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‘Agite, agite et uenite!’ Corrupted breath, corrupted speech and encounters with the restless dead in Geoffrey of Burton’s *Vita sancte Moduene virginis*

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Written accounts of supernatural encounters often include reference to speech acts performed by the evil agent. In such instances, the human interlocutor may be overcome by sickness, sometimes leading to death. Despite the close relationship that existed between physical and metaphysical health in theological discourse, encounters with ‘diseased’ supernatural agents generated little in the way of overt explanatory frameworks, especially in historical or literary writings. Focusing on the tale of the Drakelow revenants found in Geoffrey of Burton’s *Vita sancte Moduene virginis* (c.1118–35), this article evaluates the aetiology of interactions between the living and the undead, with particular reference to the dangerous speech exhibited by the restless ghost. The investigation begins with an exploration of the medical and theological context behind the belief in the transmission of ill-health, before concluding with an examination of how such motifs were utilised for didactic effect in the creation of Geoffrey’s *Vita*. [Removed sentence; word count reduced to 149 words]

Keywords: pestilence; disease; hagiography; ghosts; death; Geoffrey of Burton; Roger the Poitevin

Introduction: sin and disease

It perhaps goes without saying that the relationship between physical and metaphysical health is one of the underlying tenets of Christian thought, one that stretches back to the very foundations of the Church. Ill health was said to have emerged as a consequence of Original Sin; a manifestation of mankind's distance from the wholeness and stability of God. Death and disease, which did not exist in paradise, were the direct result of Adam's disobedience. Indeed, the interconnection between spiritual transgression and sickness is one of the most commonly used metaphors in Scripture. Christ's proclamation that 'those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mark 2:17) is a sentiment repeated and developed throughout the gospels and apostolic texts.¹ Building upon the scriptural authority of Christ as a physician of the soul, medieval exegetes well understood the utility of disease metaphors in warning against sinful action. Augustine often augmented his base definition of sin – 'any transgression in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law'² – with reference to the equivalences that existed between physical and metaphysical healing. Such a relationship is clearly and unequivocally expressed in *De doctrina Christiana* (c.397): 'the way to health is through medical care; God's care has taken it upon itself to heal and restore sinners by the same methods.'³ Thus, bodily digression was often taken as a signifier of the sufferers' spiritual corruption, with the physical symptoms of disease reflecting the impure spiritual state of the afflicted and/or the sins of society in

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¹ The following abbreviations are used in this article: BL: London, British Library; *Modwenna*: Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, ed. and trans. Robert Bartlett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002); PL: Patrologiae cursus completus series Latinae. All English quotes from the Bible are taken from New International Version, while all Latin quotes are taken from the Vulgate.

'Non necesse habent sani medico, sed qui male habent: non enim veni vocare justos, sed peccatores.' See also Mark 2:5, Mark 5:34, 3 John 1:2 for further gospel allusion to Christ-as-physician.

² Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum libri triginta tres*, in *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponis episcopi, Opera omnia*, vol. 8, J.-P. Migne. PL 42 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1841), col. 418 (22.27): 'Ergo peccatum est, factum vel dictum vel concupitum aliquid contra aeternam legem'; trans. Rev. Richard Stothert, in *Writings in Connection with the Manichaean Heresy* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1872), 424.

³ Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 24 (1.13.27): 'Sicut autem curatio via est ad sanitatem, sic ista curatio peccatores sanandos reficiendosque suscepit.'

general. By virtue of biblical precedents (e.g. Leviticus 13:45; II Kings 15:5), leprosy was viewed as the archetypical moralistic disease by the early exegetical writers.⁴ Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* (c.578–95) comments on the similarities between lepers and heretics, with the blotchiness of leprous skin reflecting the heretical propensity to merge the corrupt with the pure.⁵ Ultimately, spiritual corruption was seen as a type of moral imbalance, one that spread to others through the percipient's own eagerness to be infected. 'Imbalance' is the operative word here. As Augustine and Gregory have shown, weighty theological matters were often articulated through base medical – i.e., Hippocratic – frameworks.⁶ The idea of balance was just as important to the material doctor as the spiritual doctor. For physicians, the maintenance of the body's humoral equilibrium was seen as the key to preserving physical health.⁷ This state of equilibrium allowed the body, or body parts, to function in a way which best suited their nature. For instance, it was 'natural' for the stomach to digest food and for the heart to pump the vital spirits around the body. It was generally believed that poor personal regimen and 'unnatural' behaviour caused a breakdown of bodily order and allowed disease and illness to flourish. As noted by Susan R. Kramer, 'the contaminating effect of sin requires the complicity of the contaminated ... protecting health and bodily harmony was conceived as a moral responsibility.'⁸ Put simply, it was believed that disease could only have

⁴ S.N. Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁵ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 5.11.28, cited from Susan R. Kramer, 'Understanding Contagion: The Contaminating Effects of Another's Sin', in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, eds. Rachel Fulton and Bruce W. Holsinger (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 145–57 (148).

⁶ Indeed, Gregory the Great's letter to Marianus (Epistle 11.20, c.601) displays a working knowledge of the aetiology and language of disease, writing from his sickbed that he is being 'drunk up' by the infection of a noxious humour (*infectio noxii humoris imbibit*). See L.M. Hartmann, ed., *Gregorii I papae Registrum epistolarum*, vol. 2, pt.2: *Libri VIII-XIV*. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1899), 281.

⁷ Much work has been conducted on medieval medical theory and it need not be discussed in detail here. See, in the first instance, Mirko Grmek, *Western Medical Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), especially 241–58. See also the exploratory essays in Lawrence I. Conrad, ed., *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC–AD 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸ For an overview of these arguments, see Kramer, 'Understanding Contagion', 154 and 156.

an effect on someone if their body and soul were already predisposed to excess, disorder and corruption.

External factors could also have a negative impact on a person's health. The belief in the influence of the six non-natural things (air, food and drink, exercise, sleeping and waking, excretions, and the passions of the mind) on the maintenance of one's moral and physical well-being entered into the West through Constantine the African's late eleventh-century translations of Ali Habbas's *Pantegni* and Hunayn ibn Ishaq's *Isagoge*. These works – the former, a detailed compendium of classical medical theory; the latter, a more concise introductory text – helped to reintroduce the base tenets of Galenic humourism back into Latin Europe.⁹ Pestilential air was one of the most feared non-natural causes of ill health. Poor air quality could lead to humoral imbalance if the vapours were particularly pestilent and/or the subject's complexion (that is, the mixture of primary qualities that determined one's predisposition towards certain imbalances) made them prone to certain types of illness. Not only did immoderate behaviour exacerbate such dangers, it may even have been the cause of a pestilence's emergence; a form of punishment wrought by the divine. Belief in the punitive function of disease proliferated widely in the works of early medieval authors, to the extent it became a rhetorical commonplace. Isidore of Seville, for instance, asserts in the *Etymologies* (c.615) that while plagues (*pestilentia*) often took hold due to 'corrupted air and airborne potencies' (*corrupto aere ... aerias potestates*), deadly disease could not proliferate without the authority of God.¹⁰ In the *De natura rerum* (c.612–15), a short treatise devoted to

⁹ For the writings of Galen (d. 217 CE), see the collection of essays by Luis García-Bellester in *Galen and Galenism: Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, ed. Jon Arrizabalaga and others. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

¹⁰ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum libri XX*, in *Sancti Isidori Hispalensis episcopi, Opera omnia*, vol. 3 and 4, ed. J.-P. Migne. PL 82 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1850), col. 187 (4.6.18); trans. Stephen A. Barney and others, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100. All future references to the *Etymologies* will be taken from these texts.

the natural sciences, Isidore restates the belief that airborne pestilences were ultimately caused by the sins of mankind (*peccatis hominum*).¹¹

Breathing, of course, was a major mechanism by which pestilential air could be transmitted. In traditional Augustinian theory, the creation of speech acts involved the transformation of inner, abstract ideas into perceptible utterances through the process of exhalation. The assertions made by Augustine in the *De magistro* (c.389) that ‘anyone who speaks gives an external sign of his will by means of an articulated sounds’ refers specifically to the mechanics of expelling and modulating air to create a ‘rational’ sound different from the irrational bleating of animals.¹² To paraphrase Augustine’s additional discussions on language in *De doctrina Christiana* and *De dialectica* (c.386): if speech was a sign of inner intention, the main vehicle by which ideas could be transmitted and understood in a post-lapsarian world, then it could also be a means for disseminating sinful and destructive thoughts.¹³ The idea of the mouth as a type of manageable boundary between the inner and outer worlds is also obliquely mentioned by Isidore, who notes that the mouth (*os*) is a door (*ostium*), from which ‘food goes in and words go out’.¹⁴ With language developing as a consequence of Original Sin, the aperture of the mouth, conceptualised as a gateway between the inner and outer worlds, needed to be carefully managed lest it be used to spread further

¹¹ Isidore of Seville, *De natura rerum*, in *Isidori Hispalensis De natvra rerum liber*, ed Gustav Becker (Berlin: Weimann, 1857), 67–8 (39.1–2). Alongside the usual explanation of the imbalance of the elements, Isidore also makes reference to the ‘seed’ theory of disease, with the air said to carry extraneous ‘plague-bearing seeds of things’ (*pestifera semina rerum*) that could be inhaled or absorbed into the body. For an overview of seed theory, see Vivian Nutton, ‘The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance’, *Medical History* 27 (1983): 1–34.

¹² Augustine, *De magistro liber unus*, in *Sancti Aurelii Augustini, Hipponiensis episcopi, Opera omnia*, vol. 1, ed. J.-P. Migne. PL 32 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1841), col. 1195 (1.2): ‘Qui enim loquitur suae voluntatis signum foras dat per articulatam sonum’; trans. Peter King, in Augustine, *Against the Academicians and The Teacher* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), 95, n. 6.

¹³ For the theory of language, see Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. Green, 59 (2.5.6); and Augustine, *De dialectica*, ed. Jan Pinborg and trans. B. Darrell Jackson (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1975), 86–7 (5). For scholarship on Augustine’s theories of speech acts and verbal signs, see Clifford Ando, ‘Augustine on Language’, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 40 (1994): 45–78; and Andrew Louth, ‘Augustine on Language’, *Literature and Theology* 3 (1989): 151–8.

¹⁴ Isidore, *Etymologiarum libri XX*, PL 82, col. 403 (11.1.49): ‘quia inde ingrediuntur cibi, inde egrediuntur sermones’; trans. Barney and others, 234.

disharmony. This was a common conceit amongst Patristic and early medieval writers and was the ultimate rationale for enforcing the monastic moderation of speech. Chapter 6 of the *Regula Sancti Benedicti* (c.516), the famed rule of monastic living composed by Benedict of Nursia, quotes Psalm 38 in support of the regulation of the mouth to mitigate the sin of ‘idle words’ (*verba otiose*):

I [David] said, ‘I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue. I have set a guard to my mouth.’ I was mute and was humbled, and kept silence even from good things.¹⁵

Building upon such precepts, the Benedictine reformer Odo of Cluny (d. 942) advocated silence as a moral ideal, a type of angelic discipline, in direct contrast to the fallen language of the secular, everyday world. Odo’s biographer John of Salerno elaborated upon the abbot’s views about the moral purity of silence by stressing the spiritual barrenness that accompanied an unregulated tongue.¹⁶ Slander, the sewing of discord between brethren, was considered especially harmful by early monastic writers; a form of malign, destructive speech that directly contravened the strictures of Matthew 22:39 to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (*Diliges proximum tuum, sicut teipsum*).

By the turn of the twelfth century the employment of metaphors of infection to denounce heretical and disharmonious speech acts was well established in the critical habitus of Church writers. Disease rhetoric became a useful shorthand to denounce the social imbalance caused by wicked tongues. William of Newburgh (d. 1198) is especially strident in his use of the terms *pestis* (pestilence) and *virus* (poison) to criticise the spread of Catharism

¹⁵ *Regula Benedicti*, in *La règle de saint Benoît*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé. Sources chrétiennes 181–7. 7 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1971–2), 1: 470 (6): ‘Dixi: custodiam vias meas, ut non delinquam in lingua mea. Posui ori meo custodiam, obmutui et humiliatus sum et silui a bonis’; trans. Leonard J. Doyle, *St. Benedict’s Rule for Monasteries* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1948), 20.

¹⁶ As discussed in Scott G. Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition (c. 900–1200)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20. See also Scott G. Bruce, ‘The Tongue is Fire: The Discipline of Silence in Early Medieval Monasticism’, in *Hands of the Tongue: Essays in Deviant Speech*, ed. Edwin D. Craun (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 3–32.

and Islam. He uses similar terminologies to denounce the instigator of the 1196 London peasant uprising, William FitzObsert, who was said to speak like a serpent and cloud the minds of his audience through eloquent, poisoned whispers (*loqueretur ut draco ... venenatis susurriis*).¹⁷ Much like medical metaphors in general, the *contaminating* nature of deviant speech also had scriptural precedents. Paul's Epistle to Timothy on the dangers of false sermonising – 'the teaching will spread like gangrene' (*et sermo eorum ut cancer serpit*) (2 Timothy 2:17) – illustrates nicely the insidious and destructive nature of verbal sin. Similar sentiments are expressed in James 3:6, with the unregulated tongue conceptualised as a 'world of evil' (*universitas iniquitatis*) that had the ability to 'corrupt the whole body' (*maculat totum corpus*). Around the year 1200 – the upper boundary of this current investigation – theologians such as Radulfus Ardens (c.1200) and Alan of Lille (d. 1202) had begun to analyse the contaminating effects of evil speech (*mala locutio*) in a much more concerted, systematic manner. Working within the scholastic imperative to codify and categorise, later writers such as William Peraldus (c.1250) and John of Wales (c.1295) began to view the misuse of language as a species of sin itself, one that was especially dangerous to mankind's spiritual well-being. Whether delivered in Latin (*Fascisculus morum*, c.1300) or the vernacular (John Mirk's *Festial*, c.1380s), sermons on the damaging effects of the 'sins of the tongue' were a central feature of late medieval pastoral teaching.¹⁸

The cross-cultural fear of the pestilential undead is well established in both the written and archaeological record and can be discerned across a wide variety of contexts, from Ancient Greece to eighteenth-century Serbia. It is something that is especially apparent in

¹⁷ See R.I. Moore, 'Heresy as Disease', in *The Concept of Heresy in the Middle Ages (11th–13th c.)*: *Proceedings of the International Conference, Louvain, May 13–16, 1973*, eds. W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1976), 1–11; and Stephen Gordon, 'Social Monsters and the Walking Dead in William of Newburgh's *Historia rerum Anglicarum*', *Journal of Medieval History* 41 (2015): 446–65 (459).

¹⁸ Gabriella I. Baika, *The Rose and Geryon: The Poetics of Fraud and Violence in Jean de Meun and Dante* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014). See also Edwin D. Craun, 'Aristotle's Biology and Pastoral Ethics: John of Wales's *De Lingua* and British Pastoral Writing on the Tongue', *Traditio* 67 (2012): 277–303; and Sandra Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

Anglo-Latin texts from the high Middle Ages. From William of Malmesbury's *Gesta regum Anglorum* (c.1125) to William Newburgh's *Historia rerum Anglicarum* (c.1198), the rhetoric of infection was often used in supernatural narratives to comment upon the destruction wrought by deviant behaviour. The *topos* of the disease-spreading corpse was utilised by William of Newburgh to stress the similarities between the ontological transgressions of the undead and secular (and Church) leaders who also wilfully transgressed social-spiritual boundaries.¹⁹ The tale of two peasants from the Staffordshire village of Stapenhill who, around the year 1090, returned from the dead to wreak havoc upon the nearby settlement of Drakelow is another story that makes use of the rhetoric of disease. Recorded in Geoffrey of Burton's *Vita sancte Moduene virginis* (c.1118–35), the events at Drakelow formed part of a wider selection of *miracula* designed to advertise the efficacy of Modwenna's cult at the Benedictine Abbey of Burton-upon-Trent. Folklore surrounding the Drakelow revenants seems to have circulated amongst the local Staffordshire population well into the sixteenth century. The author of the *Historia fundatoris et abbatum* (c.1502) notes that the popular saying 'The Devil of Drakelow' emerged directly from this episode ('unde processit illud vulgare dictum, The Devill of Drakelow').²⁰ Although academic interest in this tale has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, due mainly to Robert Bartlett's scholarly edition of Geoffrey's text, scant research has been conducted on the aetiology of the disease that overran Drakelow following the peasants' return. Specifically, little has been said about the narratological importance of the revenants' vocal performance and their implorations to the

¹⁹ Stephen Gordon, *Supernatural Encounters: Demons and the Restless Dead in Medieval England, 1050–1450* (London: Routledge, 2020). See also idem, 'Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages', in *Dealing with the Dead: Mortality and Community in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thea Tomaini (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 97–128.

²⁰ Stafford, Staffordshire Record Office D603/ADD/X/2. Archived under the title 'A List of the Several Abbots of Burton upon Trent', the text operates as an overview of the deeds of the various abbots of Burton up to the year 1502, with the names of the final two abbots (William Benson and William Edys) added in a later hand c.1533. The text, along with other documents relating to the history of Burton Abbey, is transcribed in William Dugdale's monumental *Monasticon Anglicanum* (c. 1655–73), in William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 6 vols. in 8 (London: Bohn, 1846), 3: 32–51 (47). For an early explication of the 'Devill of Drakelow' extract in Dugdale, see Revd. Charles Kerry, 'S. Modwen and the Devill of Drakelow', *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal* 17 (1895): 49–59.

Drakelow villagers to follow them into death (*Agite, agite et uenite!*).²¹ Nor, indeed, has a true rationale been given for the inclusion of a revenant story within what is essentially an economic dispute between Burton Abbey (landowners at Stapenhill) and Roger the Poitevin (the secular landowner of Drakelow). Building upon Kramer's thesis that 'a community is polluted either by imitating a sinner's bad example or by failing in its duty to expel the sinner who has permeated its boundaries and violated its mores', this article argues that the dangerous, pestilential speech exhibited by the dead peasants can be read as an ironic reflection of their decision to transgress the natural order of things by leaving the protection of Burton Abbey and entering the service of Roger, for whom they sowed further (pointedly verbal) discord against their former masters.²² The wonders in this tale are thus employed in their traditional role as signifiers of inner truth.

Geoffrey of Burton and the *Vita sancte Moduennae virginis*

According to legend, the first religious institutions at Burton were founded by the sixth-century Irish saint Modwenna, who built two churches in the Trent area – including one on the island of Andressey – before returning to her native Ireland. Dying in Scotland, her body was brought back for burial in Andressey's church.²³ The *Annals of Burton* (c.1200s) date the 'second' foundation at Burton to 1004, where the Mercian nobleman Wulfric Spot provided a substantial endowment for the building of a Benedictine monastery dedicated to both St Mary and St Modwenna.²⁴ Sometime after 1008, the bones of Modwenna were disinterred from

²¹ *Modwenna*, 196–7.

²² Kramer, 'Understanding Contagion', 157.

²³ G.C. Baugh and others, 'Houses of Benedictine Monks: The Abbey of Burton', in *The Victoria Histories of the Counties of England: A History of the County of Stafford*: vol. 3, eds. M.W. Greenslade and R.B. Pugh (London: Victoria County History, 1970), 199–213.

²⁴ The annals can be found in the miscellany, BL, MS Cotton Vespasian E III. See *Annales de Burton*, in *Annales monastici*, ed. H.R. Luard. Rolls Series 36. 5 vols. (London: Longman, 1864–9), 1: 183; and Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 3: 33.

Andressey and laid to rest in new monastic building, around which formed a shrine.²⁵ Prior to the election of Geoffrey of Burton in 1114,²⁶ the office of abbot had been held by six different people, including Geoffrey Malaterra (r. 1185–94), whose feud with Roger the Poitevin led to the curious events at Drakelow.²⁷ The monastic community at Burton was never large, averaging about 20 monks throughout its lifetime, although by 1175 it had amassed a library comprising around 78 books.²⁸ Amongst the core theological works by such authors as Augustine (nos. 4–12), Gregory the Great (nos. 18–23), John Cassian (no. 29), Hugh of St Victor (nos. 13–14, 25, 34) and Anselm of Canterbury (nos. 43–4), the library was also furnished with Bedan histories and commentaries (nos. 26–8), books on prognostication (no. 33) and a number of texts written in English (nos. 71–7). Saints' lives are particularly well represented and can be found in at least 14 manuscripts. Three of the manuscripts (nos. 3, 38, 39) comprise *vitae* of St Modwenna. As noted by Robert Bartlett, the main source for Geoffrey's text was likely Conchubranus's *Vita Sanctae Monennae*, the sole extant copy of which was actually produced at Burton (London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra A II, c.1100–20). The linguistic evidence suggests that Conchubranus's text was

²⁵ The shrine was actually despoiled by the third abbot, Leofric (1051–66), ostensibly to use the proceeds to feed the poor, and was subsequently rebuilt by Geoffrey of Burton as part of his drive to reinvigorate Modwenna's cult in the early twelfth century. See 'Burton-upon-Trent: Established Church', in *The Victoria Histories of the Counties of England: A History of the County of Stafford*: vol. 9, *Burton-Upon-Trent*, ed. Nigel J Tringham (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2003), 107–30. For the episode of the shrine's despoilment, see *Modwenna*, 181–3.

²⁶ Geoffrey's religious career is difficult to trace with any certainty. According to the *Annals of Winchester* he became prior of St Swithun's Cathedral, Winchester, in 1107. He seems to have been deposed in 1111, although no explanation is given. The *Annals of Burton* record Geoffrey's election to abbot in 1114 on the death of the previous incumbent, Nigel (1094–1114). See *Annales monasterii de Wintonia*, in *Annales monastici*, ed. Luard, 2: 43; and *Annales de Burton*, in *Annales monastici*, ed. Luard, 1: 186.

²⁷ As noted by Dugdale, Geoffrey Malaterra was deposed in 1094 due to gross mismanagement of the abbey's estates: 'He was deposed in 1094, in the seventh year of William Rufus, for wastefulness and mismanagement in the concerns of the monastery.' See Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 3: 34.

²⁸ The Burton library catalogue was copied on a blank leaf at the end of BL, Add. MS 23944, a ninth-century miscellany containing Augustine's *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* and *Contra Julianum* (itself number 11 on the inventory). The *terminus post quem* of 1175 is determined by the presence of *Sex libros sententiarum* of Abbot Bernard of Burton (d. 1174) amongst the holdings (no. 58). See Henri Omont, 'Anciens catalogues de bibliothèques anglaises (XII–XIV siècle)', *Centralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* 9 (1892): 201–22 (201–2). The inventory numbers are taken from Omont's transcription of the catalogue.

originally composed in the early eleventh century.²⁹ Thus, the very old book (*Item aliam antiquissimam*) mentioned in catalogue entry 39 could either be the Burton copy or the original codex Geoffrey says he acquired from a contact in Ireland.³⁰

In any case, shortly after accepting his new post Geoffrey became smitten with the Modwenna legend, noting in the Preface to the *Vita* that he ‘had a burning desire to find out something certain about the homeland, family, life and virtues of the most holy virgin Modwenna’.³¹ Alongside such tasks as correcting the ‘barbarous language’ (*lingua barbara*) of his exemplar and putting more emphasis on Modwenna’s activities at Burton, Geoffrey’s main innovation was to include a series of contemporary post-mortem miracles at the end of the text.³² One of the main functions of hagiographies was to advertise the efficacy of the local saint and promote the viability of their cult. Whether to heal the sick, give aid to those in distress, or punish an inveterate sinner, miracles were a manifest demonstration of divine power. Devotion to the saint led to reward and transgression led to ruin. The didactic quality of hagiography extended to everyday conduct, with the manner of the saint’s life and death often used as a teaching aid to inspire good practice amongst the local community. Although Bede states in the preface to the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (nos. 27 and 74 in the Burton library) that the deeds of ‘good men’ could be used as a model for imitation, Augustine stresses that the more extreme behaviour exhibited by holy men and women should only be ‘wondered at’ and parsed for moral and spiritual meaning rather than physically copied.³³ As any good hagiographer knew, the more palatable the miracle story to

²⁹ M. Esposito, ‘The Sources of Conchubranus’ Life of St Monenna’, *English Historical Review* 35 (1920): 71–8 (72).

³⁰ Bartlett, ‘Introduction’, in *Modwenna*, xiv.

³¹ *Modwenna*, 2–3: ‘Diu desideraueram estuans animo reperire aliquid certum de Patria, de gener, de uita de uirtutibus, sacratissime uirginis Moduene.’

³² Jocelyn Price, ‘La vie Sainte Modwenne: A Neglected Anglo-Norman Hagiographic Text and Some Implications for English Secular Literature’, *Medium Ævum* 57 (1988): 172–89 (173).

³³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, vol. 1, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1896), 5 (preface): ‘Siue enim historia de bonis bona referat, ad imitandum bonum auditor sollicitus instigator’; and Augustine, *Sermones*, in *Sancti Aurelii Augustini, Hipponensis episcopi, Opera omnia*, vol. 5, ed. J.-P. Migne. PL 38 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1865), col. 1281 (Sermo CCLXXX: In natali martyrum Perpetuae et Felicitatis):

the circumstances of the audience, the better its message could be taken aboard. Thus, miracles that had a local flavour and whose truth could be substantiated by reliable eyewitness accounts demonstrated the power of the cult in a much more immediate manner than those whose impact was mitigated by temporal and geographical distance.³⁴ Geoffrey certainly understood the potency of locally sourced miracle stories, acknowledging that whilst a large number of miracles attested to Modwenna were now lost to time, he was nonetheless able to collate a selection of some of her more recent intercessions through first and second-hand oral testimony.³⁵

Although miracles technically referred to the *non-natural* intervention of God in the mortal world, and ‘wonders’ to events that *appeared* contrary to nature but nonetheless worked within it, the distinctions could be somewhat blurred. Hence Geoffrey’s rubric that the Drakelow *exemplum* was a wonderful example of (divine) vengeance (*mirande contigit ultionus exemplum*). Only later did the differences between natural wonder and supernatural miracle become more defined, with writers such as Gervase of Tilbury (d. 1228) making precise ontological distinctions between the two.³⁶ Even so, chroniclers and hagiographers were well aware that the ontological ambiguity of wonders made them perfect vehicles for commenting upon imbalances in the body politic. Augustine’s digression on marvels – that ‘monsters’, ‘portents’ and ‘prodigies’ were so called because they signified *something other* than their apparent form – is the benchmark definition that was readily applied by later

‘Quid enim gloriosius his feminis, quas viri mirantur facilius, quam imitantur?’ (‘What, then, is more glorious that these women [Perpetua and Felicity] who are more easily wondered at than imitated by men?’).

³⁴ Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 22–5.

³⁵ Cited in Bartlett, ‘Introduction’, in *Modwenna*, xxvi.

³⁶ *Modwenna*, 190. Writing at the turn of the thirteenth century (c.1210–14), Gervase of Tilbury notes quite explicitly that miracles (*miracula*) are wrought through the power of the divine, whereas marvels (*mirabilia*) are natural phenomena, albeit things and events that are beyond human comprehension. For the full definition given by Gervase, see Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia*, eds. and trans. S.E. Banks and J.W. Binns (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 558–9 (preface to Book 3). For the blurred distinction between wonders and miracles before the rise of scholasticism, see Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘Wonder’, *American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 1–26 (8).

authors.³⁷ Simply put, the more contrary to the workings of nature the *mirabilia* appeared, the more egregious the transgression it represented. Accounts of the restless dead may have been used sporadically, but their very scarcity was crucial to their impact as the most divergent of wonderous creatures. When pestilential (usually demonically activated) corpses appeared, it must have been for a particularly damning reason. Whether Geoffrey recorded his oral source verbatim or used the rhetorical tools at his disposal to construct a gloss for an attested plague that had no previous moral meaning, the fact remains that the sins of Stapenhill peasants and, by proxy, Roger the Poitevin, were egregious enough in Geoffrey's eyes to warrant the most horrifying of divine punishments.

The revenants of Drakelow: context

The events at Drakelow appear in Chapter 47 of Geoffrey's *Vita*, prefaced by a brief account of the punishment meted out to a royal official, Ælfwine of Hopwas. A longstanding enemy of Burton Abbey, Ælfwine was compelled to gouge out his own eye whilst boasting about the 'wicked deeds' (*gloriaretur ... malorum operum*) he enacted against Burton's monks. Living the rest of his life with only one eye, Ælfwine learnt to his cost that 'it is not good to do evil to the monastery of the servants of God.'³⁸ Modwenna's implacability towards her enemies – especially slanderous enemies – is made all too clear. Indeed, this is a structuring principle that informs the longer narrative to follow. If a single, scurrilous evildoer (*homine malefactore*) suffered mutilation, then the reader is left to ruminate on what manner of vengeance befell those who performed even greater iniquities against Modwenna's cult.

³⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, ed. A. Kalb. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 48 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1965), 773 (XXI.8). For the use of wonders in such a way, see Monika Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century English Historical Writing* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 102–3.

³⁸ *Modwenna*, 192: 'Cenobio seruorum Dei mala ingerere non esse bonum.'

It is with this question in mind that Geoffrey begins his tale. In brief, two peasants from the village of Stapenhill, under the jurisdiction of Burton Abbey, fled to the neighbouring village of Drakelow, foreswearing their allegiance to the monks and desiring to live under the authority of the local secular lord, Roger the Poitevin. In response, the abbot, Geoffrey Malaterra, seized the peasants' crops and stored them in his own barns at Stapenhill. Provoked into further action by the two peasants and riled up by their 'wicked speech' (*pessime loquentes*), Roger gathered a group of armed men and seized the monks' barns, razing the abbey's fields at nearby Blackpool for good measure. Roger also encouraged his men to goad Geoffrey's personal retinue of 10 knights into combat. Despairing at the situation, the monks entered Modwenna's shrine barefoot and appealed to God for help. The response was swift and immediate. As the monks were praying, Geoffrey's knights entered into the field of battle where 'through the merit of the virgin and the power of God' (*merito uirginis et Dei virtute*) they triumphed against Roger's men, going against the abbot's earlier command not to engage due to a lack of numbers.³⁹ That was not the end of God's vengeance. The next day, the two peasants who had started the whole affair were struck down dead and buried in the graveyard at Stapenhill. But the grave did not keep them at rest for long. That very evening the peasants reappeared at Drakelow, carrying their coffins on their backs as they walked through the fields and village streets. Appearing in the form of bears (*ursorum*) and dogs (*canum*) as well as men (*speciem hominum*), they knocked on the walls of the houses and called on those inside to follow them into death ('Promouete, citius promouete! Agite, agite et uenite!'). This occurred over a number of nights, after which a pestilence engulfed the village and killed all but three of the inhabitants.

Horried by what was happening, Roger and his retinue travelled to the abbey to beg the monks for forgiveness. Roger ordered the village reeve Drogo, one of the three Drakelow

³⁹ *Modwenna*, 194–5.

residents yet to succumb to illness, to repay the brethren double the costs he had inflicted upon them, after which both he and Drogo fled to escape the deadly plague. With the two remaining peasants also falling ill and the revenants' appearances showing no sign of abating, permission was given by the bishop to exhume the offending corpses. Found with their funerary shrouds covered in blood, the bodies were decapitated, their hearts removed and their heads placed between their legs.⁴⁰ The bodies were reburied, whilst the hearts were taken to a place called *Dodefreseford* to be summarily cremated. It was here, with a great cracking sound, that 'everyone saw an evil spirit in the form of a crow fly from the flames.'⁴¹ Almost immediately the plague dissipated, and the sighting of the dead peasants ceased. Fully recovered, the remaining Drakelow residents packed up their belongings and moved to the nearby village of Gresley. Geoffrey concludes with a warning that no one dared resettle Drakelow for fear of 'the vengeance of the Lord that had struck there, and wondering at the prodigies that God omnipotent had worked through the holy virgin'.⁴²

There is a lot to unpack from this narrative. Firstly, it is difficult to determine whether the peasants were conceptualised as having physically risen from the grave or if their appearance was the result of a diabolical illusion. Although the peasants were said to have walked through the village (*deambulantes*) and physically rapped on walls (*percucientes parietes domorum*), Geoffrey also uses the descriptors *phantasia* and *species hominum*, playing into the interpretation that they were airy (if tangible) projections. Whereas later theologians such as Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) stressed the immateriality of demons, and that any tangible form assumed from the elements was only temporary,⁴³ traditional Augustinian

⁴⁰ *Modwenna*, 196–7: 'Pannis tamen lineis super ora deformissime cruentatis'.

⁴¹ *Modwenna*, 196–7: 'Confestim malignum spiritum tanquam coruum uolantem de ignibus uniuersi qui aderant uisibiliter conspexerunt.' Judging by the use of the singular *malignum spiritum*, the sixteenth-century nomenclature 'Devill of Drakelow' likely refers to this evil spirit rather than the two dead peasants.

⁴² *Modwenna*, 198–9: 'Metuentes uindictam Domini que tam mire ibi contigerat et prodigia reuendo mirantes qui omnipotens per sanctum uirginem operabatur.'

⁴³ Gordon, *Supernatural Encounters*, 11 and 169.

theory states that demonic bodies were actually constructed from the coarser ‘lower’ air, having lost their purer bodies at the Fall.⁴⁴ The reference to shape-shifting further suggests that the Drakelow revenants may not have been revived corpses per se, but the condensed airy forms of demonic simulacra. Either way, the emergence of the *malignum spiritum* on the pyre confirms that the demonic infiltration of the body, a common conceit in revenant stories, was at least some way involved. The presentation of the mobilising agent as an evil spirit can be read in a similar wonder story from the *De miraculis sancti Edmundi* (c.1090), detailing the death and posthumous return of the hated local sheriff, Leofstan.⁴⁵ The telling allusion in Goscelin of Saint-Bertin’s revision of the *De miraculis* (c.1100), that some believed the corpse walked under its own volition (*ipse protestans inquietudinem*), muddies the waters where the agency of the undead is concerned.⁴⁶ It suggests an interpretive disconnect between authors schooled in traditional Augustinian theology and local populations who believed in the persistent vitality of the deceased.⁴⁷

Regardless of whether revenants were mobilised by the Devil or the souls of the dead, the act of decapitating a presumable troublesome corpse and placing its head between its legs is an archaeologically (and historically) identifiable practice that attests to the professed oral origins of Geoffrey’s tale. It is a form of corpse management that can be discerned across a wide geographical and chronological spectrum, from fifth-century England to sixteenth-

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, ed. Kalb, 776 (XXI.10): ‘Nisi quia sunt quaedam sua etiam daemonibus corpora, sicut doctis hominibus uisum est, ex isto aere crasso atque umido, cuius impulsus uento flante sentitur’ (‘Unless devils have a kind of body made of that dense and humid air which we feel strikes us when the wind is blowing’).

⁴⁵ Herman the Archdeacon and Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *Miracles of St Edmund*, eds. and trans. Tom Licence with Lynda Lockyer (Oxford: Clarendon, 2014), 12–13 (3).

⁴⁶ Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *Miracles of St Edmund*, eds. Licence and Lockyer, 144–5 (3)

⁴⁷ William of Malmesbury records similar contrasting viewpoints in his account of the death of King Alfred in the *Gesta regum Anglorum*: R.A.B. Mynors, R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, eds. and trans., *William of Malmesbury, Gesta regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 196–7 (2.124): ‘Mox pro deliramento canonicorum, dicentium regios manes resumpto cadauere noctibus per domos oberrare ... Has sane nenias sicut ceteras, ut credant nequam hominis cadauer post mortem demone agente discurrere, Angli pene innata credulitate tenant.’

century Poland.⁴⁸ The osteological evidence is unable to prove for certain whether hearts were ever removed post-mortem, but it is something that can definitely be discerned in the wider written record. The ‘Ghost of Anantis’ episode from William of Newburgh’s *Historia rerum Anglicarum* and the ‘shoemaker of Breslau’ narrative from Martin Weinrich’s preface to the 1612 edition of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola’s *Strix* (1523) each note that the removal of the heart was the only way to successfully cremate a pestilential corpse.⁴⁹ Indeed, one of the actors in William of Newburgh’s story unequivocally states that the pestilential body would not burn unless its heart was torn out.⁵⁰ Since the heart was involved in the production of vital spirits through the admixture of blood and air drawn from the lungs, the destruction of the organ that was responsible for the physical maintenance of the body was, from a folk-humoural standpoint, entirely rational.⁵¹ A heart corrupted by the Devil produced corrupted vital spirits, thus acting as an incubator for corrupting exhalations. As the source of mechanical life, the heart was seen as the locus of the corpse’s resistance to decay – its restlessness – and needed to be dealt with accordingly. The eviction of the ‘Devil’, the root cause of the heart’s continued and wondrous vitality, was the ultimate apotropaic goal. Whereas in William of Newburgh’s Anantis narrative the revenant body was thrown onto the pyre and the heart rendered powerless through extraction and being subsequently torn to pieces, the method is inverted slightly in the Drakelow episode: the hearts are cremated

⁴⁸ See the discussion of the archaeological evidence for the decapitation of corpses in Gordon, ‘Dealing with the Undead’, 106–7.

⁴⁹ According to Weinrich, the situation with the restless shoemaker took place in 1591–2. See Martin Weinrich, ‘Proaemium’, in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Strix* (Strasbourg: Paul Ledertz, 1612 [1523]), 1–60. The Breslau episode is discussed in detail in Stephen Gordon, ‘Emotional Practice and Bodily Performance in Early Modern Vampire Literature’, *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 6 (2017): 93–124.

⁵⁰ William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Howlett. Rolls Series 82 (London: Longman & Co., 1885), 482 (5.24): ‘cadaver pestiferum ardere non posse nisi corde extracto’. For the English translation, see Scott G. Bruce, *The Penguin Book of the Undead: Fifteen Hundred Years of Supernatural Encounters* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 129–36 (136).

⁵¹ James M. Bono, ‘Medical Spirits and the Medieval Language of Life’, *Traditio* 40 (1984): 91–130.

whilst the cadavers were cut in two.⁵² The impetus to dispel residual life energy remained the same in each.

Whilst these are certainly important issues, one aspect of the Geoffrey's *exemplum* that has often been overlooked is the symbolic connection of the plague to the wider narrative. Out of all the punishments that could have been meted out to Roger, why a revenant-inspired epidemic? If, as hypothesised, the diseased, portentous speech of the peasants allegorises the destructive actions they took in life, then to understand the tale's narrative logic we must first explore the underlying tensions that existed between Burton Abbey and Roger the Poitevin. Social historians have read the tale as a paradigmatic example of the type of low-level violence that occurred when property complaints between local landowners were unable to be settled in court.⁵³ According to the Domesday Book, Burton Abbey's holdings at Stapenhill (then located in Derbyshire) included 12 households, four carucates and two bovates of taxable land, with an overall value of £3. The second landowner at Stapenhill, the feudal Lord Nigel de Stafford (d. 1100), controlled seven households (four villagers, three smallholders) and six bovates of taxable land, valued at 10s.⁵⁴ Drakelow, which at this time was under the sole the control of Nigel, housed six villagers and had an overall value of £2.⁵⁵ In 1088, Roger the Poitevin was granted lordship of Drakelow by William Rufus, providing a rough *terminus ante quem* for the miracle story.⁵⁶ The third son of one of William of the Conqueror's chief advisers, Roger de Montgomery (d. 1094), Roger – the son – acquired his surname through marriage to Almodis, daughter of Count Aldebert II of La Marche, Poitou, sometime in the early 1080s. According to the Domesday Book, Roger

⁵² William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, ed. Howlett, 2: 482 (5.24).

⁵³ David Crouch, *The English Aristocracy, 1070–1272: A Social Transformation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 100–1; and John Hudson, 'Maitland and Anglo-Norman Law', *Proceedings on the British Academy* 89 (1996): 21–46.

⁵⁴ John Morris, ed. and trans., *Domesday Book*, vol. 24: *Staffordshire* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1976).

⁵⁵ Philip Morgan, ed., Sara Wood, trans., *Domesday Book*, vol. 27: *Derbyshire* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1978).

⁵⁶ Crouch, *English Aristocracy*, 100. The narrative does not specify whether Roger also gained control of Nigel's holdings in Stapenhill.

the Poitevin held vast swathes of land in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, and Suffolk, but in some of the entries for Norfolk, Derbyshire and Lancashire the past tense *habebat* or *tenuit* was used, with marginal notes stating that these estates had since returned to the Crown.⁵⁷ Whatever the reason for the loss of land under the Conqueror – dereliction of martial duty is one hypothesis⁵⁸ – Roger regained royal favour with the accession of William Rufus in 1087 and received yet more properties, including Drakelow.⁵⁹ Stapenhill and Drakelow were adjacent settlements situated only about 1.5 miles apart and separated from Burton Abbey by the River Trent to the north. It was a situation ripe for secular–religious conflict. Even though the written evidence is oblique and certainly framed in the abbey’s favour, what began as a minor legal dispute about errant serfs was taken to the extreme by Roger’s in character show of belligerence.⁶⁰ The theme of crossing inviolate boundaries dominates the narrative, split into three distinct stages: the peasants renege on their allegiance to God (stage one) and use wicked speech (*pessime loquentes*) to goad their new lord into action (stage two). As a result, Roger physically trespasses onto monastic lands and lays waste (*depopularetur*) to the monks’ crops (stage three). Each stage is a flagrant act of transgression. As will be discussed in more detail below, the peasants’ post-mortem return to Drakelow (analogous to stage one), their implorations to their victims to follow them into death (analogous to stage two) and the final depopulation of the village (analogous to stage three) can be read as a dramatic and wholly appropriate inverse of the events that went before. Building upon the orthodox Augustinian conceptualisation of justice as a means of rebalancing the sins caused by a

⁵⁷ As discussed in J.F.A. Mason, ‘Roger de Montgomery and His Sons (1067–1102)’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 13 (1963): 1–28 (14).

⁵⁸ Frank Barlow, *William Rufus* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 73–4.

⁵⁹ For the life and career of Roger the Poitevin, see Roger Schofield, ‘Roger of Poitou’, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 117 (1965): 185–98; C.P. Lewis, ‘The King and Eye: A Study in Anglo-Norman Politics’, *English Historical Review* 104 (1989): 569–89; and Victoria Chandler, ‘The Last of the Montgomerys: Roger the Poitevin and Arnulf’, *Historical Research* 62 (1989): 2–14.

⁶⁰ Crouch, *English Aristocracy*, 100 and 108–9. Following William Rufus’ death, Roger was involved in a rebellion against the new king, Henry I, alongside his famously violent and cruel brother, Robert of Bellême (d. 1130), for which Roger was expelled from England. Exiled to his wife’s lands in La Marche, he then waged war with Hugh VI of Lusignan over control of the county.

misuse of free will, Geoffrey constructs a miracle story where the punishment very much fits the crime.

Pestilential speech and the transgression of natural order

The deadly speech of the undead is a motif not solely confined to Geoffrey's rendering of the Drakelow episode. As a type for the devastating effects of transgressive behaviour, it finds reference in other twelfth-century Anglo-Latin texts. Indeed, one of the most fascinating *nugae* incorporated into the *De nugis curialium* (c.1182) of the famed courtier and cleric Walter Map tells of an irreligious Welshman who, around the year 1150, returned from the grave and '[would] not desist from summoning singly and by name his fellow villagers, who upon being called at once [fell] sick and [died] within three days'.⁶¹ However, unlike the *exemplum* from Geoffrey of Burton's *Vita*, we do not get to hear the Welshman's corrupted speech acts, only the reported content of his 'citations' and their impact on the local community.⁶² Nor are we given information about how the Welshman died, where he died, or what type of sins he committed to warrant such a post-mortem fate. In keeping with Map's penchant for irony and literary play, it is left to the reader to bridge these interpretive gaps: 'I bring you the game, it is for you to make dainty dishes of it' ('Venetor uester sum: fera uobis affero, fercula faciatis').⁶³ Nevertheless, Map still offers a tantalising glimpse into the type of localised belief system that Geoffrey of Burton also professed to draw upon, albeit for a less orthodox and didactic purpose.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Walter Map, *De nugis curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, eds. and trans. M.R. James, C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors, 202–3 (dist. ii. 27): 'non cessat euocare singillatim et nominatim conuicaneos suos, qui statim uocati infirmantur et infra triduum moriuntur.' For a recent investigation into the unfinished, contingent nature of Map's work, see Joshua Byron Smith, *Walter Map and the Matter of Britain* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

⁶² Walter Map, *De nugis*, eds. James, Brooke and Mynors, 202–3 (dist. ii. 27): 'Ipsum Willelmum trina citacione vocavit.'

⁶³ Walter Map, *De nugis*, eds. James, Brooke and Mynors, 208–9 (dist. ii. 32).

⁶⁴ Map wryly notes that the strategy devised by the then Bishop of Hereford, Gilbert Foliot (1148–63), to cut the corpse's neck with a spade and sprinkle the grave with holy water, failed to stop its wanderings. The Welshman was finally assuaged when a local knight, William Laudun – reacting to himself being 'cited' (see n. 62, above)

Whereas the Welshman's transgressions are left intentionally ambiguous by Map, the reader of Geoffrey's *Vita* is left in no doubt as to the type of sin the two peasants committed. Living under the jurisdiction (*sub iure*) of Geoffrey Malaterra, they broke their bonds to Burton Abbey by swearing fealty to Roger the Poitevin. The very depth of their betrayal is revealed not long after burial. Just as they destabilised the natural order of things by fleeing to Drakelow in life, so they – or the demons in their likeness – were compelled to take the same destructive path in death. Their nightly wanderings can be read as a parodic recreation of the actions that caused their demise. The function of the wonder as a type of *speculum peccati* is also borne out in the peasants' actions as they roamed around the village's fields and streets. It is here, after knocking on the sides of houses, that we are privy to the type of malign speech act only implied in Walter Map's narrative: 'Promouete, citius promouete! Agite, agite et uenite!' These words are less a call than a quasi-legalistic command; an imperative to persuade their neighbours to follow them to a new place – death – just as they precipitated their own deaths by travelling to Drakelow in life.⁶⁵ Filtered through the moralistic lens of Augustinian sign theory, the ability of wicked tongues to spread disharmony to others depended just as much on the listener as the speaker, whether through eager acceptance of the destructive message or, as Susan Kramer notes, the failure of a

– chased the revenant back to its grave and cleaved its head down to the neck. The failure of the bishop's advice is an ironic reversal of what was expected from narratives of this type, a humorous jibe at the authority of the Church that no doubt would have amused Map's clerical audience. For Map's reputation as an ironist, see Neil Cartledge, 'Masters in the Art of Lying? The Literary Relationship between Hugh of Rhuddian and Walter Map', *Modern Language Review* 106 (2011): 1–16; and Margaret Sinex, 'Echoic Irony in Walter Map's Satire against the Cistercians', *Comparative Literature* 54 (2002), 275–90. For the irony of Map's revenant stories specifically, see Gordon, *Supernatural Encounters*, 102–29.

⁶⁵ Multilingual realities were rarely represented in twelfth-century historical writings. If, as Geoffrey stresses, the Drakelow story derived from oral testimony, one would expect that the peasants' words to have been spoken in English rather than Latin. As Tim W. Machen notes, multilingualism usually signified social disharmony – the distortions of language mirroring a distortion of state – but it could also be employed 'as an index of the supernatural'. The decision to render the peasant's curses in Latin rather than the vernacular may reflect its function as a corrective issued from God. Although wayward and destructive, the revenants' speech was nonetheless used in the service of reparation rather than division. See Tim William Machan, 'Language and Society in Twelfth-Century England', in *Placing Middle English in Context*, eds. Irma Taavitsainen and others (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), 43–65.

community to ‘expel the sinner who [had] permeated its boundaries’.⁶⁶ The latter definition may well apply to Drakelow residents, who we can infer accepted the new arrivals from Stapenhill without question. For Geoffrey, even the ostensibly innocent were tarnished with the stain (and sin) of inaction. Roger’s villagers were complicit enough in the original transgression to succumb to the dead peasants’ offer.

The peasants’ imperative to their neighbours to ‘Move, quickly move! Get going! Come!’ may similarly reflect their role in persuading Roger the Poitevin to take action against the Burton monks for seizing their corn. As noted previously, Roger was stirred up by their words to such an extent that he mobilised a small army to attack the abbot’s holdings at Stapenhill. Inciting others to violence very much accords to the belief that the unruly tongue is a fire capable of corrupting the whole body (James 3:6).⁶⁷ It also corroborates the base monastic precepts about the devilish nature of slanderous speech.⁶⁸ If the revenants’ return to Drakelow can be read as a malign reflection of the path they took in life, then the command to ‘move quickly’ can similarly be read as an ironic inversion of the scurrilous pleas they made in Roger’s court. It is narratologically (and theologically) appropriate for speech acts that precipitated social ruin to portend a physical outbreak of illness. The noxious exhalations that emanated from the phantom dead men made manifest what had previously only been transmitted on a socio-spiritual level. The use of wonders in such a way was, of course, a common literary device. Alongside Walter Map’s account of the fate of the *maleficus* Welshman, mentioned above, contagious disease as an outer expression of inner malignity was a central feature of William of Newburgh’s own revenant stories, where the lifestyles of the pestilential corpses from Berwick and Anantis were described as being ‘ruinous’ (*pessimus*) and ‘evil’ (*malae*) respectively.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Kramer, ‘Understanding Contagion’, 157.

⁶⁷ ‘Et lingua ignis est ... quae maculat totum corpus.’

⁶⁸ Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language*, 31.

⁶⁹ William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, ed. Howlett, 2: 476 (5.23) and 479 (5.24).

With Geoffrey leaning wholesale into the relationship between disease and sin, equivalences can further be made between the destruction of Burton Abbey's fields near Blackpool and the final depopulation of Drakelow. Although the *Vita* does not provide specific names and locations, the statement that '[Roger] gathered together a troop of knights and peasants with weapons and carts [to attack the abbey]' suggests that a number of Drakelow residents had indeed taken up to the call-to-arms.⁷⁰ The transgressions made against the monks were reciprocated in kind. Roger the Poitevin's possessions were despoiled – the village was rendered barren and unproductive – just as Burton Abbey's possessions were stolen and laid to waste. Ultimately, whilst a cursory reading of the narrative suggests a certain fidelity to the oral source, it is actually a carefully crafted study of the balancing qualities of divine retribution. As argued by John Rist, the conceptualisation of justice as the rebalancing of disorder was an orthodox Augustinian belief that finds expression across many of the bishop's writings.⁷¹ *De libero arbitrio* (c.387–95) is one such text where Augustine makes specific reference to the proportional nature of divine justice.⁷² The manifest miracle demanded by the Burton Abbey monks was a sufficient response to the crime and did not veer into disproportion. Like was paid back with like. The sins of the peasants were replayed and relayed in a precisely rendered parody that was as startlingly visceral as it was theologically exact. Even prior to the revenants' return, the motif of divine reciprocation can be discerned in the victory of Geoffrey's knights against Roger's 60 strong retinue. It also underscores the narratology of the tale's climax. Only after Roger healed the social schism by offering spiritual and material recompense to the monks did the bishop – who, pointedly,

⁷⁰ *Modwenna*, 192–3: 'Denique, uehementer turbatus, collecta multitudine rusticorum ac militum cum quadrigis et armis.'

⁷¹ See John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 273–4.

⁷² To paraphrase the student Evodius in the *De libero arbitrio* dialogue, 'it is now clear that God redresses sins since all justice comes from him.' See Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, PL 32: col. 1241 (2.1.2): 'Hoc quoque non aliunde video esse manifestum, nisi quod jam constat Deum vindicare peccata. Siquidem ab illo est omnis iustitia.'

seems to have been well aware of the procedures for exhuming troublesome corpses – give permission to deal with the restless dead. With the release of the evil spirit signalling the redress of the peasants’ wayward sin, justice was finally served.

The true cause of Drakelow’s abandonment may never be known. All we are left with are allusions to some sort of severe environmental catastrophe. The outbreak of plague was a wondrous event that demanded *admiratio*; it was something to be analysed and explained.⁷³ Trauma is a difficult concept to quantify, reflected in this miracle story through the creation of sublimating agent, the restless corpse, that acted as the very paradigm of material and spiritual rupture.⁷⁴ Orthodox theory dictated that outbreaks of disease must have happened for a reason, whatever that reason might be. Roger the Poitevin would undoubtedly have interpreted the plague in a different light, putting moral blame on Geoffrey Malaterra for the confiscation of the peasant’s goods, such seizures being a common if contentious tactic for disciplining unruly villeins.⁷⁵ Remoulding (or simply moulding) the folklore of Drakelow’s depopulation to suit the context of a saint’s life, Geoffrey of Burton interpreted the signs as a ‘wonderful example of vengeance’ in the traditional Augustinian mode. Structured by the preceding account of the punishment meted out to the boastful royal official, Ælfwine of Hopwas, the Drakelow story operated as a fitting counterpoint to the miracles that demonstrated Modwenna’s benevolence.⁷⁶ The power of Modwenna’s cult was not something to be taken lightly. Nobles and rustics alike were invited to marvel at the return of the disruptive peasants and think twice about violating the sanctity of Burton Abbey, whether physically through incursion or metaphysically through slander.

⁷³ Bynum, ‘Wonder’, 7.

⁷⁴ For wonders as an articulation of trauma, see Catherine A.M. Clarke, ‘Signs and Wonders: Writing Trauma in Twelfth-Century England’, *Reading Medieval Studies* 35 (2009): 55–77.

⁷⁵ Crouch, *English Aristocracy*, 101.

⁷⁶ *Modwenna*, 190–1.

Conclusion

As the locus of both breath and speech – and a porous boundary between the inner (microcosmic) and outer (macrocosmic) worlds – the mouth was one of the most problematic parts of the body to manage. Deviant speech signified a deviant inner self, a moral distance from God. Demonic speech was especially destabilising and demanded extra restraint, the correct management of the six non-natural things, to prevent moral and physical contamination. The inability of the Drakelow villagers to withstand the malign speech of the demonically activated dead is a testament to their perceived lack of moral fibre, a reflection of the sins of their feudal lord, Roger the Poitevin. Out of all the miracles recorded in the *Vita sancte Moduene virginis*, the Drakelow *exemplum* seems to have held particular resonance for the local community. The author of the *Historia fundatoris et abbatum* (c.1502) paid special attention to the episode in his overview of the abbacy of Geoffrey Malaterra, code switching from Latin to English when highlighting the contemporary sobriquet ‘The Devill of Drakelowe’. To what extent the tale remained a viable part of Staffordshire folklore is still open to debate. Tracing the perseverance of popular belief is, of course, a nebulous activity and one fraught with methodological uncertainty. The *exemplum* may have been transmitted orally as a sermon story, disseminated through the circulation of the *Vita sancte Moduene virginis*, or else found an audience through some other unknown means. Regardless, if the *vulgare dictum* ‘Devill of Drakelowe’ did indeed enjoy currency in the years just prior to the Reformation, it is a testament to Geoffrey of Burton’s skill in crafting a tale that tapped into continuing fears about environmental catastrophe, the sins of the tongue and the socio-spiritual problems caused by ‘bad’ death.

Note on contributor

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