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Medieval Ghosts: the Stories of the Monk of Byland

Abstract: It is well known that ghosts as well as supernatural phenomena and creatures in general were of great importance to medieval minds. Thus, it is no wonder that much of the literature of the Middle Ages is ripe with references to monsters, phantoms, miraculous characters and the like, from Beowulf's Grendel to the Lady of the Lake to visions of the dead. Focussing on the latter category, it is the aim of this paper to analyse a collection of ghost stories written down in the early years of the fifteenth century at Byland Abbey in Yorkshire. The first part traces the evolution of medieval perceptions of the dead found both in doctrinal teachings as well as in more popular ideas, including a consideration of the role of Purgatory in this development and the functions ghost stories could perform. In the second part of the paper, the Byland stories are analysed and compared to the notions described in the first part. It is concluded that these tales relate to both 'official' Christian concepts of the dead as well as to the rather more popular notion of the *draugar* found in Scandinavian folklore. This combination means that the stories are ideal for a possible use as *exempla* in confessions or sermons.

Stories of ghosts are widespread in the later Middle Ages. The following excerpt is from a collection of narratives written down in the early years of the fifteenth century at Byland Abbey in Yorkshire:¹

Concerning a certain ghost in another place who, being conjured confessed that he was severely punished because being the hired servant of a certain householder he stole his master's corn and gave it to his oxen that they might look fat; [...] and he said there were fifteen spirits in one place severely punished for sins like his own which they had committed. He begged his conjuror therefore to ask his master for pardon and absolution so that he might obtain the suitable remedy. (Story VII, trans. Grant 371)²

The writer of this story tells us about a living man encountering a dead servant who asks him for help in escaping the punishments he suffers for the sins he had committed. In tales such as these, the dead appear in various forms and for various

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- 1 The *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Old Royal and King's Collections* dates the script to around 1400 (cf. Warner and Gilson 147). Since the reign of Richard II (1377–99) is referred to in the past at the beginning of story II, it seems likely that the stories were recorded in the early fifteenth century.
 - 2 References to the Byland stories will be according to the Roman numerals given to them by M.R. James who transcribed the tales from the manuscript in 1922.

reasons. It is the aim of this paper to consider the stories in the Byland collection in terms of their description of encounters with the dead as well as regarding the possible use these narratives could have had. Before this can be done, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the development of the medieval opinions towards these apparitions, focussing mainly on the connection between the establishment of Purgatory as a third realm in the other-world and the apparitions of the dead, as well as several functions these tales performed. However, not only the 'official' perception of ghosts will be considered but also a more popular concept, namely the *draugar* of Scandinavian folklore.

The early Church was quite suspicious of ghostly apparitions.³ In the words of Schmitt, the "ecclesiastical culture of the early Middle Ages" was characterised by "a persistent yet somewhat ambiguous and contradictory refusal to admit the possibility that the dead might return in dreams or perhaps in conscious visions" (11). One of the main reasons for this negative response towards apparitions of the dead is that they were considered to be traditions inherited from classical and pagan cultures from which the early Church endeavoured to somewhat disassociate itself. This is not to say, however, that there were no ghost stories in this period at all, but they were relatively rare in comparison with later centuries.

This suspicion of apparitions of the dead slowly gave way in the following centuries to a more accepting and incorporating stance. The main motivation for this development was the progressing establishment of Purgatory as a separate realm in the afterlife. Since quite early in the history of Christianity, there had been the notion of a fire that purges one's sins after death. The fate of the people eligible for this treatment – the "not altogether good" in St. Augustine's four categories of sinners (Le Goff 69) – can be made more tolerable by the so-called suffrages of the living. These suffrages are the sponsoring and singing of masses, the saying of prayers as well as alms-giving.

The theological theories about the afterlife, especially concerning the fate of the people who died having committed only minor sins, were discussed and refined intensely in the High Middle Ages. From the late twelfth century onwards, there were three places for the dead: Heaven for the saved, Hell for the damned, and Purgatory for everyone else. Purgatory was in essence a concept of hope, since even if a person committed sins during his or her lifetime, he or she could still be among the saved at the moment of the Last Judgment. The time a dead person

3 The following, necessarily quite selective, delineation of the development of ghost stories in the Middle Ages is based on Jean-Claude Schmitt *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, passim, as well as on Jacques Le Goff *The Birth of Purgatory*, passim, and Ronald C. Finucane *Appearances of the Dead*, 29–89.

needed to spend in this place depended on the number and seriousness of his or her sins; however, it could be shortened by the suffrages of the living. According to Le Goff, this possible connection between the living and the dead through suffrages proved invaluable in the development of Purgatory: "In these [suffrages] the faithful found what they needed both to satisfy their desire to support their relatives and friends beyond the grave and to sustain their own hopes of benefiting in turn from similar assistance" (134). Consequently, the bonds between the living and the dead were tightened during this period.

This is the situation in which many stories about apparitions of the dead emerge. In order to popularise the concept of Purgatory as a place in its own right as well as to prove the effectiveness of suffrages for the souls in Purgatory, preachers used tales about encounters with the dead as exemplary stories in their sermons. In most of these tales, the living encounter the souls of the dead from Purgatory, who tell about the pains suffered in this place and ask them for suffrages. Apart from this didactic function of supporting doctrinal teaching about the afterlife and suffrages, these tales also have other uses. The encounters with the dead stressed the need for continual confession and absolution as well as moral concepts of sin and punishment. The ghosts' return from Purgatory or Hell was a warning against sinning, since the living did not want to have the same fate as the dead they encounter or are told about in the exemplary tales (cf. Le Goff 134 f., 177 ff.). However, ghost tales did not always serve as illustrating narratives in sermons or confessions: sometimes, they were recorded alongside other miraculous events in chronicles simply because of their interesting nature (cf. Schmitt 59). At other times, they were also used to promote political causes (cf. Le Goff 206 f.; Schmitt 161).

The dead appeared to the living in a variety of forms and ways.⁴ They often appeared while the living, usually close relatives or friends, were awake and conscious, since these kinds of apparitions are less delusive than those in dreams, which could easily be induced by the devil. Usually the ghosts were described as spirits, as something that is neither body nor soul, but in between, something that is not completely immaterial but also not completely corporeal either. Although they are not entirely physical, they nonetheless could have a physical impact on the living people they encounter, for example by leaving marks that proved their existence. If they were visible, and they not always were, they usually have a hu-

4 The following list, which is far from comprehensive, is based on the descriptions provided by Schmitt 195–205 and Finucane 80–5 as well as on the ghost stories gathered in Andrew Joynes's *Medieval Ghost Stories*.

man form and appear just as they were at the time of death: they have the same age, the same features and often wear the same clothing they used to wear, which obviously aids the possibility of recognition and thereby increases the reliability and authority of their appearances. However, this appearance is only a likeness of their former self – they appear as if alive, but are, in fact, not the deceased persons themselves, but spiritual images.

Leaving aside these, so to say, ecclesiastically approved ghosts for a moment, there are also more popular concepts of the dead that differed from those returning from Purgatory or Hell. One of these folkloric types of dead are the Scandinavian *draugar*. Unlike the ghosts encountered so far, these creatures are explicitly corporeal. N. K. Chadwick describes them as “animated corpses, solid bodies, generally mischievous, and greatly to be feared” (50). These revenants are often able to wander about and thus pose a great danger to people and animals alike. Their harmfulness could be prevented by physically disabling their corpses, for example through decapitation or burning (cf. Caciola 15, 31 f.). Probably the most famous example of such beings appears in the *Grettissaga*. In this Icelandic story, a mischievous shepherd called Glámr is killed violently and returns after his burial to terrorise and kill the locals. The saga’s protagonist Grettir comes to the aid of the people and fights with the *draugr*; having overcome him eventually, he hacks off his head and places it between the corpse’s legs (cf. Morris 79–91; see also Caciola 15; Lecouteux 135–9; Chadwick 50 f.).⁵ Accounts of revenants were popular throughout the Middle Ages (cf. Caciola 15), being kept alive through oral transmission, although Christianity had an increasing influence on the manner of their appearance – stories such as that of Glámr betray the attempts of the Church to reinterpret local stories in a Christian light (cf. Lecouteux 139).

In summary, the dead in the Middle Ages could appear to the living in a variety of forms, be it as the ‘official’ ghosts that supported Church doctrine about Purgatory and suffrages as well as warn the living to live more virtuously, or as the revenants of Scandinavian folklore that often aggressively attacked the local population. How, then, are these concepts reflected in the Byland story collection?

As mentioned above, these Latin stories were written down in the early fifteenth century at Byland Abbey in Yorkshire by an anonymous monk of the Abbey using blank space in a twelfth century manuscript (cf. James 414). All in all, there

5 It is noteworthy that Glámr is described as unwilling to follow Christian customs (fasting on Christmas Eve); thus, his return from his grave appears to be a punishment from God for his sins (cf. Lecouteux 139).

are twelve stories recorded in this collection; however, only eleven of these will be considered here, since the other one does not deal with an apparition of the dead. In general, the narrations tend to adhere to the following structure: A living person encounters a dead one. The living person makes the sign of the cross or appeals to the trinity in order to deflect any possible harm that could be done by the apparition. He then conjures the dead person to tell his name, the cause of his wandering and a possible remedy.⁶ After the conjuration, the living person takes actions to help the dead, who then finds rest and peace.

In order to give one further example of this structure and the language and atmosphere of these stories in general, story VI shall be cited in its entirety:

It happened that this man was talking with the master of the ploughmen and was walking with him in the field. And suddenly the master fled in great terror and the other man was left struggling with a ghost who foully tore his garments. And at last he gained the victory and conjured him. And he being conjured confessed that he had been a certain canon of Newburgh, and that he had been excommunicated for certain silver spoons which he had hidden in a certain place. He therefore begged the living man that he would go to the place he mentioned and take them away and carry them to the prior and ask for absolution. And he did so and he found the silver spoons in the place mentioned. And after absolution the ghost henceforth rested in peace. But the man was ill and languished for many days, and he affirmed that the ghost appeared to him in the habit of a canon. (Story VI, trans. Grant 371)

Several aspects of ghosts described above can be pointed out here. To begin with, it is striking that the dead canon is depicted as fighting with and tearing the clothes of the living man. Obviously, this ghost is physical rather than insubstantial, and he is able to pose a definite threat to the health of the living. This corporeality and possible harmfulness of the apparition can also be observed in the other stories: In story II, the ghost in the form of a raven throws a tailor off his horse and then threatens him with pain and death if he is unwilling to help. Even after helping him, the tailor becomes ill for several days. The ghosts in stories III, V and XII are said to be captured by the living before being dealt with in various ways, thus proving their materiality, and the ghost in story IX throws a living man over a hedge but catches him before he hits the ground.

6 Conjuraton here needs to be understood in an older sense rather than the modern one with its connotations of magic. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as follows: "II. 3. To constrain (a person to some action) by putting him upon his oath, or by appealing to something sacred; to charge or call upon in the name of some divine or sacred being; to adjure."

This description of the ghosts is obviously related to the revenants of popular belief encountered above – like the *draugar*, they are entirely physical and able to harm the people they meet. As dangerous as these apparitions appear to be, however, it must also be acknowledged that none of them mortally wounds the living. They may cause fear, torn clothes and illnesses, but they do not wander about killing every person they encounter; some even explicitly try not to harm the living too much, such as the ghost in story IX who catches the man he threw before he hits the ground. This may appear strange at first, since revenants are usually described as very menacing and aggressive, but it can be argued that the actions and threats of these ghosts are aimed at obtaining help from the living rather than hurting them. The ghostly raven attacking the tailor, the apparition fighting with the man in the story quoted above as well as the ghost throwing a living man over a hedge: all of these happenings are described in close connection with the conjuration of the ghosts – since they seem to be unable to initiate a conversation themselves, they need to resort to milder forms of aggression in order to provoke a response that then ultimately leads to their absolution and, possibly, salvation (cf. Simpson 395).

Once conjured by the living, the dead can finally state their problem. In most of the stories, the apparitions tell of, or at least hint at, sins they have committed while alive and for which they are now punished, such as the ghost in the story quoted at the beginning. This punishment is presumably carried out in Purgatory rather than Hell, since suffrages were considered to be ineffective for the damned in Hell (cf. Le Goff 66; Finucane 64 f.). The ghosts in this collection can find peaceful rest after being absolved or by having masses sung for them. In some cases, such as in story VI, the living first have to remedy a wrong done by the apparition before absolution and suffrages can be obtained. It is apparent from these proceedings – the confession of sins and asking for absolution and suffrages – that the narrations are at least in this point heavily influenced by ecclesiastical teachings.

One ghost narrative from the collection deserves special attention, since it differs significantly from the others. In story IV, the ghost, a rector who was buried at Byland, walks to his former concubine and blinds her. Instead of being conjured, absolved and thereby put to peace, however, the abbot and convent have his body dug out and thrown into a lake far away. This story clearly departs from the ordinary solution of the problem of the wandering dead. It is reminiscent of earlier stories about revenants in which the usual remedy against the creatures is the dismembering or disabling of their corpses. The monk who recorded the tale is clearly taken aback by the actions of the religious people in this story: “God forbid that I be in any danger for even as I have heard from my elders so have

I written” (Story IV, trans. Grant 370). He rejects any responsibility for the tale by stating that he has heard it from his superiors and has written exactly as they have informed him. This reference to the elders, which suggests that the event happened in their youth or even earlier, also is the only instance in the entire collection that explicitly describes the action as being long in the past; all other events seem to have occurred not too long ago. By stressing the tale being set in the distant past as well as by downright rejecting the actions taken by the abbot and convent, the monk makes clear that this kind of behaviour does not represent Church doctrine and should be refrained from.

Summarising the findings of this analysis of the collection, it is evident that the apparitions described neither completely belong to the ‘official’ dead returning from Purgatory that feature for example in the *exempla* of preachers, nor to the more popular concept of revenants. Instead, it seems that the Christian teachings about the afterlife have been imposed on tales of folkloric encounters with ghostly creatures. In this process, the nature of these apparitions was changed fundamentally: the aggressive, ruthless and violent behaviour of their predecessors here is transformed into ghosts that, although they are still physical and capable of wounding the living, actually seek help and absolution, quite like the ghosts in the ecclesiastical tradition. This observation leads to the final point that shall be considered in this paper: why did a monk write down stories that combine doctrinal and popular beliefs about the afterlife and the dead?

Scholarly opinion on this has been somewhat divided. Schmitt states that they may have been intended as *exempla*, but then seems to contradict himself by stating that the monk “above all gave in to a fascination with extraordinary and truly fantastic stories” (142), suggesting that he recorded them because of their curious content rather than their didactic value. Schmitt’s view is supported by Gwenfair Adams, who concludes her analysis of the stories by stating that they were not written as *exempla* but as accounts of events (cf. 215 f.). Opposing this view, Jacqueline Simpson has argued in favour of the stories being *exempla*. She is convinced that “[t]he stories would make excellent material for sermons on the need to pray for the dead and prepare for one’s own death” (395). Finucane also appears to tend towards this viewpoint: although he does not explicitly state it, he nevertheless considers several Byland stories in his discussion of ghosts that are used to teach about doctrine (cf. 60 ff.). Claude Lecouteux argues in a similar direction by observing that the monk might have recorded only those events that can be used for edification (cf. 147, 158).

Considering the arguments put forward by these scholars, it is clear that more point towards the stories being used as *exempla*. Most importantly, the description

of post-mortem punishment for sins and possible remedies in the form of absolution and suffrages is coherent throughout the collection and reflects the official stance towards these topics. Thus, the tales could easily have been used to teach about Christian doctrine. Through the abhorrence expressed by the monk to the unchristian solution in story IV, this focus on the correct doctrinal framework is stressed. In addition, there are some comments made by the monk that appear to be his attempts at understanding the stories told to him in a more religious framework than his informants did (cf. Adams 216). In story VIII, for example, the apparition does not succeed in provoking a positive response from the living—the only outcome of the ghost’s endeavours is to make both people and animals afraid. The monk here suggests that “he was a ghost that mightily desired to be conjured and to receive effective help” (Story VIII, trans. Grant 372). In the next story, after the apparition is absolved and rests in peace, the monk comments that “[i]n all these things, as nothing evil was left unpunished nor contrariwise anything good unrewarded, God showed himself to be a just rewarder” (Story IX, trans. Grant 372). These comments certainly point towards a didactic use of the stories.

One of the main objections raised against the stories being *exempla* is that they describe specific, local events that cannot be applied universally in the teaching of doctrine (cf. Adams 215 f.). Universality is a characteristic of many exemplary stories used by preachers, because they often travelled from town to town to preach and therefore required examples that were applicable in many situations rather than one specific one (cf. Schmitt 124). However, there is no reason to ignore the possibility that this local setting was exactly what appealed to the monk, since it seems quite reasonable that a preacher would use local tales to make identification with the contents easier for the local audience. All but two stories take place in the immediate vicinity of Byland Abbey. Thus, the audience of these stories was presumably able to recognise the streets and villages mentioned, thereby making it easier for them to apply the stories’ edifying message to themselves.

There is one further point that can be made in favour of a didactic function of the tales. As mentioned above, the texts have been written onto blank pages in a twelfth-century manuscript. Considering the contents of this volume, it is striking that it contains several works by Cicero as well as theological texts (cf. Warner and Gilson 147–8). In the Middle Ages, Cicero was very popular and influential both as a teacher of rhetoric as well as an authority on morals and politics (cf. Dyck 43 f.; Ward 69; Powell 24). The second part of the manuscript contains, among others, Honorius’s *Elucidarium*, which is an encyclopaedic summary of theological knowledge. Written in the late eleventh century,

it contains three books, one of which is concerned with the afterlife. The text was also often copied and translated, and it can be considered as a handbook for the clergy (cf. Haacke and Arduini 572). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the manuscript contains several texts dealing with confession, such as a letter by Ivo of Chartres,⁷ as well as theological commonplaces on this subject and a short text *de triplici genere confessionis* ('on the three kinds of confession') that has been entered into the manuscript by the same scribe who recorded the ghost stories. This analysis of the immediate manuscript context of the Byland ghosts strongly suggests that the volume may have been used at the Abbey as a reference book for moral, rhetorical and doctrinal instruction of clerics or monks. The fact that the stories were entered into such a manuscript would further support the argument that they were intended as *exempla*, most likely to be used in the context of a confession or a sermon.⁸

In conclusion, medieval stories about encounters between the living and the dead show a huge variety both in form and in functions. Throughout the period, the ecclesiastical reaction towards apparitions of the dead changed fundamentally, leaving behind the initial suspicion in favour of a more accepting perspective in later centuries. This development was heavily influenced by the establishment of Purgatory as a place in the afterlife in itself. Henceforth, ghosts coming from the purgatorial fire appeared to the living in order to ask for suffrages and warn them to avoid sins, thereby proving the very existence of Purgatory and supporting various other teachings. However, there were also more popular concepts of the dead, such as the revenants influenced by Scandinavian folklore. They were kept alive in the tales told from generation to generation, even though the Church attempted to discredit them through association with the activities of the devil. Nevertheless, there are still some remnants of this tradition even in the literature of the later Middle Ages, such as the Byland story collection. As we have seen above, these tales constitute a combination of both the folkloric as well as the ecclesiastical perception of ghosts; the apparitions described by the anonymous monk are as corporeal and able of aggression as those of popular legend, but they behave like the dead in Christian tales.⁹ This

7 Ep. 69 (*Patrologia Latina* 162, 89). The letter concerns the question whether canons regular should be allowed to hear confessions (cf. Rolker 187).

8 It seems that this aspect – the immediate manuscript context – has not yet been considered in the secondary literature on the Byland stories.

9 When considering the texts surviving from the Middle Ages, one should always be aware of the fact that they were usually recorded by either religious writers or, at least, a literate elite. Hence, it should not be assumed that what the monk of Byland wrote

introduction of doctrine to folklore makes the stories ideal for the teaching of the Church's theories about the afterlife and the relation between the living and the dead, since their popular nature could appeal to the local audience. The Byland ghosts can therefore be seen as a valuable and important example of medieval apparitions of the dead.

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down is necessarily an exact representation of the local population's beliefs about these apparitions; instead, their perception of the dead is very likely filtered through the religious background of the monk.

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