of the dead were shown as emaciated corpses, midway through the process of decay. Typically, the artists portrayed skin stretched taut over bony limbs, but burst open over the entrails — an area of the body subject to early decomposition.⁷⁴ Some artists also showed

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁶⁸ See Künstle, *Legende der Drei Lebenden und der Drei Toten und der Totentanz*; Kurtz, *Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature*.

⁶⁹ Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, ed. Bober, p. 329; the poetic origins of the theme are also discussed by Batany, “Image en négatif du fonctionnalisme social”.

⁷⁰ Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, ed. Bober, pp. 329–30.

⁷¹ For various chronologies and geographical emphases, cf., for example, Clark, *Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance*; Rosenfeld, *Mittelalterliche Totentanz*; Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, ed. Bober.

⁷² Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, ed. Bober, p. 331.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 334; Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, p. 90; Schmitt, *Revenants*, p. 165. The predominance of the half-decomposed corpse or *transi* in macabre iconography is also noted by Ariès, *Hour of our Death*, p. 113.

⁷⁴ Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, p. 90.

worms at work in the cadavers to demonstrate the putridity of the remaining flesh. This is a vital detail, for the dance of death and the three living / three dead motifs are iconographic counterpoints to revenant stories, intimately related to the same set of mental attitudes. These dead men are not insubstantial illusions, but corporeal revenants. And just as tales of the undead were reinterpreted by some churchmen in terms of demonic animation, the iconography, too, was appropriated by the church in order to convey a message of secular transience and *memento mori*. Regardless of how these various representations were used and interpreted within ecclesiastical thought, however, the geographic coincidence of the macabre iconography and tales about corpses coming back to life is striking. I shall return to these themes below.

V

FLESH AND BONES

Tales of revenants, though scattered chronologically from the mid-twelfth century to the end of the fifteenth, geographically across the north of Europe, and textually throughout disparate authors and genres, nevertheless display a basic unity of form. Guillaume d'Auvergne's description of the belief remains a useful one: he claims to have heard tales, "many times, about certain dead men who kill other men from among the living".⁷⁵ This brief comment may serve as the basis for teasing out some fundamental similarities between revenant tales.

First, Guillaume notes that he had heard of such events "many times". He was not alone in his observation. Although some authors classified such events as *prodigia* or *mirabilia* — words that suggest the extraordinary — others discuss the wanderings of the dead in a matter-of-fact, naturalistic way: "the younger Robert died and was buried in the cemetery, but he used to go out from his grave at night";⁷⁶ "a certain man, who they say died irreligiously, used to wander about publicly for a month or more . . . in his shroud".⁷⁷ Although such appearances were invariably terrifying to the populace, the writers' laconic tone suggests that revenants were not unique or unknown. Furthermore, several

⁷⁵ Guillaume d'Auvergne, *De universo*, ii.3.24 (*Opera omnia*, i, p. 1069, col. b).

⁷⁶ James, "Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories", p. 418.

⁷⁷ Map, *De nugis curialium*, ii.28 (ed. James, rev. Brooke and Mynors, p. 204).

texts testified to the frequency of such events. As William of Newburgh wrote, “[these stories] would not easily be accepted as true if there were not so many examples at hand from our own time, and if the testimony were not so abundant”.⁷⁸ As it is, evidence for the medieval belief in corporeal revenants is fairly well attested. From these passages one senses that many more such incidents were discussed and deemed credible by local communities than were actually recorded.

A corollary to this point, however, is the fact that not all the dead were believed to wander. Only “certain dead men” (again to borrow Guillaume d’Auvergne’s formulation) left their graves. How and why was a corpse believed to become a revenant?

There seem to be two related answers to this question: the manner of the individual’s life and the manner of his or her death. Indeed, these two factors can scarcely be separated. Caesarius of Heisterbach, for example, enumerated four different kinds of death: that of those who live well and die well; that of those who live well and die badly; that of those who live badly but die well; and that of those who both live and die badly.⁷⁹ Indeed, though not always explicitly articulated, the distinction between a “good” and a “bad” death was widespread throughout medieval society (as it is cross-culturally⁸⁰) and was thought to provide a vital clue to the ultimate fate of the deceased. The “good” death has been characterized by Philippe Ariès as the “tame” death:⁸¹ it is ritualized, foreseeable, even welcomed. This concept reached its fullest expression in the late medieval ritual *artes moriendi*, manuals for “dying well”.⁸² By contrast, the “bad” death, as Caesarius explains, is sudden or violent; those who die badly are torn too soon from this world and are unprepared for the next.⁸³ These ideas are found not only in Caesarius’s *Dialogus*, however. The significance of the individual’s manner of life and death is a theme in nearly all medieval revenant tales: the undead are most often presented as having lived an evil life leading to a bad end.

⁷⁸ William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, v.25 (ed. Howlett, p. 477).

⁷⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, xi.1 (ed. Strange, ii, p. 266).

⁸⁰ See Bloch and Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*.

⁸¹ Ariès, *Hour of our Death*, pp. 5-92.

⁸² Roger Chartier, “Les arts de mourir, 1450-1600”, *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxi (1976), pp. 29-50. Still valuable is the classic work of Alberto Tenenti, *Il senso della morte e l’amore della vita nel Rinascimento (Francia e Italia)* (Turin, 1957).

⁸³ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, xi.1 (ed. Strange, ii, p. 267).

To begin with the manner of life, from Caesarius we have the cases of a usurer and of a violent and dissolute man prone to every kind of criminal behaviour. Map's dead Welshman is "evil". William of Newburgh discusses a wealthy man and a choleric and jealous husband; and both William of Newburgh and the anonymous Yorkshire collection of revenant tales include restless dead men who find repose through absolution of their sins. Likewise, the Icelandic evidence emphasizes the unpleasant nature, in life, of those who become *draugar*, such as the surly and irreligious Glam or the violent Killer-Hrapp. Especially prone to revenancy in England and Scotland were secularized men of the church: William of Newburgh's *hundeprest* is a prime example, to which may be added the *Chronicon de Lanercost*'s "man wearing the habit of holy religion, who had lived perversely";⁸⁴ and the rector of Kerby mentioned in the Yorkshire collection. Such men of religion abdicated their sacred duties and became embroiled in pursuits that were properly the preserve of the laity: sex and violence.

Equally important as these details of a sinful life, however, is the precise manner of the individual's death. Many stories specify the bad death of those who later become the undead: Walter Map explicitly notes in each of his cases that those involved died "irreligiously". Similarly, both Thomas of Cantimpré and the Dominican Rudolf von Schlettstadt's *Historiae memorabiles* give examples of killed or murdered men as revenants; one of William of Newburgh's revenants fell to his death while watching his wife in bed with another man; and the revenant in the *Chronicon de Lanercost* had not only lived wickedly, but died under sentence of excommunication.⁸⁵ Deaths like these occurred before "one's house was in order", so to speak. Similarly, those revenants who we are told were put to rest through the absolution of their sins must not only have led improper moral lives, but also presumably died without proper confession. Related to the manner of death is the question of proper burial: it will be recalled that one of Walter Map's revenants was put to rest after a cross was placed to mark its grave. In Iceland, being lost at sea appears to have been considered an especially unfortunate death, as was death at the hands of a *draugr*: both forms of dying commonly resulted in

⁸⁴ *Chronicon de Lanercost*, ed. Stevenson, p. 163 (a. 1295).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

revenancy, as did death through loss of self-control (such as Thorolf's death from sheer rage in *Eyrbyggja saga*).

The underlying logic of belief in revenants is that of a remaining life-force in the bodies of those who projected strong ill will, or who died too suddenly, leaving "energy still unexpended", in Lester Little's felicitous phrase.⁸⁶ The bad death of a malicious person gave cause for fear that his cantankerous vitality might live on within the corpse itself: hence Guillaume d'Auvergne's observation that revenants "kill other men from among the living". This, as I have emphasized, was a common aspect of tales of the undead. Nearly all are represented as dangerous, terrorizing villages and bringing others to an untimely demise. A death before the end of one's natural lifetime leads to aggression against the places and people of one's life. These revenants beat and smother the living, at times succeeding in killing them; or else they call on the living to come and join them in the world of the dead. They are particularly apt to attack those with whom they had had some sort of connection: family members, mistresses and residents of the town where they lived. The unruly packs of dogs that follow them about, howling, testify to their malign nature.

Given this logic, it is not surprising that preventive measures against potential revenants may be discerned in some medieval practices relating to the disposal of the dead — indeed, the evidence for such practices antedates many of the tales related above. The early eleventh-century penitential of Burchard of Worms, known as the *Corrector* and incorporated into the same author's *Decretum*, discusses many contemporary "superstitions", including the course of action to be followed in the case of an untimely (that is, bad) death.⁸⁷ One entry concerns the disposal of the body of an unbaptized infant, which was to be buried in a remote place and pierced through with a stake, or else "the little infant would rise up and injure many".⁸⁸ The following section prescribes penance for those who bury in like manner stillborn infants and women who die in childbirth.⁸⁹ In such cases of bad or premature death, the body is disposed of in a location

⁸⁶ Lester K. Little, *Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 151.

⁸⁷ On Burchard, see in particular Kyll, *Tod, Grab, Begräbnisplatz, Totenfeier, passim*.

⁸⁸ Burchard of Worms, *Decretum*, xix.5, ed. J.-P. Migne, P.L., cxi, col. 974.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, cols. 974-5.

outside the normal activities of the living; and the stake transfixing it to the earth prevents it from wandering. Later sources mention alternative means of depriving the dangerous dead of local mobility: suicides, for example, were commonly disposed of in rivers in the Middle Ages.⁹⁰ Denied burial in the common cemetery of the community, the bodies of these unfortunates were instead banished to parts unknown, so that their corpses might not become revenants.⁹¹ Moreover, water was itself an important barrier within medieval thought about the dead: rivers are often presented as liminal spaces between the realms of the living and the dead in otherworld visions.⁹² In one revenant tale, at least, the attack of the dead took place next to a river: the story of the knight Henry in the *Historiae memorabiles*. Similarly, in the Yorkshire collection, the corpse of one revenant was disposed of in water, while another revenant who walked with a living man at night refused to continue when they came to a river.⁹³ Fear of revenants and their disposal in watery places may also help to explain the bog burials uncovered by archaeologists in northern Europe: these bodies were discovered pinned into peat bogs with thorns and stakes.⁹⁴ The treatment of such remains may be juxtaposed with the observation of the first-century Roman historian Tacitus that according to the justice system of the Germanic tribes, “the coward, the shirker and the unnaturally vicious are drowned in miry swamps under a cover of wattled hurdles”:⁹⁵ a

⁹⁰ Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Le suicide au Moyen Age”, *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxi (1976), pp. 3-28.

⁹¹ The related issue of water as a barrier between the living and the dead cannot be discussed at length here. See Schmitt, *Revenants*, p. 210; Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, pp. 147-53. Perhaps related to this belief is the section in Burchard’s *Corrector* that describes the practice of pouring water under the departing bier of a dead man: perhaps the water, even after its evaporation, forms a symbolic barrier preventing the corpse’s return? Burchard of Worms, *Decretum*, xix.5 (ed. Migne, cols. 964-5).

⁹² See various texts in *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, trans. Gardiner. On rivers as places of power generally, see Peter Dinzelbacher, “Il ponte come luogo sacro nella realtà e nell’immaginario”, in Sofia Boesch Gajano and Lucetta Scaraffia (eds.), *Luoghi sacri e spazi della santità* (Turin, 1990), pp. 51-60.

⁹³ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories”, p. 413.

⁹⁴ For a detailed archaeological discussion, see P. V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (New York, 1969). I would like to thank Lester Little for bringing this work to my attention. See also Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, pp. 141, 145.

⁹⁵ Tacitus, *Germania*, ch. 12, ed. M. Winterbottom and R. M. Ogilvie (Oxford, 1975), p. 43; trans. Harold Mattingly (Baltimore, 1954), p. 110. Again, I am indebted to Lester Little for this reference.

special means of execution and bodily disposal for those convicted of living an evil life. The prime importance of physically constraining the undead is provided in the following case from Caesarius of Heisterbach, in which a corpse's transformation into a revenant is interrupted *in processu*:

*Concerning the knight Everhard who sat up on his bier. At that time in the same province died another knight named Everhard, and he was a criminal . . . In the middle of the night his corpse sat up on the bier and struck terror into all who were present . . . After tying up the body, they buried it before mass.*⁹⁶

By hindering the body with bonds, the physical activities of a potential revenant (once again, a wicked man) are minimized.⁹⁷ The corpse is then buried as soon as possible — even before morning mass.

These practices point once more to the corporeality of the revenants: these are not wraith-like apparitions, but fleshly corpses. Indeed, by contrast with the epigraph to this article (“when a human being dies, both flesh and bones die”), a close reading of the sources suggests that the source of these corpses' vitality inheres specifically within the conjunction of flesh and bone. The fresher the cadaver, the more dangerous it is. William of Newburgh, for example, places great emphasis upon the intactness of the cadavers that become revenants. In his tales, the bodies in question are all recently deceased, and they gush forth copious amounts of blood when wounded.⁹⁸ Moreover, the preferred remedy for revenants that William presents is cremation, a form of complete destruction of the flesh. (Presumably it would be difficult to re-kill a dead man by any means other than total

⁹⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, xii.1 (ed. Strange, ii, p. 324).

⁹⁷ On the tying-up of potential revenants in various cultures, see Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, *passim*.

⁹⁸ This is not usually attributed to blood-sucking, although William of Newburgh refers to his last corpse as “sanguisuga”: *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, v.24 (ed. Howlett, p. 482). Proper vampires are rare in medieval sources, though Etienne de Bourbon makes mention of a (living) blood-sucking were-woman: E. de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques, légendes, et apologues*, iv.7.364, ed. A. Lecoy de la Marche (Paris, 1877), p. 320. Nancy Partner discusses the cases in William of Newburgh, adopting the term “vampire”: N. Partner, *Serious Entertainments* (Chicago, 1977), pp. 134–40. In this regard, it is puzzling that elsewhere she denies any blood-sucking in William's tales, despite the fact that the last case is clearly that of a blood-sucker: *ibid.*, p. 137. For the later historical development of vampires, see Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*; Stephan Hock, *Die Vampyrsgagen und ihre Verwertung in der deutschen Literatur* (Berlin, 1900).

bodily destruction.) In all William's cases, burning is the immediate solution suggested by the frightened townspeople.⁹⁹

Similarly, Thomas of Cantimpré in *De apibus* explicitly links the possibility of reanimation to the incorruption of the corpse (though again with his characteristic demonic interpretation): "[The animation of a dead body by a demon] is not possible for long, for the body is fluid by nature, and cannot preserve the necessary vigour without an enlivening spirit. The body corrupts swiftly when its humour slows down".¹⁰⁰ Here Thomas suggests that the body is dangerously potent, and apt to become reanimated, until the flesh is fully corrupted and destroyed. It must have "the necessary vigour", which is eliminated by putrefaction. Yet alongside his demonic interpretation may be discerned a basic connection between flesh and vitality. If we separate Thomas's interpretation of revenants as demonically possessed from the "cultural facts" he is reporting, we are left with the belief that cadavers are only in danger of becoming revenants before they "corrupt" and are reduced to bones.

Again, Guillaume d'Auvergne also stressed the importance of remaining flesh even as he refuted belief in revenants. His description of the revenant belief continues: "the bodies of those dead men, at the time when they seem to be doing this thing, either are lying *intact* in their graves, or at the very least their bones and the rest of their bodies, *which decay has not yet been able to consume*, are there".¹⁰¹ Like Thomas, William implies that once the decomposition of a body was complete, it would no longer have been considered a potential revenant. The question of a reanimated skeleton is never raised: there must be flesh upon the bone.

The importance of the remaining flesh in iconographic representations of the living dead now takes on greater resonance: the revenants in the *danse macabre* and three living / three dead motifs are within the fleshy "danger-zone" during which the undead may wander. If the flesh itself is vital, then the representation of these revenants as in the process of decay takes on an added

⁹⁹ William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, v.24 (ed. Howlett, p. 482).

¹⁰⁰ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De apibus*, ii.49.7: *Thomæ Cantimpratani . . . Miraculorum*, p. 369. Note that this passage is a continuation of the quotation attached to n. 35 above.

¹⁰¹ Guillaume d'Auvergne, *De universo*, ii.3.24 (*Opera omnia*, i, p. 1069, col. b; my emphasis).

significance.¹⁰² There is a liminal period in which the death of the personality is absolute, but the death of the flesh is not yet complete. Psychic death and physical death do not coincide. It is only when the body has passed through its “wet” enfleshed stage, and become “dry” bones (to borrow categories from anthropological studies of death¹⁰³) that it is fully defunct. Dichotomies between flesh and spirit, as well as between living and dead, are broken down.

Aside from burial practices specifically aimed at preventing revenants, other northern European traditions surrounding disposal of the dead body are also characterized by a desire to avoid the flesh of the corpse as much as possible. This hints at a more general distaste for the newly dead. From the twelfth century it was common in northern Europe for a dead body to be sewn into a shroud, then nailed into a wooden coffin masked with cloth. The identity of the deceased was revealed (if at all) only by means of a wooden or wax effigy placed on the lid of the coffin: the flesh itself had to remain boxed up and concealed.¹⁰⁴ This practice has the double effect of constraining the flesh as much as possible, and of replacing the “empty” physical identity of the corpse with the more acceptable neutrality of an artistic representation. Once the body was interred, it might well have a handful of the so-called “flesh-eating” soil of the cemetery of the Innocents in Paris added to the grave. This earth was highly prized for its alleged capacity to reduce a body to bare bones in nine days.¹⁰⁵

Among the highest levels of the nobility a different, but equally interesting, set of new funeral practices also made their appearance around this time, as Elizabeth A. R. Brown has shown in a fascinating article.¹⁰⁶ The habit of immediately boiling or dismem-

¹⁰² One representation of the *danse macabre* bears an additional resemblance to certain revenant tales: those that involve shape-shifting. The Yorkshire collection includes several tales that describe the bodily form of the revenant as taking on animal shapes, such as that of a dog or a bird. Similarly, the Icelandic evidence often presents revenants as taking on animal form, particularly that of a seal. This bears comparison with the iconography of the dance of death as shown in the church of Kermaria-en-Isquit, in Brittany. In this particular example, some of the dancing dead figures are shown with the heads of animals.

¹⁰³ On “dry” and “wet” bodies and their cross-cultural valences, see Bloch and Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. The related issue of secondary burial is discussed in Hertz, “Répresentation collective de la mort”.

¹⁰⁴ Ariès, *Hour of our Death*, pp. 127, 168–70.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion of these practices, see Brown, “Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages”, *passim*. For a modification of her earlier essay’s conclusions

(cont. on p. 34)

bering a body to extract the bones may also have been intended to hurry the body through its dangerous fleshy stage as quickly as possible. The custom is best known in cases where an individual had died overseas and the remains had to be repatriated for burial. However, it is widely attested in England, France, Germany and the Low Countries even in cases where the person had died in bed. Philip the Fair referred to the habit of dismembering the body for plural burial as “the practices of his ancestors”.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, Boncompagno referred to boiling and dismemberment as the “German custom” for disposal of the body, while Saba Malaspina spoke of stripping the bones of flesh as “ancestral custom in France”.¹⁰⁸ The tradition bears cross-cultural comparison with practices of secondary burial, in which bodies are disposed of in two distinct stages that are often related to the decomposition of the flesh.¹⁰⁹ Within European culture, such practices have been interpreted as a means of multiplying prayers for the dead by multiplying the places of burial. However, boiling and dismembering might also be seen as an attempt to hasten the dissolution of the body; as a means to deprive the corpse of its individuality and so submerge it within the ancestral group; and also as a way of scattering the limbs so as to prevent the possibility of revenants. In fact, dismemberment was the method adopted in the case of the undead Breton corpse discussed earlier.¹¹⁰ The total destruction of the flesh was the key to combating the potency of the dead body. Whether by natural decay or human intervention, the flesh must be dissolved for the corpse to be truly defunct.

Fragments of folklore can also help elaborate the notion of vitality as inherent in the material components of the body. Emphasis on the flesh that remains upon the bones as the source of life invites comparison with the mythic motif of the animal that is re-enfleshed after having been eaten.¹¹¹ Here, too, themes

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based on the same evidence, see Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “Authority, the Family, and the Dead in Late Medieval France”, *French Hist. Studies*, xvi (1989-90), pp. 803-32.

¹⁰⁷ Brown, “Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages”, p. 254.

¹⁰⁸ Cited *ibid.*, pp. 227 (Germany), 232 (France).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Hertz, “*Répresentation collective de la mort*”; Bloch and Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*.

¹¹⁰ Schmitt, *Revenants*, p. 174.

¹¹¹ For more on this topic, see Maurizio Bertolotti, “Le ossa e la pelle dei buoi: un mito popolare tra agiografia e stregoneria”, *Quaderni storici*, xli (1979), pp. 470-99; Klaniczay, *Uses of Supernatural Power*, ed. Margolis, pp. 129-50; Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, ed. Gregory Elliott, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1991).

of the dead coming back to life are linked to flesh and bone. The tale exists throughout Europe in both a saintly and a sinister version. It is told in a ninth-century hagiography of St Germanus of Auxerre, where the saint resurrects a calf after he has eaten it by folding the bones into the skin and praying over it.¹¹² A variant of this type may also be found in Thomas of Cantimpré's *De apibus*, where an ox is killed in order to cure an ailing pregnant woman, and the abbot of a monastery secretly resurrects it.¹¹³ In Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, dating from the first half of the thirteenth century, a similar tale is told of Thor.¹¹⁴ After eating two goats for dinner, Thor asks that the bones be collected and placed in the skins. One leg-bone is damaged, however, for the marrow had been eaten. When Thor hits the skins with his hammer, the animals take on flesh and come back to life — but one limps. Interestingly, the same topos is present in some Italian witchcraft confessions from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries.¹¹⁵ These witnesses explain to their interrogators that they occasionally attend feasts, after which the bones of one of the oxen slain for dinner are placed in its skin and revived when the "lady" who presides over the festivities touches them with a magic twig. If a bone were lost or broken, it could be replaced by a little piece of wood, which would serve just as well. Finally, one version of the tale involves a person rather than an animal. Burchard of Worms's *Corrector* censures the belief of some women that they can kill human beings, eat their flesh and then place straw or wood under the skin and bring the person back to life.¹¹⁶ The common substratum of these tales, diverse as they are in time and place, points to a definition of life as located within the conjunction of flesh and bone (or their substitutive equivalents): the skeletal structure, overlaid with the material flesh, together form an animate body.¹¹⁷

¹¹² The earliest hagiography does not mention the incident. See Bertolotti, "Ossa e la pelle dei buoi", p. 478. The anecdote is retold of Germanus in Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1993), ii, p. 29.

¹¹³ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De apibus*, ii.25.5: *Thomæ Cantimpratani . . . Miraculorum*, pp. 212-13.

¹¹⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ch. 44, in his *Edda*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford, 1982), p. 37; trans. Anthony Faulkes (London, 1987), pp. 37-8. The relevant passage is quoted, in Italian translation, in Bertolotti, "Ossa e la pelle dei buoi", p. 480.

¹¹⁵ For more on this kind of witchcraft confession, see Bertolotti, "Ossa e la pelle dei buoi", pp. 470-2, 487-92; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, ed. Elliott; Klaniczay, *Uses of Supernatural Power*, ed. Margolis, pp. 129-50.

¹¹⁶ Burchard of Worms, *Decretum*, xix.5 (ed. Migne, col. 973).

¹¹⁷ Dry animal bones alone also had important magical uses. Gerald of Wales mentions the Welsh practice of boiling the right shoulder-blades of rams in order to

(cont. on p. 36)

Similarly, a tension between two different definitions of life — material and spiritual — is also manifest in the medieval devotion to relics. Despite the protests of theologians that relics themselves were not animate or sentient — being mere matter left behind in the world while the soul of the saint dwelt in heaven — the widespread imputation of a powerful *virtus* to saints' relics parallels revenant beliefs in several important ways.¹¹⁸ In both cases, the local community's evaluation of individuals' manner of life and death is central to the definition of their bodies as powerful after death.¹¹⁹ Saints, like revenants, were likely to die before their time, through persecution or simple austerity, thus leaving "energy still unexpended" in their physical remains.¹²⁰ Moreover, the emphasis upon the relics' incorruption again suggests that continuing vitality was connected to the congruence of flesh and bone. Indeed, a process of discerning between the good and the bad dead is suggested by the eighth-century *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, which notes that some erroneously "pretend to themselves that the dead of any kind are saints".¹²¹ Relics may thus be seen as a special category of the undead.

These fragments of belief and custom cohere around a belief that the body possessed vitality as long as it remained intact. This material definition of life contrasts sharply with the medico-theological tradition, which privileges the numinous element of the spirit-soul as the main element in the definition of life. In the local traditions of northern Europe, the life-force is literally embodied, held within the flesh and bone; while in ecclesiastical

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clean them of flesh; afterwards, they were used to cast lots and prophesy the future: Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, i.11, ed. James F. Dimock (Rolls Ser., London, 1868), p. 87.

¹¹⁸ See Brown, *Cult of the Saints*; Vauchez, *Sainteté en Occident*; Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1990); Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*; Joan Petersen, "Dead or Alive? The Holy Man as Healer in East and West in the Later Sixth Century", *Jl Medieval Hist.*, ix (1983), pp. 91-8.

¹¹⁹ For a discussion of the centrality of local community participation in the formation of a reputation for sanctity after death, see Nancy Caciola, "Through a Glass, Darkly: Recent Work on Sanctity and Society", *Comp. Studies in Society and Hist.*, xxxviii (1996), forthcoming.

¹²⁰ Miri Rubin, "Choosing Death? Experiences of Martyrdom in Late Medieval Europe", in Diana Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (Studies in Church Hist., xxx, Oxford, 1993), pp. 153-83.

¹²¹ "Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum", no. 25, in *Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. Alfred Boretius and Victor Krause (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Legum sectio ii, 2 vols., Hanover, 1883-97), i, p. 223.

doctrine the life-force may be either embodied or not — depending on whether it is in the fleshly “garment” or awaiting the final resurrection. These differing viewpoints led to differing interpretations of reports of wandering corpses, as either the living dead or as possessed by demons. Yet corporeal revenants were not always seen as malign or demonic: as I shall demonstrate, those who died peacefully could also return from the grave, without any aggressive intent.

VI

RITUALS OF THE DEAD

Although the restless dead were most often envisioned in predatory terms during the Middle Ages — that is, as desiring to make the living cross over into their own realm — some tales present them as having an active social life among themselves. Tales of spirit feasts presided over by Diana or Herodias, or of Harlequin’s army and its ritualized processions and tournaments, are fairly well known to modern historians.¹²² This “wild horde” and its feminine counterpart of the “good things” were said to appear with particular frequency around the Ember days, the four weeks of transition between the seasons. However, such apparitions of the dead were apparently conceived as less corporeal than the revenants discussed above, since in order to see these wraiths the living had to leave behind their own bodies and encounter them on equal terms, as disembodied spirits. Such meetings could only be conducted by specialists such as the *benandante* in the Friuli, or *armariés* like Arnaud Gélis in Pamiers.¹²³ Were an unprepared individual to meet the disembodied dead, they could be just as dangerous as corporeal revenants. As I have argued elsewhere, in some areas of Europe (particularly in Italy, and to a lesser extent in other areas) shades and spirits of the dead were consid-

¹²² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York, 1986); Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, ed. Elliott, pp. 89–121; Schmitt, *Revenants*, pp. 115–46; Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), pp. 23–4, 78–81; W. E. Peuckert, *Deutscher Volksglaube des Spätmittelalters* (Stuttgart, 1942), pp. 86–96; Waldemar Liungman, *Traditionswanderungen Euphrat – Rhein: Studien zur Geschichte der Volksbräuche*, 2 pts (Helsinki, 1937–8). For a collection of documents on the horde, arranged chronologically, see Karl Meisen, *Die Sagen vom wütenden Heer und wilder Jäger* (Münster, 1938).

¹²³ See Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1978), pp. 342–56.

ered likely suspects in the spiritual possession of the living: the disembodied dead seeking a new body.¹²⁴

Corporeal revenants had rituals of their own as well, the most important of which was the dance. This harmless activity differs markedly from the malevolent tales of the undead discussed above, suggesting that these revenants have come to terms with their new status. Furthermore, since sources on the dances of the dead do not give information on the manner of life (or of death) of the dancers, one might speculate that these revenants lived and died less spectacularly than their more aggressive counterparts. Rather than preying on the living, the dancing dead transfer their energies to their new community. Walter Map mentions such incidents twice in his *De nugis curialium*. In the first, a man buries his wife only to see her dancing shortly after:

a certain knight buried his truly dead wife, then snatched her back from a circle-dance. Afterwards he had children and grandchildren with her, and the family survives to this day. Those who trace their origin to her have become a large group, and everyone calls them "children of the dead woman" (*filiu mortue*).¹²⁵

Map's tone suggests an utter lack of surprise at someone finding the dead dancing in this way. The fact that the woman dies, and that her husband then snatches her back from a dance, is presented as entirely logical, in no need of further explanation. Similarly, Map's second tale also concerns an intermarriage between the living and the dead. Here we are told of a nobleman who "snatched the most beautiful of a group of nocturnally dancing women",¹²⁶ wed her and had a son. The end of the anecdote explicitly notes that she had been abducted from among the dead, who were quite annoyed at the man's temerity. Female revenants, though rare among the individual, hostile variety of the undead, seem to have been common as dancers. Perhaps this is related to women's relatively tenuous connections with violence: women did not lead the kinds of lives, nor die the kinds of death, associated with the evil undead.

Thomas of Cantimpré mentions a dance of "demons" dressed as monks sighted near Cologne in 1258. Yet these figures could equally well have been interpreted as a group of the dead. As I

¹²⁴ See Caciola, "Discerning Spirits".

¹²⁵ Map, *De nugis curialium*, ii.13 (ed. James, rev. Brooke and Mynors, p. 160).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, iv.10 (ed. James, rev. Brooke and Mynors, pp. 348-50).

have demonstrated above, the demonization of revenants is a characteristic trait of Thomas of Cantimpré's *De apibus*:

In the present year 1258 near the city of Cologne . . . a huge circle-dance of demons in the habits of white monks was seen in the open part of the fields. With their voices lifted on high, they were dancing in time (*tripudians*) and joyously leaping (*exultans*). The people of the village gathered there along with the priest, but when they wanted to approach the dance, the demons edged, dancing, towards a river the same distance that the men approached, until the whole malignant crowd disappeared into the river.¹²⁷

The demonic explanation seems to be Thomas's preferred explanation, but this tale was in all likelihood based upon a local belief in a sighting of revenants. Since Thomas did not give credence to the undead, he interpreted the boisterous dancers as demonic. For those who believed in the dead's return, however, there would be no reason to interpret these human figures in human dress as anything other than revenants: once again, the cultural facts of the tale differ from the collector's interpretation. There is nothing demonic in these dancers' aspect, and the fact that they escape the approach of the living by entering a river is suggestive. As I have noted above, rivers were often seen as boundaries between the realms of the living and the dead.

A similar dance, this time conducted in a cemetery, is attested in a story in Rudolf von Schlettstadt's *Historiae memorabiles*, "On the rector of the church of Basel, who reported that he saw the dead". This man held several benefices, and was in the course of visiting each of his churches:

Finally, he arrived at a church whose vicar had a house bordering the cemetery . . . He slept well and, after having had sweet dreams up until the hour of eleven, he awoke and got up to ease his bladder. Afterwards he returned to bed, with the window that looked out on to the cemetery still open, in order that he might see the calmness of the sky and winds. Then suddenly he saw many men in the cemetery, running to and fro with little torches and lamps, while others were performing a circle-dance and singing this song together in a deep voice:

If I were still in the short home,
As I am in the long home,
Then I would, before my end,

¹²⁷ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De apibus*, ii.57.42: *Thomae Cantimpratani . . . Miraculorum*, p. 475. This chapter is also found separately in British Library, Harley MS. 2316, fo. 10^v: H. L. D. Ward and J. A. Herbert (eds.), *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 vols. (London, 1883-1910), iii, p. 575 (no. 24); Frederic C. Tubach, *Index exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki, 1969), p. 113 (no. 1413).

Turn towards many good things,
And send them on my own behalf.¹²⁸

The verse is included in the text in Middle High German and is even set to musical notation. The use of a vernacular language in this context is a tantalizing clue to the story's oral foundation. Where did the Dominican collector of these tales hear the song in its original tongue and jot down the tune? These questions must remain unanswered. What is clear, however, is that the verse derives from some local community where it was performed as a song of the dead. The references to the "short home" (*kurtzhaim*) and the "long home" (*langkhaim*) identify the singers with the dead, and also indicate how parallel the worlds of the living and the dead were thought to be: each has its proper realm or home, with distinct names and customs.

To these literary references to the dances of the dead must be added the iconographic motif of the *danse macabre*, in which the bodies of the dead, some carrying musical instruments and all lifting their feet in measured time, also perform a circle-dance. Yet in these representations the dead are interspersed with the living, a fact that suggests some interesting connections. For not only did the dead dance in churchyards, but so, too, did the living, both in cemeteries and at vigils, wakes or commemorations for the dead:¹²⁹ perhaps the little verse just quoted derives from such a context. Indeed, such practices have long genealogies. As early as the eighth century, the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* headed its list of condemned practices with "sacrilege at the tombs of the dead".¹³⁰ In the ninth century, Hincmar of Reims discussed the traditional one-year anniversary rites for the dead, which included feasting and *convivia* in which the dead were represented among the living by masked revellers.¹³¹ In the early eleventh century, Burchard of Worms instructed confessors to

¹²⁸ Rudolf von Schlettstadt, *Historiae memorabiles*, ch. 20, ed. Kleinschmidt, p. 72. The German text of the verse reads as follows: "wer ich da zw kurtzhaim / als ich bin zw langkhaim / so wölt ich vor meinem ende / gütz vil beywenden / und für mich sendenn". I am indebted to Craig M. Koslofsky for help with translating these lines.

¹²⁹ For a general treatment, see Louis Gougaud, "La danse dans les églises", *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, xv (1914), pp. 5-22, 229-43.

¹³⁰ "Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum", no. 1 (ed. Boretius and Krause, p. 223).

¹³¹ Hincmar of Reims, "Quomodo in conviviis defunctorum aliarumve collectarum gerere se debeant", *Capitularia presbyteris data anno 852*, ch. 14, ed. J.-P. Migne, P.L., cxxv, col. 776. For more on masks and the dead, see Schmitt, *Religione, folklore, e società nell'Occidente medievale*, pp. 206-38.

enquire of their penitents, "Have you attended the vigils over the corpses of the dead, in which the bodies of Christians are guarded by a pagan ritual, and have you sung diabolical songs there and participated in dances?"¹³² Thomas of Cantimpré mentions identical practices in the thirteenth century, censuring the customary "games" (*ludi*) played at vigils over the biers of the dead.¹³³

By far the most detailed medieval description of the traditional circle-dances held in cemeteries derives from the twelfth-century work of Gerald of Wales, whose *Itinerarium Kambriae* reads much like the diary of an anthropological expedition. Gerald describes the ecstatic dances he witnessed in the local cemetery as follows:

Here you may see men or girls, either in the church, in the cemetery, or in the circle-dance that winds through the cemetery with songs, suddenly fall to the ground. At first they are led into an ecstasy and are in a trance (*quietos*); then immediately, as if rapt into a frenzy, they leap up. Then they mime, with hands and feet, in front of everyone, whatever actions they are accustomed to engage in improperly on feast-days. You might see this one put his hand to the plough; another as if goading oxen. Each of them, as if to ease their work, emits traditional cries in a barbarous tone. You might see this one imitate a cobbler, that one, a tanner; or a girl, as if she were carrying a distaff, now pulling out the thread at length with her hands and arms, and then, when it is out, winding it back on to the spindle. One, as she walks, seems to work fibre on the loom; another sits as if all is ready and tosses a shuttle from side to side, from hand to hand, and with flourishes and rhythm she seems to weave.¹³⁴

Apart from Gerald's interpretation of these mimed gestures as representing illicit activities carried out on feast-days, this account stays close to the level of cultural fact, and is remarkable for its detail and sympathetic presentation. His description of miming, or theatrical elements, as central to the celebration also may be compared to Burchard of Worms's censure of dances, held on feast-days in front of the church (in the cemetery?), that involved cross-dressing.¹³⁵ A century after Gerald, the Dominican Etienne de Bourbon was unable to contain his repugnance at dances in cemeteries, which utterly scandalized him. The dances often appear in his collection of exempla, along with appropriately scathing remarks and exhortations to abandon the custom. One tale tells of a church struck by lightning after a group of local

¹³² Burchard of Worms, *Decretum*, xix.5 (ed. Migne, col. 964).

¹³³ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De apibus*, ii.49.23: *Thomæ Cantimpratani . . . Miraculorum*, pp. 376-7.

¹³⁴ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Itinerarium Kambriae*, i.2 (ed. Dimock, pp. 32-3).

¹³⁵ Burchard, *Decretum*, x. 39 (ed. Migne, col. 839).

young people “performed circle-dances the whole night long in the cemetery”.¹³⁶ Although clearly not all the dances mentioned in this work are directly concerned with the dead — cemeteries, as centrally located open spaces, would have been a natural ground for any kind of dance — it is likely that at least some served as a ritual means of interacting with the dead.¹³⁷ Indeed, certain circle-dances — most notably a “bridge-dance” or “arch-dance”, in which the circle of dancers threads itself under the clasped hands of one link — were closely associated with funeral events or fertility cycles for precisely this reason: by dancing in this way, one symbolically crossed the border between life and death, guaranteeing fecundity for the living and harmony with the dead.¹³⁸ As the Middle Ages wore on, church councils continually inveighed against such activities: in 1208, Eudes de Sully, archbishop of Paris, forbade dances, especially in three places: churches, processions and cemeteries. In 1212 or 1213, the Council of Paris adopted this prohibition, singling out circle-dances of women in churchyards for specific condemnation. The Council of Rouen in 1231 forbade any dances to be held in a cemetery, as did the Council of Würzburg in 1298 and the Statutes of Tréguier in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.¹³⁹ The Rouen prohibition reappears in 1405.¹⁴⁰ In 1435, the Council of Basel referred to the “Feast of Fools, or of Innocents, or of Children”, and to the dances that were shamelessly held on this occasion “even in the cemetery”.¹⁴¹

Thus there exist three bodies of evidence with thematic similarities: reports of dances of the dead; the dances of the living in cemeteries or in other contexts that involve death; and the *danse macabre* motif, which includes both living and dead. Certain connections, though tenuous, may be made between them. The

¹³⁶ Etienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques, légendes, et apologues*, iii.6.195 (ed. Lecoy de la Marche, p. 169).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, iii.6.194-5, iv.7.275, iv.12.462 (ed. Lecoy de la Marche, pp. 168-9, 229-30, 398-9). For similar exempla, see also *La Tabula exemplorum secundum ordinem alphabeti*, ch. 35, ed. J. Th. Welter (Paris, 1926), p. 11; *Fasciculus morum*, v.8 (ed. Wenzel, p. 444). For a close reading of one of these episodes, see Schmitt, *Religione, folklore e società nell'Occidente medievale*, pp. 98-123. On the dances as ritual interaction with the dead, see Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance*, trans. Bessie Schönberg (New York, 1937), pp. 251-3, 257-8.

¹³⁸ Sachs, *World History of the Dance*, pp. 162-3.

¹³⁹ For all the foregoing, see Gougau, “Danse dans les églises”, pp. 12-13.

¹⁴⁰ Ariès, *Hour of our Death*, p. 69.

¹⁴¹ Charles du Plessis d'Argentré, *Collectio judiciorum*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1728-36), i, pp. 231, 243-7.

iconographic motif may represent in pictorial form the perceived coexistence of seen and unseen worlds. When the living held dances in cemeteries, might they have believed themselves to be dancing with the dead among them, as shown in the frescoes — a circle-dance of the living upon a circle-dance of the dead?

There is some evidence to this effect. For example, according to Florence Whyte, dances in the cemetery at Montserrat led directly to the painting of a dance of death fresco in the church. Monks at the Abbey of Montserrat patronized the *danse macabre* theme because of what they saw as its sombre *memento mori* associations.¹⁴² But mindfulness of mortality may mean different things within different semantic systems. The dance of the living with the dead, which to the monks was a symbol of the brevity of this life, may have been to others a celebration of the continuity of the living and the dead as one circular community. The ritual dance relates to the iconography in different ways when seen from different perspectives. Similarly, Emile Mâle emphasizes the performative origins of the *danse macabre* theme: an early fourteenth-century manuscript, for example, contains a “script” for such a performance, in which the living would dance the dance of death.¹⁴³ Furthermore, there is also evidence of actual theatrical stagings of the motif. In 1393, a representation of the *danse* was performed in Caudebec; in 1449, the Franciscans of Besançon had it performed in the church of St John. Gerald of Wales’s description of the Welsh cemetery dance could also be interpreted as such an event: perhaps the activities mimed by the dancers among the graves represented the different professions and daily activities in which one might be engaged when death comes, just as the later *danse macabre* iconography pictorially represents the same theme. Even though the *danse macabre* acquired a history and a meaning of its own within ecclesiastical traditions, it appears to have been based upon performative dramas, that were in turn appropriated from traditional dances with ritual overtones.

Thus traditional beliefs, ritual and iconography overlap and trace upon one another a cultural map of the common activities of both living and dead. Some cemetery dances may well have served the apotropaic purpose of fixing revenants within their own social sphere, their own “long home”, lest they prowl among

¹⁴² Whyte, *Dance of Death in Spain and Catalonia*, p. 45.

¹⁴³ Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, ed. Bober, pp. 329–30.

the living: dancing revenants do not appear to have been violent. By ritually transgressing the border of life and death, such practices might have been perceived as a way of strengthening the border itself. This would make the dances of the living a form of sympathetic magic, by which the dead were encouraged to remain within their own realm.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, they celebrated the communal linkages between living and dead.

VII

CONCLUSION

We historians, too, are constantly seeking out the dead and then attempting to “fix” them in their own place: though my aim in this article has been to pin down ideas and mental attitudes towards the dead, rather than dead bodies. I have explored three linked issues in the social history of ideas, while emphasizing the multiplicity of possible responses they evoked.

First, how did different medieval traditions or communities define life and death? This article proposes a loose grouping of definitions into two models: the spiritual, characteristic of the élite learned traditions of the Middle Ages; and the material, associated with the popular cultural sphere of northern Europe. Thus the doctrine of the *spiritus* as the principle of life was contrasted with the idea of a physical *virtus* residing in the flesh and bone. Yet despite such differences in the conception of life’s and death’s physical processes, nevertheless there was a broad cultural consensus about other aspects of death as an experience. In particular, there was widespread concern about the “good” and the “bad” death: agreement on the importance of meeting death well prepared was common in nearly all sectors of medieval society.

Secondly, what kinds of afterlife were possible, and how was the continuing vitality of the body interpreted? Again, in addressing these questions I have emphasized both the unity and the diversity of medieval culture. All the sources agree upon a concept of afterlife: death is not the end of life. However, the spiritual and the material models of life and of death are each associated with a particular view of afterlife. In the spiritual

¹⁴⁴ Helmut Rosenfeld interprets the dance of death iconography as serving the apotropaic purpose of warding off plague: Rosenfeld, *Mittelalterliche Totentanz*, pp. 298–9.

model, the afterlife is a numinous, wraithlike existence and movements of a body after death may take place only through the intervention of a spirit — that is, by a demon possessing a corpse. In the material model, of course, the conception of vitality as inherent in flesh and bones makes a special, corporeal form of afterlife possible until the complete decay of the corpse. Here afterlife occurs as a revenant, rather than as a wraith.

Thirdly and finally, how did communities achieve a balance between the overlapping realms of the living and the dead? Although interest in the continuing social importance of the dead was a feature of medieval culture as a whole, ritual technologies for dealing with the dead differed according to tradition. While ecclesiastical doctrine promoted the provision of masses and prayers for those in purgatory as the best means of assuaging the torments of one's ancestors, local communities in northern Europe apparently interacted with their dead through ritual dancing. I have offered an interpretation of these enigmatic dances as bringing together the living and dead members of the community into one circular chain; at the very least, the graveyard dances of the living replicated social activities that were reported of the dead. Yet these dances may also have served as the basis for the iconography of the *danse macabre* that was promoted by the institutional church: once again, the border between popular and élite culture was subject to a process of dynamic exchange that accounts for much of the creativity of medieval culture as a whole.

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