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Citation for final published version:

Gordon, Stephen 2022. The vitality of the dead in medieval cultures. *Journal of Medieval History* 48 (2) , pp. 155-165. 10.1080/03044181.2022.2049516

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2022.2049516>

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## **The vitality of the dead in medieval cultures**

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**Received:** 14 October 2021

**Accepted:** XX February 2022

This article provides an overview of the current state of research into the dead and undead in the European Middle Ages. Looking at the theoretical frameworks that underpin modern scholarship on the topic, as well the key publications that have steered academic investigations on death and dying into exciting new arenas, this introduction highlights the myriad ways in which the traumas of death were conceptualised in pre-modern textual traditions.

**Keywords:** death; ghosts; revenants; rite of passage; belief

Al sodenly yu myddes his messe  
Per drow3 to hym such a derkenesse,  
Pat lakkede al þe dayes ly3t.  
For hit was derke as mydny3t.  
In þat derkenes was myste among;  
All stonyed he stode, so hit stongke.  
Besyde he loked unþur hys lere;  
In þat derknes a byng drew nere,  
A wonþur grysely creature

Aftur a fend ferde her feture;  
All ragged and rente, elenge and evell,  
As orrybull to beholde as devell.  
Mowthe and neose, eres and yes  
Brennede all full of brennyng lyes.  
Perof so grislyr he was agaste,  
That yn swonyng he was almaste (ll. 45–60)

This extract from the fourteenth-century Middle English poem *Pe Pope Trental*, also known as the *Trental of St Gregory*, offers an appropriate introduction to this special issue of *Journal of Medieval History*.<sup>1</sup> Detailing the death of Gregory the Great's mother and her return to earth in the form of a 'grysely' apparition to plead for masses to be said in her name, the *Trental* exemplifies the ambiguous and terrifying nature of encounters with the dead. As a narrative, it can be read as a distillation of the prevailing attitudes towards death and dying in late medieval England, showcasing, amongst other things, the difficulty of discerning between good and bad spirits, the dangers of dying unshriven (in this case, the unremitted sin of secret infanticide), and the efficacy of post-mortem prayer for easing the pains of purgatory. Indeed, the pointed listing of the prayer cycles that comprised Gregory's mother's 'trewe trentell' (ll. 100–14) speaks to the function of the ghost story as a prime vehicle for religious instruction.<sup>2</sup> The dividing line between didacticism (the inner truth of the tale) and the enjoyment of the poem as a piece of entertainment was, of course, altogether blurred. The influence of this scene in the description of the 'grisly goost' of Guinevere's mother in the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted here is the version 'Trental A' from the British Library Cotton Caligula A.II (c.1400). Transcript taken from Albert Kaufmann, ed., *Trentalle Sancti Gregorii: eine mittelenglische Legende in zwei Texten* (Erlangen: Böhme, 1889), 32–3.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Pfaff, 'The English Devotion of St Gregory's Trental', *Speculum* 49 (1974): 75–90.

late fourteenth-century Arthurian romance *The Awntyrs of Arthure* is a testament to the ghost's inability to be contained by textual as well as ontological boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

Containment, or lack thereof, is a central feature of interactions with the dead. The reaction of Gregory to the sight of his mother – his 'swonyng' – ties into modern theorisations about the strangeness of being confronted with something that by all accounts should not be confronted at all: the return of the unwanted and unbidden. For scholars of the supernatural, Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny' is often used as the starting point for discussions on the psychological function of the ghost as the re-emergence of repressed trauma.<sup>4</sup> Taking on board the philosopher Friedrich Schelling's notion that the uncanny can be conceptualised as something hidden and secret that has nonetheless come to light, Freud adds the proviso that 'to many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts', a connection based on the lingering sense of familiarity with the returning being. That is to say, corpses and spirits are not new or unknown, but 'something ... long familiar to the psyche': the fear of death made manifest.<sup>5</sup> The terror evoked by the uncanny can be readily discerned in Gregory's reaction to the 'grysely' creature in his midst.

Building upon the work of Freud and Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection is another key theoretical tool for understanding the emotional conflicts engendered by the dead. Often viewed as the obverse to Lacan's conceptualisation of the object of desire (*objet petit a*), abject entities are excluded rather than sought, expelled from society in order to maintain a sense of cohesion and social order.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, however, the abject continue to press upon the boundaries of the universe that their very expulsion helps maintain. For

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<sup>3</sup> Leah Haught, 'Ghostly Mothers and Fated Fathers: Gender and Genre in "The Awntyrs off Arthure"', *Arthuriana* 20 (2010): 3–24 (8 and 21, n. 1).

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Freud, *Uncanny*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Karnac, 2004).

Kristeva, the state of abjection is one of pristine ambiguity, the breakdown of meaning, and cannot be truly defined. As neither subject nor object, abject bodies – of which the dead are the most prominent example – tend to invoke feelings of disgust, horror and danger in the percipient, representing the very essence of the pollution taboo.<sup>7</sup> As noted in John Arnold’s contribution to this special issue on the inquisitorial trial of the French sacristan and ghost whisperer Arnaud Gélis, Jacques Derrida formulated the term ‘hauntology’ to describe the communal and emotional pressures that spectres – in Kristevan terms, abject bodies – exert upon the living.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond psychoanalysis and deconstructionism, the fields of anthropology and ethnography have also offered useful analytical tools for historians of the supernatural. The concept of the *rite de passage* first gained prominence through the writings of Arnold van Gennep, whose discussions on the processes of ‘separation’, ‘liminality’ and ‘incorporation’ have become a commonplace for describing an individual’s transformation from one state of being to the next, especially with regards to the change of spiritual status and the transition between life and death.<sup>9</sup> Whether conceived as something that was violent, sudden, or ill-performed, ‘bad’ death left the social agents involved in the funerary ritual unable to satisfy the conditions for a successful rite of passage. To mitigate these problems, the living could either attempt to complete the *rite de passage* and re-incorporate the deceased back into the community (that is, conduct contingency rites that propitiated the dead), or else enact protective, apotropaic measures to ensure that the socio-spiritual pollution of the abject body

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982). For the classic text on the polluting nature of the excluded, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994); John H. Arnold, ‘Talking with Ghosts: Rancière, Derrida, and the Archive’, in this special issue, Scott Bruce and Stephen Gordon, eds., *Vigor mortis: The Vitality of the Dead in Medieval Cultures*, published as *Journal of Medieval History* 48, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>9</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage: étude systématique des rites* (Paris: Nourry, 1909); English translation: *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

did not spread to others. Either way, the problem of how to manage the unstructured liminal forces represented by the lingering presence of the deceased remained the main focus of concern. In the case of Gregory's mother, the fact that she died without first confessing to the murder of her illegitimate child – 'Be the neck the chyld she wryede' (l. 21) – condemned her to a restless, painful existence in 'hell' until such time her sins were assuaged through the recitation of the Trental. Only then could she be reincorporated 'ynto heven' (ll. 165 and 176).

Van Gennep's tripartite schema has proved incredibly durable, especially in cross-cultural studies on death rites.<sup>10</sup> It was especially influential on the writings on the British anthropologist Victor W. Turner, who devoted considerable attention to the social function of the rite of passage in his widely read 1969 publication *The Ritual Process*.<sup>11</sup> Turner famously defines liminal entities as

neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions.<sup>12</sup>

Liminal entities – for our purposes, the medieval dead – are often conceptualised as a blank slate; powerful, uncanny, but *indeterminate* objects upon which multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings could be ascribed. Thus, the meanings attached to the (un)dead body could fluctuate according to the worldview of the percipient and/or the nature of the repressed truth – the 'rupture' – that was pushing to re-emerge. Being ontologically uncertain, it is

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<sup>10</sup> The formative text on the anthropology of death rites remains Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, eds., *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969). For Turner's other key works on the structural mechanics of the ritual process, see *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), especially 93–111 (Chapter 4: 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage'); and *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Books, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

impossible to corral liminal entities into discreet linguistic or typological units. The disembodied dead (in modern parlance, spirits or ghosts) often shared attributes with the embodied dead (the vital corpse or revenant) as well as other, more morally suspect beings such as elves, nightmares, poltergeists and demons. Indeed, the initial assumption made by Gregory that the ghost of his mother was a ‘fende’ (l. 62) is not simply a literary flourish on the part of the poet, but reflective of an age-old concern about how to correctly identify spirits and grasp the essential truth of liminal bodies.<sup>13</sup> Gregory’s terror at the creature that appeared before him only subsided after conjuring it in the name of God to reveal its true purpose: ‘Sey me sykerly be soþe soone’ (l. 65). With demons able to imitate (or infiltrate) the dead and the dead manifesting their sins on their bodies like demons, it was unwise to take things at face value. A certain level of discernment was needed before the appropriate apotropaic or incorporative rite could commence. In base anthropological terms, adherence to the correct, culturally ascribed mental and physical processes for dealing with liminal bodies was vital for resolving encounters with the unbidden returned.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst Van Gennep and Turner may not be quoted as directly as Freud, Lacan, Kristeva or Derrida, historians and archaeologists have certainly made use of the model of the rite of passage in their own analyses of medieval death rituals. Such studies not only attempt to chart the various stages of the ideal funerary process – from deathbed to burial and post-mortem commemoration – but also the circumstances by which the deceased were considered so polluting they had to be purposefully trapped in a liminal mode of existence; for example, through the dissolution of the body or burial in unconsecrated ground.<sup>15</sup> That is, if the ideal

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Kathryn Edwards, ‘How to Deal with the Restless Dead? Discernment of Spirits and the Response to Ghosts in Fifteenth-Century Europe’, *Collegium* 19 (2015): 82–99.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret S. Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130–50.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Roberta Gilchrist and Barney Sloane, *Requiem: The Medieval Monastic Cemetery in Britain* (London: Museum of London Archaeology Service, 2005), 18–28; Robert Dinn, ‘Death and Rebirth in Late Medieval Bury St Edmunds’, in *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 1000–1600*, ed. by Steven R. Bassett (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 151–69; Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in*

death pattern was the most straightforward way of completing the rite of passage, and positive ritual innovations (for example, post-mortem prayer) appeased and counteracted the spiritual fallibility of the deceased, then extreme deviation can be seen as the intentional preclusion of the journey into the next life.<sup>16</sup> The latter option was reserved for only the most inveterate of sinners, those who needed to be fully abjectified to maintain the sense of socio-spiritual order. Whether understood as an embodied corpse or insubstantial spirit, manageable or unmanageable, the dead held a firm grasp on the medieval imagination. The same, perhaps, can be said about those who write about the dead in the present day.

### **The vitality of the dead: a modern historiography**

It is only within the last 30 years or so that the dead have truly emerged from the margins of medieval scholarship, especially among Anglophone scholars. Prior to the late twentieth century we find only tentative attempts to make the dead – in whatever substantial or insubstantial form – an area of study in their own right. Montague Summers's *The Vampire, His Kith and Kin* (1928) and *The Vampire in Europe* (1929) mark two of the earliest (and infamous) attempts to integrate the medieval belief in embodied ghosts within the wider folklore of pestilential, undead bodies from ancient Greece to modern times.<sup>17</sup> The validity of

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*Medieval England: 1066–1550* (London: Routledge, 1997); Stephen Gordon, 'Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages', in *Dealing with the Dead: Mortality and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Thea Tomaini (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 97–128; Romedio Schmitz-Esser, *The Corpse in the Middle Ages: Embalming, Cremating, and the Cultural Construction of the Dead Body* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> A concept discussed in more detail in Stephen Gordon, 'The Walking Dead in Medieval England: Literary and Archaeological Perspectives' (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Montague Summers, *The Vampire, His Kith and Kin* (London: Kegan Paul and Co., 1928); and idem, *The Vampire in Europe* (New York, NY: Dutton, 1929). The central and eastern European vampire is a creature deserving of a special issue in itself. Whilst it is not the remit here to provide a full analysis of this culturally specific iteration of the undead corpse – an entity that first came to prominence in the West during the so-called 'vampire epidemic' of the eighteenth century – it is something that has certainly excited a lot of scholarship over the years. See, in the first instance, Katharina M. Wilson, 'The History of the Word "Vampire"', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46 (1985): 577–83; Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Koen Vermeir, 'Vampires as Creatures of the Imagination: Theories of Body, Soul, and Imagination in Early Modern Vampire Tracts (1659–1755)', in *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Yasmin Haskell (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 341–73; and Stephen Gordon, 'Emotional Practice and Bodily Performance in Early Modern Vampire Literature', *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 6 (2017): 93–124.



Summers' scholarship has often been questioned, as has his credulity with regards to the reality of vampires, but it is a testament to the impact of his writings that both books have never gone out of print.<sup>18</sup> Working in a much more secure intellectual framework than Summers, Hilda Ellis Davidson and Nora K. Chadwick represent the formative English-language scholars on the Scandinavian and Icelandic iteration of the embodied ghost, the *draugr*, an entity that had only been given marginal consideration in *The Vampire in Europe*.<sup>19</sup> As a localised sub-category of the unquiet dead, the *draugr* have been subject to considerable analysis in recent years, with such scholars as Ármann Jakobsson, Kirsi Kanerva, William Sayers and Claude Lecouteux (among myriad others) shedding much light on how the Saga writers (c.1200–1300s) articulated the socio-political function of the restless corpse during the settlement and Christianisation of Iceland (c.870–1030).<sup>20</sup> In general, the Icelandic undead operated under their own agency and, if benign, tended to guard the barrows under which they were buried. By contrast, living 'badly' and dying with unfinished business were conditions that prompted the malign dead to actively walk the earth spreading further discontent until such time their bodies were rendered inert. For his part, Ármann Jakobsson explicitly echoes Freud in noting that the Icelandic ghost 'reflects attitudes to omnipresent, exotic, frightening and unconquerable death, [it] may be regarded as the double of a normal human being, and therefore not only dangerous but uncanny.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Hume, 'The Uses of Montague Summers: A Pioneer Reconsidered', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700* 3 (1979): 59–65.

<sup>19</sup> Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943); N.K. Chadwick, 'Norse Ghosts (A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi)', *Folklore* 57 (1946): 50–65; and eadem, 'Norse Ghosts II (Continued)', *Folklore* 57 (1946): 106–27.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic Draugr and Demonic Contamination in Grettis Saga', *Folklore* 120 (2009): 307–16; Kirsi Kanerva, 'From Powerful Agents to Subordinate Objects? The Restless Dead in Thirteenth and Fourteenth-Century Iceland', in *Death in Medieval Europe: Death Scripted and Death Choreographed*, ed. Joëlle Rollo Koster (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 40–70; William Sayers, 'The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 242–63; and Claude Lecouteux, *The Return of the Dead: Ghosts, Ancestors and the Transparent Veil of the Pagan Mind*, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110 (2011): 281–300 (300).

To return to mainland Europe: the publication of Jacques le Goff's *Birth of Purgatory* in 1981 marks the sea change in modern scholarship on medieval death.<sup>22</sup> As Carl Watkins remarks in this special issue, Le Goff's thesis concerning the emergence of purgatory as a physical, bounded place in the late twelfth century may not stand up to scrutiny in light of the evidence from the early Middle Ages, but it certainly remains pervasive. Le Goff's analysis of the emergence of ghost stories and descent narratives as a way to advertise the redemptive qualities of purgatorial pain still makes for valuable reading.<sup>23</sup> Published around the same time as Le Goff's work, Hilda Ellis Davidson's edited collection *The Folklore of Ghosts* and Ronald C. Finucane's *Appearance of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* are notable for making the restless dead the sole focus of study.<sup>24</sup> Both take a broadly diachronic approach to proceedings, looking at case studies from prehistory to the present day. Whereas Ellis Davidson's volume is geographically as well as chronologically diverse – including essays on ghost belief in the Near East, the West Indies and Japan – Finucane is much more focused on Western Europe. Finucane's discussions on the Christianisation of the pagan undead, the early medieval understanding of apparitions (Chapter 2) and the abiding influence of purgatory on the form and function of late medieval ghost narratives (Chapter 3) remain a suitable introduction to the topic.

The impact of the 'cultural turn' in the study of history naturally (and ironically) gave the ghost a new lease of life. In the last decade of the twentieth century, interest in medieval death culture flourished, generating strands of scholarship that remain pertinent to this day. Indeed, Jean-Claude Schmitt's *Ghosts in the Middle Ages* (1998) and Nancy Caciola's

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 177–207; Carl Watkins, 'Landscapes of the Dead in the Late Medieval Imagination', in this special issue, Bruce and Gordon, eds., *Vigor mortis*.

<sup>24</sup> H. Ellis Davidson and W.M.S. Russell, eds., *The Folklore of Ghosts* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981); and R.C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (London: Junction, 1982). See also Finucane's pertinent study on the medieval treatment of the dead: 'Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion: Social Ideals and Death Rituals in the Later Middle Ages', in *Mirrors of Mortality: Social Studies in the History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa, 1981), 39–62.

‘Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture’ (1996) are the tantamount urtexts where the study of ghosts (in general) and revenants (specifically) are concerned.<sup>25</sup> Focusing on the written and occasionally art historical evidence from the central and later Middle Ages (c.1100–1500), Schmitt was one of the first scholars to systematically investigate the ways in which ghost narratives were rethought and reformulated in response to changing socio-spiritual demands. Be it charting the appearance of the dead in dreams (Chapter 2), the belief that they suffered purgatorial pain on the surface of the earth (Chapter 5), or the ghost’s orthodox role in enforcing expected modes of behaviour (Chapter 8), Schmitt’s study succeeds by being both accessible and comprehensive. His concluding remarks, that ‘the dead had no other existence than that which the living gave them’, is an effective and accurate summation of over 200 pages of scholarship.<sup>26</sup> Caciola may not have been the first person to investigate the belief in the embodied ghost in Latinate Europe – Montague Summers, for his part, devotes a chapter to the topic – but her efforts have done more than any to bring the revenant to wider scholarly attention. Examining the overlap between orthodox teachings on the animating *spiritus*, demonically possessed corpses and the lay belief in the vitality of the corpse after death, Caciola argues that for certain communities the ultimate source of a cadaver’s presumed agency – its latent life force – resided in the juxtaposition between vital flesh and sterile bone. A body was only truly rendered ‘safe’ when the process of decay was completed. In other words, the fresher and more liminal the corpse, the greater danger it presents to the living – whether this danger be caused by an incubating demon or the residual

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<sup>25</sup> Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1998); and Nancy Caciola, ‘Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture’, *Past and Present* 152 (1996): 3–45. A version of this article was later republished as a chapter in Nancy Mandeville Caciola, *Afterlives: the Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 206–53 (Chapter 5: ‘Flesh and Bone: The Semiotics of Mortality’).

<sup>26</sup> Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 224.

agency of the deceased.<sup>27</sup> Read in this way, revenants had no other existence than that which their *body* gave them.

The influence of Schmitt and Caciola cannot be overstated. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we find a marked increase in the number of studies on the restless dead, especially in England. John Blair, for example, discusses the evidence for revenant belief in the early medieval period, staking a claim – as it were – for the benefits of using archaeological evidence to support the analysis of written sources.<sup>28</sup> Studies on the fear of the dead (whether vampires or potential vampires) are well established in the field of mortuary archaeology, especially in mainland Europe, where scholars such as Leszek Gardela and Anastasia Tsaliki are developing fascinating new insights into the apotropaic function of ‘deviant’ burials. Even in these studies, however, caution is advised that there may have been other, more prosaic reasons for singling out bodies for special treatment – judicial spectacle being one common example.<sup>29</sup> With equal caution taken, archaeologists working on British grave sites have also recognised that the fear of the undead may account for instances of prone burial, mutilation, bodily dissolution and the placement of objects within the corpse’s mouth or the burial matrix.<sup>30</sup> And yet it is only recently, exemplified by the work of Stephen

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<sup>27</sup> Caciola, ‘Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual’, 32.

<sup>28</sup> John Blair, ‘The Dangerous Dead in Early Medieval England’, in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, eds. Stephen Baxter and others (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 539–59 (542).

<sup>29</sup> Leszek Gardela and Kamil Kajkowski, ‘Vampires, Criminals, or Slaves? Reinterpreting “Deviant Burials” in Early Medieval Poland’, *World Archaeology* 45 (2013): 780–96; idem, ‘The Dangerous Dead? Rethinking Viking-Age Deviant Burials’, in *Conversions: Looking for Ideological Change in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Leszek Słupecki and Rudolf Simek (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2013), 99–136; and Anastasia Tsaliki, ‘Unusual Burials and Necrophobia: An Insight into the Burial Archaeology of Fear’, in *Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*, ed. Eileen M. Murphy (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008), 1–15. See also Tracy K. Betsinger and Amy B. Scott, ‘Governing from the Grave: Vampire Burials and Social Order in Post-Medieval Poland’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 24 (2014): 467–76; and Marek Polcy and Elzbieta Gajda, ‘Buried with Sickles: Early Modern Interments from Drawsko, Poland’, *Antiquity* 89 (2015): 1373–87.

<sup>30</sup> The scholarship is too vast to provide a full bibliography, but see Gilchrist and Sloane, *Requiem*, 27–8; J.L. Buckberry and D.M. Hadley, ‘Fieldwork at Chapel Road, Fillingham’, *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology* 36 (2001): 11–18; Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and S. Mays and others, ‘A Multidisciplinary Study of a Burnt and Mutilated Assemblage of Human Remains from a Deserted Mediaeval Village in England’, *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 16 (2017): 441–55.

Gordon, that attempts have been made to discuss the material and written evidence *in tandem*, as equal partners, rather than one form of evidence being used to buttress the other.<sup>31</sup>

In the wake of Schmitt and Caciola's work, the undead have enjoyed a much more prominent role in recent historical scholarship. Robert Swanson, Robert Bartlett, Darren Oldridge, Catherine Rider and Carl Watkins have all made valuable contributions to our knowledge-base in the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>32</sup> Chapter Five of Watkins's *History and Supernatural Belief in Medieval England* (2007), for example, explores how the increasing influence (if not creation) of the idea of purgatory in the twelfth century explains the contrasting, sometimes conflicting ways in which the restless dead were perceived and managed in this era. The idea that the revenant corpse was but a puppet for demonic agency belonged to an older, more conservative mode of religious thought. The progressive attitudes engendered in the Parisian theological schools supported a new theory: that the corpse could have been permitted by God to walk the earth in order to achieve absolution from its sins. Cadavers needed to be managed with 'positive' contingency rites (for example, prayer) rather than being destroyed.<sup>33</sup> Of course, belief is never truly uniform, nor is it completely imposed from on high. Whilst it has generally been accepted that the increasing influence of purgatory on official Church teachings led to the gradual disembodiment of the restless dead in official discourse – from animate corpse to spirit – the process never achieved blanket coverage. For every text that evokes orthodox teaching, like *Pe Pope Trental*, there were others where the

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<sup>31</sup> Gordon, 'Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages'. See also idem, 'Disease, Sin, and the Walking Dead in Medieval England, c.1100–1350: A Note on the Documentary and Archaeological Evidence', in *Medicine, Healing and Performance*, eds. Stephen Gordon and others. (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), 55–75.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Swanson, 'Ghosts and Ghostbusters in the Middle Ages', in *The Church, the Afterlife, and the Fate of the Soul*, eds. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon. *Studies in Church History* 45 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 143–74; Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 612–15; Darren Oldridge, *Strange Histories: The Trial of the Pig, the Walking Dead, and Other Matters of Fact from the Medieval and Renaissance Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Catherine Rider, 'Agreements to Return from the Afterlife in Late Medieval *Exempla*', in *Church, the Afterlife, and the Fate of the Soul*, eds. Clarke and Claydon, 174–83.

<sup>33</sup> Carl S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

ontology of the dead was never so clear cut, with seemingly corporeal ghosts possessing elements of incorporeality and vice versa. ‘Belief’ exists as an indeterminate melange of overlapping ideas and habits that fluctuates according to individual circumstance. Such uncertainties are explored closely by Jacqueline Simpson, who uses Yorkshire revenant lore from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries to discuss how theological innovations could combine with entrenched belief to create local, non-uniform traditions about the form and function of the spectral dead.<sup>34</sup> In extreme circumstances, the ‘on the ground’ beliefs surrounding the nature of the afterlife had the potential to become so divergent, so heterodox, as – in the case of Arnaud Gélis – to occasionally incite the interests of inquisitors.<sup>35</sup>

Doubt is a powerful emotion. The age-old fear that the returning entity was not, in fact, friend or loved one, but a demon-in-disguise intent on dragging the percipient into sin was an issue that had occupied theologians since at least the time of Augustine. Demons not only had the ability to infiltrate (and ambulate) cadavers, but could also deceive the senses of those they encountered, either by modulating their elemental forms to appear in the guise of the deceased, or by causing hallucinations through the manipulation of their victims’ humoural makeup. Conjuring a ghost in the name of God was the orthodox method for establishing its true identity.<sup>36</sup> Such a strategy can be seen in *Pe Pope Trental*, where Gregory demands ‘[p]orow goddes myzte’ that the apparition tell him why it appeared (l. 61). Similarly, it is no surprise that in the contemporaneous *De spiritu Guidonis* (c.1327), a supposedly first-hand account of a haunted house in Alès, France (Dec 1323–Jan 1324), the Dominican inquisitor Jean Gobi uses the power of his office to compel the ghost to reveal its true intent. In the poetic Middle English retelling of this report, *The Gast of Gy* (c.1350), the

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<sup>34</sup> Jacqueline Simpson, ‘Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England’, *Folklore* 114 (2003): 389–402.

<sup>35</sup> See Swanson, ‘Ghosts and Ghostbusters’, 164.

<sup>36</sup> Edwards, ‘How to Deal with the Restless Dead?’.

attendant spirit is simply asked ‘whether ertow ane ill gast or a gud?’ (l. 235).<sup>37</sup> Not all ghost encounters were treated with credulity, however. Some were approached with due scepticism by the authorities. As discussed by Robert Swanson, the reported 1424 appearance of the ghost of William FitzHenry to Thomas More of Kelfield, East Yorkshire, asking that his son, John FitzHenry, return some property to Robert Henryson (no relation), takes an interesting turn when More was later charged by the local church authorities with defaming William FitzHenry’s character.<sup>38</sup> The function of the dead as a manifestation of hidden sin or unfinished business is, of course, a common one. Yet in this instance the court seems to have taken the more cynical viewpoint that it was all part of a scheme to defraud the FitzHenry family. Swanson’s article offers an interesting counterpoint to Tom Johnson’s essay in this special issue on the role of the dead in Yorkshire property disputes.<sup>39</sup>

Over the last decade, academic debates on the dead have continued apace. Alongside displaying an interest in the archaeology of revenant belief and the relationship between ghost stories and the nightmare experience, Stephen Gordon has explored how the motif of the disease-spreading dead could be used as a powerful critical tool by chroniclers, court writers and religious moralists, a body of work that culminated in the publication of *Supernatural Encounters: Demons and the Restless Dead in Medieval England, c.1050–1450* (2020).<sup>40</sup> Christian Livermore, meanwhile, has followed on from the methods employed by Ronald Finucane, P. G. Maxwell Stuart and David Keyworth in tracing the belief in the

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<sup>37</sup> For an overview of the Alès affair, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 102–50. For the Middle English text, see *Three Purgatory Poems: The Gast of Gy, Sir Owain, The Vision of Tundale*, ed. Edward E. Foster ((Kalamazoo, MI Medieval Institute Publications, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> R.N. Swanson, ‘Defaming the Dead: A Contested Ghost Story from Fifteenth-Century Yorkshire’, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 82 (2010): 263–8.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Johnson, ‘Byland Revisited; or Spectres of Inheritance’, in this special issue, Bruce and Gordon, eds., *Vigor mortis*.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Stephen Gordon, ‘Medical Condition, Demon or Undead Corpse? Sleep Paralysis and the Nightmare in Medieval Europe’, *Journal of the Social History of Medicine* 28 (2015), 425–44; idem, ‘Monstrous Words, Monstrous Bodies: Irony and the Walking Dead in Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*’, *English Studies* 96 (2015): 379–402; idem, ‘Social Monsters and the Walking Dead in William of Newburgh’s *Historia rerum Anglicarum*’, *Journal of Medieval History* 41 (2015): 446–65; and idem, *Supernatural Encounters: Demons and the Restless Dead in Medieval England, c.1050–1450* (London: Routledge, 2020).

walking corpse across a wide diachronic spectrum.<sup>41</sup> Lastly, Thea Tomaini's edited collection *Dealing With the Dead: Mortality and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2018) employs a methodological approach similar to that used in this very issue. With themes ranging from scornful corpses in Anglo-Saxon homilies to the function of late medieval cadaver sculptures, Tomaini's volume showcases how the dead continued to exert a pressure on the living even after they had been laid to rest, remaining ever-present – if sometimes unwanted – members of the local community.<sup>42</sup>

As Hilary Fox and Christina Welch's chapters in the *Dealing with The Dead* volume attest, investigations into the dead (specifically, the Western Latinate dead) have become much more prevalent in literary and art historical scholarship over the last two decades.<sup>43</sup> Methodological holism – that is, an awareness of how the fear of the dead was made manifest across different disciplines – is especially needed when the object of study find expression across such a wide array of texts. The composition of *Pe Pope Trental* is a perfect example of how culturally acceptable, habitually persistent beliefs concerning the function of the dead could flourish, meme-like, across genre type. As noted briefly at the start of this essay, the appearance of Gregory's mother in a shroud of preternatural gloom – 'In bat derkenes was

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<sup>41</sup> Christian Livermore, *When the Dead Rise: Narratives of the Revenant, from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2021); P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Ghosts: A History of Phantoms, Ghouls and Other Spirits of the Dead* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007); and David Keyworth, *Troublesome Corpses: Vampires & Revenants, from Antiquity to the Present* (Southend-on-Sea: Desert Island Books, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Tomaini, ed., *Dealing with The Dead*.

<sup>43</sup> Hilary Fox, 'The Talking Dead: Exhortations of the Dead to the Living in Anglo-Saxon Writing', and Christina Welch, 'Exploring Late-Medieval English Memento Mori Carved Cadaver Sculptures', both in *Dealing with the Dead*, ed. Tomaini, 17–35 and 331–65 respectively. For examples of recent scholarship, see Elizabeth Williams, 'Sir Amadace and the Undisenchanted Bride: The Relation of the Middle English Romance to the Folktale Tradition of "The Grateful Dead"', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), 57–70; Barry Beardsmore, 'A Study of Two Middle French Ghost Stories', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 54 (2002): 84–101; Haught, 'Ghostly Mothers and Fated Fathers'; Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010); Kenneth Mooney, *Mortality and Imagination: The Life of the Dead in Medieval English Literature* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); and Jennifer L. Sisk, "'We must be trefable': Law and Affect in Lydgate's Saint Austin at Compton', *Modern Philology* 112 (2014): 76–96. The formative text on the art and architecture of death in this era remains Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Library, 1996). For more recent scholarship, see Stephen Perkinson and Noa Turel, eds., *Picturing Death 1200–1600* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).



myste among’ (l. 49) – was likely used as the basis for a similar scene in the *Awntyrs off Arthure*: ‘The day wex als dirke / As hit were mydnight myrke’ (ll. 75–6). The influence of the *Trental* on the *Awntyrs* can further be seen in the ghost of Guinevere’s mother asking her daughter to say trentals for the sake of her soul: ‘Were thritty trentales don’ (l. 218).<sup>44</sup> The acknowledged connection of the *Awntyrs* to the *Three Living and Three Dead* – a visual and literary motif whereby three living kings confront their cadaverous doubles while out hunting and are forced to ruminate on their transient existence – further links the *Trental*, at however far remove, to the *memento mori* traditions that reached their apogee with the emergence of the *danse macabre* in Paris in the early 1420s.<sup>45</sup>

The morals attached to the *Three Living and Three Dead* and the *danse macabre* imagery – that death is the great leveller and makes no allowances for social rank or status – are a taut summation of late medieval pastoral teachings on the need to prepare for death and ‘die well’. The development of *Ars moriendi* (Art of Dying) literature in the years following the Council of Constance (c.1414–18) is perhaps the most enduring example of the Church’s desire to further standardise lay devotional practice, especially in the context of death rituals.<sup>46</sup> As a rule, the main body of the *Ars moriendi* text operated as a series of vignettes,

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<sup>44</sup> ‘The Awntyrs Off Arthure’, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> The ‘Three Dead Kings’ motif first appears in the historical record in the form of Baudouin de Condé’s late thirteenth-century vernacular French poem, *Dit des trois morts et des trois vifs* and thereafter spread quickly throughout Europe, with English, German, Latin and Italian versions emerging in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Numerous studies have been made on this visual/textual tradition. See Thorlac Turville-Petre, ‘“Summer Sunday”, “De Tribus Regibus Mortuis” and “The Awntyrs off Arthure”’: Three Poems in the Thirteen-Line Stanza’, *Review of English Studies* 25 (1974): 1–14; Susanna Grier Fein, ‘Life and Death, Reader and Page: Mirrors of Mortality in English Manuscripts’, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 35 (2002): 69–94; and Ashby Kinch, ‘Image, Ideology, and Form: The Middle English “Three Dead Kings” in Its Iconographic Context’, *Chaucer Review* 43 (2008): 48–81. For the separate *danse macabre* tradition, see James M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Glasgow: Jackson and Sons, 1950); Sophie Oosterwijk, ‘Of Corpses, Constables and Kings: The Danse Macabre in Late Medieval and Renaissance Culture’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 157 (2004): 61–90; and Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Mary Catherine O’Conner, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars moriendi* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1942); and Donald D. Duclow, ‘Dying Well: The *Ars moriendi* and the Dormition of the Virgin’, in *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, eds. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1999), 379–429.

with examples of ‘bad’ deathbed performances (faithlessness; despair; impatience; vainglory; and avarice) pitted against their ‘good’ counterparts (faith; hope; patience; humility; and worldly detachment). The danger of damnation awaited those who did not perform their deathbed rituals correctly. This was a moral that certainly applied in years past to Gregory’s mother, whose apparent good death – ‘when she was seyn so softly dye’ (l. 35) – was not what it appeared to be. It is only by unravelling these diachronic and synchronic threads, both backwards and forwards in time and across different types of dataset, that we can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of pre-modern attitudes to death. For its part, *Pe Pope Trental* operates at the interstice between orthodox teachings on the architecture of redemption, the problem of discerning the identity of spirits, burgeoning *memento mori* artistic traditions and the telling of ghost stories for the simple thrill of entertainment. Whether the cadaver itself or the (dis)embodied ghost, the dead exist at a nexus point of overlapping concerns and competing agendas that would otherwise be difficult to articulate. As the selection of essays in this volume demonstrate, it was the very liminality of the dead that allowed them to become whatever moral or pedagogical force the living needed them to be – in whatever form, function or medium.

#### **Note on contributor**

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