

4 Spirits seeking bodies: death, possession and communal memory in the Middle Ages

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What of those shades of the dead who lacked a proper place? In the following pages I discuss the displaced dead who wandered, restlessly, through the imaginations of late medieval urban communities. Their memories – and, according to the texts I shall discuss, their ghosts – lingered on amidst the community of the living; searching out, and sometimes finding, a physical place in which to lodge. These spirits seeking bodies haunted the late medieval landscape, and the rather spectral traces they left in medieval texts – hagiographies, miracle compilations, exorcists' manuals – provide the primary evidence for my investigation.

To place the dead permanently, in the period from the fourteenth through to the sixteenth centuries, was a complex process. Once the spirit left the body it was displaced from its accustomed habitation, and the location of its continued existence was a topic of some dispute. Theologians held that the spirits of the dead were placed immediately according to their merits, entering into one realm of a tripartite afterlife, but this was not a consensus viewpoint. The bourgeois inhabitants of some towns entertained alternative possibilities about the status of dead spirits. Many believed that certain shades of the dead might remain displaced for some time, particularly the ghosts of those who had died a 'bad death' that was sudden or violent.¹ Such spirits might wander the

¹ On 'good' and 'bad' deaths, see Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982). I discuss this theme in a slightly different context in 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past and Present* 152 (1996), pp. 3–45. On ghosts in the Middle Ages, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les revenants: les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris, 1994), now available in English translation by Teresa Fagan, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: the Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago and London, 1998); Claude Lecoutoux, *Fantômes et revenants au moyen*

earth as maleficent spirits seeking bodies. In short, the dead might mourn their own death, their desolate existence in exile from the sensory experiences of embodiment. Hence they might seek another human body, a new place in which to dwell, through the spiritual possession of the living.

In this chapter I seek to mine the layers of cultural interpretation that are sedimented in tales about spirit possession, drawing from sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with a geographic range stretching from Berne to Rome. I shall focus upon two distinct interpretations of these events, interrogating in particular the nature of possessing spirits. Official Church doctrine held that possessing spirits were demons or fallen angels, ancient forces of evil seeking the downfall of the human race. The dead, by contrast, had passed beyond the realm of the living, and were placed in a new afterlife of torment, purgation or blessedness; they did not seek new bodies. However, within local communities in the area I have identified, possession was thought to be the work of disembodied human ghosts seeking to regain a human body. I shall designate these different interpretations as 'demonic possession' and 'ghostly possession' respectively.

Thus, on one level, this is a paper about differing attitudes towards the dead, towards spirits and towards the human body. At a somewhat grander level, I shall also argue that these two differing interpretations of possessing spirits correspond to two fundamentally different attitudes towards the supernatural and natural worlds. On the one hand, theologians had for centuries elaborated a cosmic, transcendent, and moralistic view of the supernatural, a view dominated by powers and principalities conceived as fundamentally Other to the human realm. More characteristic of local communities, on the other hand, was an intimate, immanent and amoral view of the supernatural, one in which the building blocks of the supernatural were apt to be conceived as elements of the natural world conjoined in an unexpected or marvellous manner. I shall argue, further, that within this more intimate world view, the dead occupied a central place. The supernatural order imagined by the local communities I will discuss was dominated by dead saints and wandering ghosts, rather than by demons and angels. Thus this is also a chapter about competing religious and social epistemologies.

âge (Paris, 1986); Ronald Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: a Cultural History of Ghosts* (New York, 1984); Nikolaus Kyll, *Tod, Grab, Begräbnisplatz, Totenfeier* (Bonn, 1972); Jean Gobi, *Dialogue avec un fantôme*, French tr. by Marie-Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Paris, 1994).

Even as these two systems of thought competed with one another, however, they overlapped. Historians of 'popular culture' must be mindful of the essential artifice of this category: the popular only exists in so far as it becomes the object of an historical analysis. The terms 'popular' and 'elite' are modern constructions that are not native to the medieval data: indeed, the dichotomy erects false boundaries between cultural idioms that intermingle freely in the sources and artefacts of the past.² Yet in sounding this cautionary note, I do not mean to suggest that the duality of popular and elite cultures lacks all utility, merely to note that the spectrum of culture is more complex and shaded than the dichotomy of popular and elite allows. Individuals and communities often adhered simultaneously to beliefs that we find logically inconsistent with one another. Such multiplicity is an expression of the complexity both of medieval cultures and of the intellectual and physical communities that produced them.

The evidence I shall discuss exemplifies this complex interweaving of different cultures. I begin with a close reading of a paragraph from Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*, describing the formation of a local possession cult in the city of Berne that centred on the returning spirits of the local dead. The minute observation of this constellation of beliefs within a circumscribed time and place permits an analytic precision that is necessary to the project of placing the unruly dead. This initial micro-study, in turn, will provide a sort of template that may then be compared with, and tested against, references to spirits seeking bodies from other sources. Thus from Berne, I move to a series of ghostly possession episodes across the Alps in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. Here, a close reading illuminates both divergences from and similarities with the Bernese example. In the end, these fragments of information, while often cryptic on their own, can be layered together to produce a provisional description of local popular beliefs about dead spirits and their relationships with the living. The effect is similar to a mosaic or pointillist painting, which allows the viewer a clear image or impression when viewed in its entirety, even though each smudge or tile is opaque when viewed alone.

² See Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Religione Folklore e Società nell'Occidente Medievale* (Bari, 1988), pp. 1–27; Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual', pp. 3–6, especially n. 6 for further citations.

Spirits seeking bodies: the genesis of a spiritist cult

What follows is a description of how one could gain a reputation as a medium for spirits of the dead in early fifteenth-century Berne:

There was a fraticello in the city of Berne . . . who got up at night in his house, and using stones and wood, he pretended that some spirit was present. Thus, to the admiration of many each night in that place he asserted (and many believed him) that either some divine revelation must be forthcoming, or a ghost [*anima*] was abroad, or an evil spirit. Not infrequently, he changed his voice and, in wailing accents like the ghost of some dead man who had been well known in the city, he gave responses to those who asked him questions, saying that he was the ghost of a certain recently deceased person, both those known to him and strangers, whose name he would give. He persuaded them that he would perform a pilgrimage to particular saints' shrines on [the souls'] behalf . . . and while journeying to these saints' shrines for the above mentioned souls, he acquired . . . not a little money.³

Johannes Nider incorporated this tale into his *Formicarius* without further explanation, doubtless assuming that his readers would perceive why the man was a fraud. Indeed, from Nider's particular cultural perspective – that of a learned Dominican Inquisitor writing between 1435 and 1437 – there were excellent reasons to dismiss the fraticello's assertion. The latter's claim that he could be voluntarily possessed by spirits of the dead contravened basic dogmas of medieval theology. According to Church⁴ doctrine, the possessing spirits that sometimes invaded human bodies were fallen angels, rebellious creatures who had been transmuted into demons through a primordial sin of pride. The human dead, though possibly condemned to share an infernal abode with demons, emphatically did *not* share an essential nature with demons. Ontologically speaking, demons and the dead had absolutely nothing to do with one another. I cannot examine this entire tradition of thought here, but a brief examination of these ideas at their origin may prove instructive. In *The City of God*, Augustine – the first and most important Catholic theologian to forge a mutually exclusive demonology and necrology – addressed the issue directly:

Apuleius says that the souls of men are demons and that, on ceasing to be men, they become *lares*, if they have deserved this reward for their good

³ Johannes Nider, *Formicarius sive Myrmecia Bonorum* (Duaci, 1602), pp. 181–2.

⁴ See Gary Macy, 'Was there a "the Church" in the Middle Ages?', in R. Swanson (ed.), *Unity and Diversity in the Church* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 107–16.

conduct, and *lemures* or *larvae* if they have been bad . . . What an abyssal pit of profligacy is opened up before men's feet by those who hold this belief as anyone can see if he gives the matter even the slightest attention!⁵

Demonic spirits and human spirits were different orders of beings. Furthermore, the corollary to this principle was equally true for Nider and his peers: living human beings could not possibly be possessed by shades of the restless dead. This tradition, again, stretches back to Augustine, who explicitly wrote against certain contemporary Christians who believed in ghostly possession.⁶ Augustine instead emphasised the cosmic and eschatological dimensions of the battle between God and the Devil that is waged in human bodies through demonic possession. Demons 'influence [people] in extraordinary and invisible ways, using the subtlety of their bodies to penetrate the bodies of men without their feeling it'.⁷ However, 'that power [i.e. of demons to possess a given individual] neither conquers nor enthralls any man unless he joins it by some act of sin'.⁸ In short, possession can only be accomplished through an initiating act of human collusion. All this was axiomatic for Nider in the fifteenth century, a kind of cultural 'common sense'⁹ that held an authoritative pedigree of tradition. Indeed, Nider undoubtedly included the tale of the soul-possessed fraticello in his collection of anecdotes precisely so that it might serve as a negative illustration of a 'superstitious error' in need of correction.

For a modern historian, however, Nider's story is instructive on levels that extend beyond the cautionary lessons anticipated by its author. In describing the responses of a community to a reputed medium in its midst, the story offers a valuable index of popular beliefs about spirits, possession and the dead, as well as providing social-historical evidence about constructions of individual identity and communal memory.

⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, tr. D. Wiesen (Cambridge, MA, 1968), pp. 188–91.

⁶ See the fourth-century Zeno of Verona, who believed in ghostly, not demonic, possession. 'For the wandering unclean human spirits of both sexes enter into the corporal dwelling-places of living spirits . . . But when they . . . [are exorcised, each] will confess its sex, it will confess the time and place when it entered, it will confess its proper name, and its death. Or else it will reveal who it is by clear signs . . . we are especially concerned about those who died through some violence [vi] . . . You say, "Demons feign these things" . . . But why would they take feigned names, when their confessions are true in all other ways?' *De Resurrectione*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1844–64), xi, pp. 373–6 (hereafter cited as PL). Augustine's rejection of this proposition was to become standard.

⁷ Augustine, *De Divinatione Demonum*, in PL, p. 586.

⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, pp. 348–9. See also pp. 343–7.

⁹ In the sense used by Clifford Geertz, 'Common Sense as a Cultural System', *The Antioch Review* 33 (1975), pp. 5–26.

Although any recovery of local beliefs and practices is necessarily both partial and provisional, a close reading of the 'cultural facts' of the story¹⁰ yields rather a different conception of possessing spirits from that advanced by theologians. What was considered possible within the realm of spirit possession for this community, and what kinds of evidence were accepted as probative indicators of possession? How was the nature and identity of the spirit gradually constructed and endowed with meaning?

Nider reports three inferences or chains of association made by the community in Berne that gathered around the *fraticello*. These determinations on the part of the community become increasingly precise in their assessment of the unseen. First they decided that there was some sort of spirit present; then its identity was debated; and finally, several specific spirits were named and interviewed. This incremental process of constructing meaning – of attaching both a recognisable identity and a communal significance to the spirit – reflects the gradual coalescence of the group from an amorphous collection of curious neighbours, to a spiritist cult centred upon a charismatic medium and his regular bouts of possession by spirits known to the community. By placing the dead, the community also places itself, a point to which I shall return.

The circumstances that initially drew attention to the *fraticello* occurred at night – the traditional time for spirits to walk abroad – and in his home. We can infer (from Nider's enigmatic notation that the *fraticello* was 'using stones and wood' as part of his pretending) that the most notable element was some sort of noise, possibly of a rattling or clapping sort.¹¹ From these few indications – night-time noise in the house of a semi-religious figure – it seemed credible to observers that an unseen spirit was in their midst. As gossip spread through the small world of a fifteenth-century town, the *fraticello* apparently became the centre of a nightly gathering of curious neighbours, who gathered to experience the visits of the purported spirit first hand. The subsequent development of the anecdote informs us of the range of identities that the Bernese thought might legitimately be attached to this unknown spirit that

¹⁰ I am here utilising a notion elaborated in greater depth in 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual', pp. 10–11. Briefly defined, by 'cultural facts' I mean 'the most minimal description of what actions are reported to have occurred, and were held as true by the community that circulated the report'.

¹¹ On noise-making, see Nicole Belmont, 'Fonction de la dérision et symbolisme du bruit dans le charivari', in Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (eds.), *Le charivari* (Paris, 1981), pp. 16–21.

suddenly wandered among the living. According to Nider, it was the fraticello who first suggested that there were three possibilities: either it was a good spirit who would be responsible for a divine revelation; or it was a human spirit, or ghost; or perhaps an evil spirit, or demon. The word that I have translated as 'ghost' throughout the paragraph is *anima*, or human soul. Thus, significantly, the population of supernatural spirits is here divided into three parallel groups, with human ghosts regarded as similar in nature and capabilities to spirits of angelic origin. This inclusiveness contrasts sharply with the theological position, which as we have seen assigned distinct essences and capabilities to human souls on the one hand, and angels or demons on the other.

In the final part of Nider's description, the terms of encounter with the spirit suddenly change. Rather than the vague nocturnal disruptions that were described earlier, we learn that the fraticello apparently became more intimate with the spirit over time. He 'not infrequently' spoke in the voice of a ghost, that is, with a wailing inflection. Furthermore, the voices that proceeded from the fraticello's body sounded familiar to the crowd, often like that of a 'dead man who had been well known in the city'. Now it becomes clear that the fraticello was regarded as a medium for the dead, and that his body was believed to be possessed by various ghosts that spoke through his mouth. Moreover, these spirits were interactive: they answered the questions of bystanders and, most importantly, explicitly identified themselves by name. There was no longer any question of divine revelations or evil spirits: the possessing entities were prominent, recently deceased Bernese. Their names were recognised, though the crowd was particularly impressed that the fraticello himself had not known all of them personally.

Nider's anecdote perhaps constitutes our most detailed medieval description of the genesis of a minor spiritist cult. An initial period of commotion, during which news of the spirit spread and locals began to frequent the home of the fraticello at night, was followed by a period of transition, in which alternative theories about the nature and identity of the spirit were proposed and debated. Finally, the group seems to have coalesced into a group of 'regulars' who structured their meetings around a series of séances. These were conducted by the fraticello, who allowed spirits of the well-known local dead to take over his body and answer questions through his mouth. Thus the fraticello ultimately learned how to become 'voluntarily possessed', that is, to control the spirits and his possession trances. Anthropological studies of spirit possession have noted that this phenomenon of domesticating or taming spirits often accompanies the public institutionalisation of a possession

cult.¹² In many cultures, individuals who were at first considered to be involuntarily possessed through the guile or violence of the spirit, later establish a reputation as voluntary mediums as they mature and learn to control the spirits that frequent their lives. A somewhat similar pattern seems to be elaborated in Nider's tale, as the fraticello gradually learns to subdue the spirits and mediate their interrelationships with the living. His ultimate goal, however, is to lay the unruly spirits that haunt him to rest. His project of going on pilgrimage aims at placing the restless dead by visiting the shrines of the holy dead. The detail about the man's continued funding while on pilgrimage suggests, further, that belief in the possibility of becoming a medium for the dead was not confined within the city walls of Berne.

The interpretive choices made by this community correlate with a particular set of attitudes towards the supernatural world. It is significant that at the outset of the tale, the identity of the spirit is a cipher, an indeterminate sign, the meaning of which is only gradually worked out by the group. While the existence of angelic and demonic spirits was acknowledged by the Bernese, they focused their attention upon the spirits of the dead as the most likely supernatural beings to be wandering amongst them. Yet the excluded alternatives for the spirit's identity are equally as interesting as the preferred solution, for they aptly demonstrate the fluid and syncretistic nature of medieval belief systems. The categories of the elite culture (angels and demons) are recognised, even though it is ultimately a third category (wandering ghosts) that dominates the interpretive scheme of the group. Similarly, the cult of the saints – the heroic dead – was an important part of this community's religious field, for it is through pilgrimage to saints' shrines that the fraticello thinks to lay his spirits to rest. Thus the polarity of the 'bad' or restless dead, and the 'good' or saintly dead, represent the two most powerful sources of supernatural power in the unseen world constructed by the fifteenth-century Bernese. As we shall see, this mentality was not unique.

Masks, disguises and contested identities

The group at Berne represents an excellent example of what microhistorians have termed a 'normal exception'.¹³ A given set of behaviours or beliefs may be exceptional when judged by the norms of the dominant

¹² Ioan Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (New York, 1971).

¹³ Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (eds.), *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, 1991), p. xiv.

culture, here represented by the Dominican Johannes Nider, yet normal in so far as they reflect the cultural mentalities and field of possibilities maintained by a non-elite sector of society that did not produce many written narratives. The fact that the fraticello was not an isolated individual, but the charismatic centre of a group, testifies to the fact that a claim to incarnate the spirits of the dead was not considered exceptional by the Bernese, but within the range of the normal and the possible. Moreover, the Bernese case is not as isolated as it might at first appear. A body of evidence with significant parallels may be found in a group of roughly contemporary texts from across the Alps, in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy.

I would like to begin this phase of my exploration with three short quotations that all testify generally to the belief that the spirits of the dead could possess the bodies of the living. The first was written in about 1420 by an anonymous Dominican bishop about the thirteenth-century recluse Verdiana of Castelfiorentino:

Her power of expelling from human bodies the worst demons – which the common folk ignorantly consider to be souls divided from their bodies – could be proved by as many witnesses as there were and are men in that province.¹⁴

Giovanni Matteoti, the fifteenth-century hagiographer of his contemporary, Francesca Romana, makes note of the same belief, while again contesting the identity of the possessing spirits:

Demons . . . sometimes invade the bodies of living men and women, and then they lie and say that they are the spirits of the dead, whom they often even name, in order to defame the souls of those dead people.¹⁵

The third quotation derives from a sixteenth-century exorcists' manual written by a Franciscan friar by the name of Buonaventura Farinero, and published in Venice in 1567:

When demons enter human bodies, they almost always appear to the person first in the form of a man who died an evil death, or sometimes they show themselves as one of the person's relatives.¹⁶

These three comments all assume spirit possession to be the work of demons masquerading as the dead in order to lead astray the faithful. Yet

¹⁴ *Vita Viridianae Virgine*, in *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Société des Bollandistes (3rd edn, Paris, 1863–87), iv (1 February), p. 265 (hereafter cited as *AASS*).

¹⁵ *Vita Francescae Romanae*, *AASS*, viii (9 March), p. 175.

¹⁶ Buonaventura Farinero, *Exorcismo Mirabile da Disfare Ogni Sorte de Malefici et da Cacciare i Demoni* (Venice, 1567), fol. 360v.

despite the contestation of identity embedded in these texts, the authors' arguments against the possibility of ghostly possession are themselves a way of preserving the contours of popular belief. Beneath these learned interpretations, a more intimate view of the universe, one populated by spirits of human, rather than of cosmic origin, may be discerned. In general, the Italian references tell us more about the spirits than does Nider, who concentrates his attention on the putatively fraudulent medium. Several observations are immediately striking. First, spirit possession was widely seen by the 'common folk' to be the work of 'souls divided from their bodies'. That is, possessing spirits are disembodied souls seeking to regain the privileges of a human body through possession. The second quotation amplifies this description, giving an additional fragment of information: as in Nider's spiritist cult, these possessing souls usually revealed their human identities. Naming was thus a central component of what might be called the ritual drama of a possession episode, as performatively enacted by a community.¹⁷ We may assume, further, that the names given by the spirits were usually known to the witnesses and participants in this drama, for Giovanni Matteoti notes that revealing a human name is a means of 'defaming' the memory of the individual concerned. This strategy would be meaningless if the name were not familiar to the crowd. The question of defamation is linked to a final observation: the moral status of the deceased. The last quotation specifies two groups from among the dead that were deemed most likely to become spirits seeking bodies: those who 'died an evil death', or else relatives of the possessed victim. Presumably the 'defamation' of the deceased is connected with the expectation that possessing ghosts are shades who died an evil death.

The question of 'bad' or 'evil' death had been a conceptual category of some significance throughout the Middle Ages. The moral significance of one's life was thought to be complemented by the specific kind of death one met: whether it was peaceful and expected, or sudden and violent. Thus the precise manner of one's death, as much as the moral quality of one's life, had bearing upon one's fate in the afterlife. In the thirteenth

¹⁷ I am here drawing upon the literature on performance theories of ritual. See Lawrence Sullivan, 'Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance', *History of Religions* 26 (1) (1986), pp. 1–33; Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York, 1992); Roy Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Berkeley, 1979), pp. 173–222; Edward Schieffelin, 'Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality', *American Ethnologist* (1985), pp. 707–24; Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago, 1987); Ronald L. Grimes, *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, 1996).

century, for example, the Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach had enumerated four kinds of mortality in his *Dialogue on Miracles*: the death of those who live well and die peacefully; of those who live sinfully but die well; of those who live well but die badly; and finally, of those who both live and die badly.¹⁸ Caesarius follows this lesson with an illustrative discussion of each kind of death and the fates of the souls concerned. Those who die badly, through violence or guile, are shown as unquiet souls, wandering the earth either as maleficent spirits, or as corporeal revenants.¹⁹ A similar conception seems to have been at work in the late medieval Italian belief in the depredations of dead spirits seeking bodies. For example, this is likely to have been what Alessandra Strozzi had in mind when, in a 1459 letter to her son Filippo on the occasion of his brother's death, she mused that 'whoever dies suddenly or is murdered . . . loses both body and soul'.²⁰ The body is lost through physical death; the soul, through a bad death. To be torn too suddenly from life leads to restless wanderings, a death without place.

These general observations about the contours of popular belief may be supplemented by specific anecdotes about ghostly possession, in which we see the belief 'in action'. Indeed, the comments made by learned authors about 'demons who lie and say that they are spirits of the dead' correspond quite closely to some specific case-histories of spirit possession recorded in miracle accounts. At times, possession stories are merely evocative of the belief in possession by the spirits of the dead, without being precise. For example, the apparent spirit possession of a little boy described in the *Vita* of Columba of Rieti occurs after he 'found a dead cat on the public street. And when, with childish curiosity, he lifted up the head by the ears, and uncovering the eyes, looked into them, he was struck numb . . . and made mindless and mute.'²¹ This tale seems to preserve, in vestigial form, a connection between possession and death, although it is non-specific and the dead being is an animal. Similarly, the *Life* of Zita of Lucca recounts two cases of possession in which the spirits, when interrogated, reveal apparently human names. One identifies himself as Pintello de Controne, presumably a person known locally. In the other case, a woman is simultaneously possessed by two spirits, who give their names as Napoleone

¹⁸ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange (Cologne, 1851), II, p. 266.

¹⁹ Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual'.

²⁰ Gene Brucker (ed.), *The Society of Renaissance Florence: a Documentary Study* (New York, 1971), p. 48.

²¹ *Vita B. Columbanæ Reatinae*, AASS, xviii (20 May), p. 190.

and Solidario.²² All three names seem more likely to be designations of local dead people than of infernal spirits. In both cases, the victims are freed through the intervention of Zita.

A more detailed set of examples may be drawn from the *Miracles of John Gualbert*, a fifteenth-century text from Florence that includes several fascinating cases. Gualbert died in 1073, but the miracle collection was compiled some 400 years later, making this text precisely contemporary to the other testimonies presented thus far. The author was a Florentine monk of Gualbert's Vallambrosan order, Jerome de Raggiolo, who undoubtedly recorded this series of miracles with an eye to Gualbert's possible canonisation.²³ By the time Raggiolo wrote in the late fifteenth century, Gualbert's relics – particularly his arm – enjoyed a reputation for outstanding exorcistic virtue. The possessed were brought to his shrine in large numbers, and it is their testimony, that of their family members, and that of the monks performing the exorcisms with the help of Gualbert's relics, that is abstracted in Raggiolo's text. Some tales give quite a bit of circumstantial background to the process of the possession, including information about the identity of the spirit, what the victim was doing just prior to the possession, and how the spirit gained power over the individual. In several cases, the spirit either explicitly identifies itself as a ghost – though as we might expect, Raggiolo contests this – or else the circumstances of the possession and exorcism clearly imply that the spirit was understood to be a ghost by the victim and onlookers. In one instance, even Jerome de Raggiolo jokes about the belief, when he tells of a fool possessed by a 'ridiculous demon' whose primary amusement is to sing psalms and hymns in such hilarious parody, that he moves even sombre religious men to irrepressible laughter. So intent was this spirit upon its liturgical songs, 'that you would think', remarks Jerome, 'it was the soul of some priest!'²⁴

The first truly detailed example of possession by a ghost in this text conforms closely to the pattern suggested above by elite authors: possession by the displaced spirit of one of the 'evil dead':

While . . . a cadaver was hanging tied to the scaffold [*cruce*] with a chain, this man, who had been driven insane by love, by chance took the road next to the scaffold. As is human nature, he raised his eyes to the frightful corpse

²² *Vita S. Zitae Virgine Lucae*, AASS, xii (27 April), pars. 85, 66.

²³ The text has been discussed by Pierre Sigal, 'La possession démoniaque dans la région de Florence au XVe siècle d'après les miracles de Saint Jean Gualbert', in *Histoire et société: mélanges offerts à Georges Duby* (3 vols., Aix-en-Provence, 1992), iii, pp. 101–12.

²⁴ *Miraculi S. Joannis Gualberti Abbatis*, AASS, xxix (12 July), p. 388.

... [and] from above, as he himself was accustomed to tell it, he heard a hissing sound . . . The demon entered into him while he was in this state of fear, and began to dominate him and to use him as a dwelling-place.²⁵

In this extraordinary fragment of testimony, it is nearly possible to hear this lovelorn fifteenth-century youth recount his own story, 'as he himself was accustomed to tell it'.²⁶ The hiss that comes from above apparently was understood by the victim as the sound made by the spirit of the executed criminal as it left the dead body hanging on the scaffold and slipped into his own body. Immediately afterwards he was possessed. The character of the possessing spirit conforms to the pattern observed by the exorcist Buonaventura Farinero, for criminal execution is, of course, the very worst kind of death, indicating an evil life leading to a violent end. Furthermore, the tale indicates that the status of the victim also was seen as a contributing factor in his possession: the combination of long-term lovesickness and recent terror apparently rendered this individual especially vulnerable to spiritual invasion. This is a theme that will recur.

In two other tales from the same text, Jerome de Raggiolo discusses possessing spirits who explicitly claim to be ghosts, and aggressively contests the identity of the spirit:

Another woman came to us . . . and the demon that had invaded her, as many are accustomed to do, confessed that it was the soul of a certain Ligurian named Beltramo. It must be noted that this is an impudent lie that must be restrained by the authority of Holy Mother Church, so that the average common man might perceive that such a thing is hardly possible, and thus be instructed in true religion . . . First of all, it is proved by the authority of the Prophet who says, 'the spirit goes and does not return' (Ps. 77:39). Nothing tells us where it goes: either it flies through the air purging itself; or it dwells in an earthly place that is deserted and uncultivated, or else not deserted; or it seeks a place unknown to us, which we call Purgatory. But that it should go back into a human body again we consider, and declare, to be a blasphemy [*nefas*]. Besides, of no people has it been read, that two souls of the same condition and nature, and experiencing various things together, [might] occupy a place in one body.²⁷

Several aspects of this incident are worthy of comment. First, there is Raggiolo's comment that 'many [spirits] are accustomed' to identify themselves as shades of the dead, testifying to how common the belief

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

²⁶ See Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, tr. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1989), pp. 156–64; Muir and Ruggiero, *Microhistory*, pp. vii–xxviii.

²⁷ *Miraculi Joannis Gualberti*, p. 416.

was in fifteenth-century Italy. Moreover, the text later notes that this Beltramo had died violently – ambushed and then slaughtered in a forest by local criminals for the sake of his money. Thus the link between the unquiet dead and the violently killed is again reinforced. Third, there is the intriguing series of arguments against the belief, including both biblical authority as well as a physiological argument that two human souls cannot share the experiences of one body. Jerome de Raggiolo, like other churchmen of his day, accepts the possibility that spirits might linger on earth,²⁸ but not within human bodies. We know from the subsequent anecdote, however, that arguments against ghostly possession were largely unsuccessful. In this tale, the exorcism of another individual possessed by a spirit claiming to be one of the displaced dead leads to a spontaneous public debate on the nature of possessing spirits. The priest contests the spirit's identity to no avail:

The demon who had invaded her asserted that it was the soul of a certain man [named] Mazzanto, who was murdered with a dagger by a certain scoundrel over a game of dice. Everyone who was present pressed forward to affirm that this was true. However the priest argued with them, bringing forth . . . many opinions of men outstanding in virtue and learning, through which he demonstrated that when the souls of men first leave their bodies they go to the place they have merited: that is, they find a sweet place; or they find a harsh land for purging or else for eternal torment. They do not find another body to enter. As for those others [i.e. possessing spirits], they are evil spirits . . . [But] he hardly could convince them that this was true.²⁹

The belief that possessing spirits were the evil dead seems to have been too deeply rooted in the community to be uprooted by the mere theological disquisitions of a priest. In this particular example, the crowd was particularly impressed by the specificity of the spirit's knowledge. The account of the precise circumstances of Mazzanto's bad death provoked a stirring response among the bystanders, who pressed forward excitedly to hear and corroborate the story. In such a case, community memory had priority over the priest's abstract theological argument about the afterlife and the different kinds of supernatural spirits. The unseen world reflected the seen world: the supernatural was populated by the 'natural' spirits of the local dead.

In addition to tales involving the 'bad dead', one case in the *Miracles of John Gualbert* involves the other category of possessing ghosts identified in the exorcists' manual above: relatives. Spirit possession was not any less to be feared for being the work of a known, but deceased, member of the

²⁸ See Gobi, *Dialogue avec un fantôme*.

²⁹ *Miraculi Joannis Gualberti*, p. 417.

community. In this instance, a girl is possessed after encountering 'an old woman lying on her bed, holding her right hand between her cheek and the pillow'.³⁰ The girl does not recognise the old lady, but the description certainly is vivid, giving a sense of the rhythms of real speech. When the spirit is later conjured, it tells the priest it will leave, 'if you make sure to have Gregorian Masses with the offerings for the dead celebrated on my behalf'. Thus far, this anecdote is rather similar to two others in Raggiolo's text, in which possessing spirits refuse to leave the bodies they have taken unless masses for the dead are sung for specific, recently dead individuals – that is, presumably, on their own behalf.³¹ In this particular case, however, not only is the ghost named and prayed for, it ultimately is identified as the girl's great-grandmother. The primary witness whose testimony is preserved was the girl's father; he noted that the spirit was that of 'the recently deceased mother of my father'.³² The old lady thus returned to the comfort of her family by first haunting, then possessing, her descendant.

Another case of ancestor-possession – though this time unsuccessful – may be found in the hagiography of Bernardino of Siena. This text, roughly contemporary with Jerome de Raggiolo's, explains in some detail how possession by the dead was believed to occur, although it simultaneously argues that possession is in reality the work of demons:

It happened not far from the town that a certain mountain man [*montanus*] came to the term of his life. Three days after he was buried, the voice of an unclean spirit was heard outside the house simulating the spirit of the dead man . . . The rebellious and envious spirits . . . succeed more easily in [their goals] if they can slip into the minds of careless people through any weakness.³³

As in the case of the lovesick victim discussed above, a state of depression – mourning – is apt to make one particularly vulnerable to spirit possession. Longing for the presence of the lost loved one may allow a possessing spirit to 'slip into the minds of careless people through any weakness'. The period directly after burial seems to be targeted in particular in this passage, noting that the attempted possession takes place within three days of the funeral; similarly, we are told that the great-grandmother who possessed her descendant in the Gualbert miracles had died quite recently.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 441. Sigal, 'Possession démoniaque', p. 106, identifies the spirit as the girl's grandmother, but this is a misreading.

³³ *Analecta S. Bernardino Senensis*, AASS, xvii (20 May), p. 140.

There thus seems to be a relatively short interval in which shades of the dead were believed to cling to life, seeking a new living body to possess after an interval of haunting. As in Berne and elsewhere, it is always the recent local dead who seek new bodies from among the living in their community. These are the displaced shades who long for a new habitation: the communities that gather to interrogate them attempt to construe their identity and understand their motivations by asking about their names; where they were from; the times and manners of their deaths; and their families. These were thought to be key points in establishing the nature of the spirit, its place within the community while alive, and the best way to place it to rest by placing it within its new community: that of the dead. Yet at the same time, the high level of public interest in these events testifies to a broad social interest in temporary communion with the dead. Jerome de Raggiolo communicates an intense sense of excitement when he describes local responses to ghostly possession: in one case, 'everyone . . . pressed forward to affirm that [the manner of the spirit's death] was true'; in another, we hear from the victim of possession, 'as he himself was accustomed to tell it' – indicating that this was a tale much in demand. The opportunity to interview the dead, while it did not obviate the desire to heal the possessed victim, was greeted with great excitement. It is easy to see how, in these circumstances, cases such as those described in the Italian sources might become transmogrified into the situation described by Nider, in which an individual first claims to be haunted, then possessed, and finally acts as a voluntary medium for a local group that forms its own local spirit cult.

Social constructions of the supernatural

'The supernatural', writes Peter Brown, 'becomes the depository of the objectified values of the group.'³⁴ This chapter has elaborated two different conceptualisations of the supernatural world. On the one hand is the model of the universe advanced by ecclesiastical authors. These men identified possessing spirits with fallen angels, and argued that dead spirits cross over into a new realm, a tripartite afterlife of reward and punishment that is disconnected from our present existence. On the other hand, it is clear that within certain local communities shades of the

³⁴ Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 318. Brown is working within a Durkheimian tradition: see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London, 1915).

bad dead, or of relatives, were believed to linger among the living, and occasionally to seize the opportunity to regain a body through possession. We have seen two variants of this latter belief: in Berne, the case of a fraticello who acted as a voluntary medium for such spirits; and in Italy, where cases of ghostly possession were seen as involuntary and violent. The Bernese anecdote focuses more upon the living medium and his community; the Italian evidence reveals more about the status of the dead. In both cases, however, visits to saints' shrines were seen as a solution to the depredations of spirits seeking bodies.

Can we, according to Brown's dictum, extrapolate social values from these different constructions of the supernatural world? In the remaining pages of this chapter, I would like to explore the social-historical dimensions of these differing mental constructs. For the process of collectively constructing the spirit's nature and meaning is a fundamentally social act, deeply expressive of community priorities and interests. Theologians utilized possession exempla as a means to explore questions of individual soteriology and universal eschatology, while local communities regarded the same events as opportunities ritually to reconstruct community boundaries and definitions, to place themselves amid the memories of local history and of their ancestors.

While I cannot do justice to the complexities of medieval theology here, a few observations can help to foreground contrasts between the elite and the popular conceptions of possessing spirits. A religion both transcendent and soteriological, medieval Catholicism developed an anthropology that was based upon a perception of congruence between the microcosm of an individual and the macrocosm of the universe. And in turn, the cosmos imagined by medieval theologians may be described as the material backdrop – almost a material analogue – to a vast eschatological conflict between God and the Devil, the Ancient Enemy of the human race. Microcosmic choices towards sin or righteousness reflect a macrocosmic, ancient tension that pervades the whole of creation and history. After death, a soul's assignment to Hell, or to Purgatory and/or Heaven, positions it eternally on the side of evil or of good. One leaves behind the body to exist among the righteous or the sinful, the blessed or the fallen, angels or demons, for all eternity. Dead spirits do not seek new bodies; they already are placed within a new spiritual realm, from whence there is no return. As one medieval encyclopaedist phrased it, 'after death there is no means of gaining merit . . . Afterwards, there is no possibility of returning to the body or to the world.'³⁵ This gap between worlds

³⁵ Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Morale* (Duaci, 1624; repr. Graz, 1964), pp. 710–11.

could only be crossed by the living when they joined the dead; never by the dead seeking to rejoin the living.

Within this system, the spirit possession of a material human body by a fallen angel inevitably was bound up with moral questions of sin and retribution. As Augustine noted, demons have no power over the individual unless she first sins, a doctrine that was more or less upheld throughout medieval discussions of spirit possession. Indeed, some sources seem to suggest that sin actually alters the physical constitution of the body and permits easier entrance to the demonic spirit.³⁶ Demons thus play a retributive role within the universal scheme of divine providence, and possession signals a negative soteriological state: only fallen Christians attract fallen angels. Moreover, since demonic spirits and human spirits are different orders of creation, possession is violent and painful: a hybrid, wrenching violation of immense power brought to bear upon fragile flesh. At this moment, the human body not only reflects but actually incarnates the tensions of the macrocosm. A possessed individual is not herself, but Other: her voice, actions and consciousness are all those of the demon whose personality is dominant. Finally, as a reflection of this unique state of alterity, possession also places the victim in a socially liminal position.³⁷ The demoniac is beyond the bounds of human society because she no longer retains an independent identity: she is in thrall to the demon in her body. In short, one's individual spiritual state, soteriological status and the broader social order are all tightly interwoven within this rationalist system, in which human events and choices reflect broader cosmic and moral conflicts.

By contrast, in turning to the supernatural world constructed by local communities, we see a universe that is far more intimate in its structure, if less systematic in its meanings. The building blocks of the supernatural often are shown as natural in themselves: it is their unwonted combination that produces a miraculous effect. Indeed, in many communities it was the human dead that dominated the local supernatural, rather than beings of an entirely different essence, such as angels and demons. For example, although the community in Berne acknowledged the possibility that the spirit in their midst might be an angel or a demon, it is a series of ghosts that are eventually identified as the agents in the possession of the

³⁶ Some of these issues are explored in an article currently being written, 'Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Possession in Medieval Europe'.

³⁷ Although Barbara Newman has emphasised that demoniacs might exercise leadership roles and gain prestige through possession, 'Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century', *Speculum* 73 (July 1998), pp. 733–70.

fraticello. This is a more 'humanistic' view of the unseen world, one in which the activities of transcendent beings are remote and ineffable, while the memories, experiences and local common sense of the community form a vivid cultural basis for constructing the supernatural. Furthermore, the cure for possession – visiting a saint – involves the invocation of yet another category of the human dead: those heroic dead whose sufferings merited them a participation in the reserves of divine supernatural power. In viewing the human body as a possible repository for displaced human souls, these communities constructed for themselves a supernatural that was more knowable because smaller in scale.

The procedure of identifying the possessing spirit – of gradually attaching meaning and familiarity to the invading entity – is an act of collective memory. In the creative process of constructing meaning, we see local knowledge, memories and idioms interwoven to express the evolving self-definitions of the group as well as its collective anxieties. Rather than the automatic placement according to merits that theologians endorsed, these local communities felt that certain souls among the dead needed to be placed in a more active way. The defining boundaries of the entire community – including both living and dead – were at stake. With good deaths, community boundaries were effortlessly fractured and immediately reconstituted as the dead left the community of the living and entered into their new 'age class'.³⁸ These shades were believed to accept their new place. In cases of bad death, however, the process of placing the dead was more complex and gradual. Death became a process, not an event. Not only did these dead have to make their initial entry among the dead too suddenly, while still desperately attached to life; but those left behind likely experienced a heady mixture of ambivalence, titillation and vague guilt in recalling the violent ends of murder victims or executed criminals. Collective memories of such deaths would linger as a mental apparition that could become vividly present. A similar, though less sinister, process could be said to occur in the case of relatives. In these cases, significantly, it is always the family that makes the identification of the possessing ghost, not the broader community as a whole. The recent deaths of family members haunted the imaginations of survivors, as the bad dead haunted the thoughts of a town more generally, providing a group of 'usual suspects' in the event that someone were possessed. Such local memory was considered probative and irrefutable by the group, as demonstrated by the sceptical reactions Jerome de Raggiolo attributed to a local crowd when a priest attempted to dispute with them about the

³⁸ Patrick Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 36.

nature of a possessing spirit. When the hapless ecclesiastic explained the theology of spirits and bodies, demons and the dead, the local folk remained unimpressed. After all, the possessing ghost had given his name, Mazzanto, and had specified in minute detail the known and remembered circumstances of his bad death. Experience was firmly credited over authority.

Furthermore, within these local communities the moral valences of possession were the inverse of theological belief. Victims might be rendered vulnerable through mourning or other forms of depression, but were not understood as sinful. Evil is displaced from the living, and projected instead onto the ghost who takes possession. By specifying that possessing spirits are the shades of those who died a bad death, sin and violence are linked to the dead spirit, not the living victim. In consequence, the social aspects of the possession drama tend to be conceived in rather a different way from theologians' representations. When viewed theologically, possession engenders an absolute alterity: the demoniac is seen as incarnating an ancient and cosmic supernatural being dedicated to nothing less than the downfall of the human race. She is socially, morally and mentally dis-integrated for the duration of her possession. As viewed through the lens of this popular culture, however, possession may become a temporary means to social integration beyond the threshold of death. A former member of the community seeks to possess one of the living both to re-experience embodiment and to reconnect with the community of the living. The living, moreover, evidently felt some sympathy for such spirits: taken too soon from the body, such spirits had not yet come to terms with the fact of their own death. They thus desperately attempt to regain life by obtaining another body, wrested from among the living. Although the possession was seen as disruptive for the possessed individual, the motives of the possessing spirit were perfectly understandable. The conversations and interviews conducted with such possessing ghosts – a theme that is particularly marked in the Bernese example, but that is also seen in episodes such as the ghost Mazzanto – signal the reconstitution of a community that temporarily includes the dead individual once again. This social aspect of possession thus both mediates group memories and restores past circles of community. In the case of the bad dead, finally laying such a ghost to rest also exorcises collective anxiety and guilt about the individual's violent end. Once fully placed among the dead, the collective memory of the individual's violent end can be allowed to fall into obscurity.

Ultimately, the entire scenario of possession and exorcism lays the errant spirits of the dead to rest in the imagination of the community.

Whether relatives or sinners, possessing ghosts must complete the process of death by abandoning the new body they have taken. The community or family places itself under the protection of a local saint, or good shade, and thus lays to rest the unquiet shade that has tried to force its way back among the living. It is a reconstitutive ritual that redefines the community at its centre – the living – and at its peripheries – the dead. Ultimately, such episodes place the living even as they place the dead, repositioning both within new social groupings as the population of a given town constantly passes away and renews itself.