SLEEPING TOWARD CHRISTIANITY: THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS LEGEND IN MEDIEVAL BRITISH ORAL TRADITION

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by

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SLEEPING TOWARD CHRISTIANITY:

THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF THE LEGEND OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS IN MEDIEVAL BRITISH ORAL TRADITION

presented by Claire Schmidt, a candidate for the degree of Master of English Literature,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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This study is dedicated to my grandparents: Joan and Richard Schmidt, and Richard and Judy Meyer. Thank you for everything you have done for me.

Thank you to my parents, for seeing the value in what I want to do, and also for teaching me to work hard.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....ii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION.....1

Goals of the Project.....1

Unique Aspects of the Project.....2

Limitations of the Project.....4

Literature Review.....5

The Story.....8

The Variants.....9

2. SUMMARY OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS PRESENCE IN MANUSCRIPTS...14

3. THE SEVEN SLEEPERS IN ANGLO-SAXON ORAL TRADITION.....19

4. THE FUNCTION OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS LEGEND.....32

5. *PIERS PLOWMAN* AND THE SEVEN SLEEPERS.....37

6. THE *VITA AEDWARDI REGIS* AND THE SEVEN SLEEPERS.....50

7. CONCLUSION.....55

APPENDIX

A. AND THEY LOOK EXTREMELY TIRED TO ME... 58

B. TRANSLATION FROM GAY.....60

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....61

Chapter 1: Introduction

Goals of the Project

The scope of this project is necessarily broad. I am working on the macro level in an attempt to illustrate the relationship between the early Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and English oral tradition between the years of 600 and 1400.

I use an oral traditional approach to consider my subject matter. Why use oral tradition? As Maring notes, "Reliance on literary or text-bound biases may result in misunderstanding both oral *and* written performances in traditional settings, particularly how these function and how they ought to be interpreted" (17). This study attempts to show how an oral-traditional understanding of a legend can contribute to our understanding of literary works, in this particular case *Piers Plowman* and the anonymous *Vita Aedwardi Regis*. Previous scholars have relied on literary tools to inform their scholarship; this study differs from these earlier approaches by utilizing a different set of tools—oral traditional and folklore theory. It is my hope that future scholars will recognize the clear benefits of a full toolbox, containing both literary and oral traditional tools, when tackling Anglo-Saxon and medieval texts.

In Chapter One, I give a general overview of the story of the legend itself for the benefit of readers who may not already be familiar with the Seven Sleepers. I consider the variation among versions of the legend in its many forms (which include hagiographical narrative, reference, homily, proverb, and charms). In Chapter Two, I

provide a brief summary of the presence of the Seven Sleepers legend in extant manuscripts. In Chapter Three, I explore evidence that indicates that the legend of the Seven Sleepers was part of an active medieval English oral tradition. In Chapter Four I consider the function(s) of the legend of the Seven Sleepers in medieval English culture as it evolves to meet changing needs. In Chapter Five, I analyze the function of the reference to the legend in Langland's *Piers Plowman* and argue that the poem uses the legend to propose a new avenue toward salvation using modified ideas of passivity and activity in sleep. In Chapter Six, I analyze the function of the reference to the Seven Sleepers in Edward the Confessor's vision in the *Vita Aedwardi Regis*, and argue that Edward's vision of the Seven Sleepers constructs him as an enduring guardian of his people after death and thus a stronger candidate for canonization. I conclude this study by suggesting several potentially fruitful avenues for future study.

Unique Aspects of the Project

This study suggests a new way for medieval scholars to consider the broad presence of legends[1] in medieval literary productions. As a brief example of the

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[1] Legends are by definition traditional (though not necessarily historical). For the purposes of this study I rely on Linda Degh's conceptions of legend; Degh often describes the legend as "a conversation genre in which participants (proponents) state and debate the nature of their belief in the account" (42). For additional background on legend scholarship, theory, and definition see Brunvand 1981; Degh 1996, 2001; Luthi 1966; Tangherlini 1990.

See Tangherlini, "'It Happened Not Far From Here...'" for a review of recent legend scholarship, including definition, trends in theory, and key theorists.

Leonard Schmidt's words have been beneficial in my struggle to resist over-defining the legend: "The domain of the legend is as large as the totality of folk culture, one can say

possibilities that an oral traditional approach opens up, I analyze the reference in *Piers Plowman* (Passus 14, lines 63-71) to the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, which, to the best of my knowledge, has gone unnoticed by previous scholars. My preliminary analysis of the function of the legend in Langland's poem is a new direction for Langland studies, which has neglected the possibilities offered by folklore and oral traditional theory for a deeper understanding of the poem.

My work also breaks new ground in the study of the legend of the Seven Sleepers as a part of Anglo-Saxon and medieval English oral tradition. Until now, scholars have failed to explore the ubiquitous presence of the legend in its many forms throughout centuries. Few medieval scholars have looked at this legend in a serious way (as I discuss in the short literature review below), and their previous work has been limited to translation and manuscript study, with a few brief analytical forays into the pedagogical function of the legend as it concerns resurrection. To date, scholars have failed even to acknowledge that this legend functioned as a part of oral tradition. A few folklorists have published versions of, or allusions to, the legend when they have encountered it in their fieldwork, but to date there is a dearth of critical exploration of the form and function of the legend of the Seven Sleepers in medieval English life and verbal art. This study takes a first step in considering the legend broadly in manuscript tradition, oral tradition and folklore, and in later medieval literary productions.

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no part of it, from settlement to house, to proverb and saying, exists without being touched also by the legend" (107).

Limitations of the Project

Because this study forges new ties between oral tradition and medieval studies through a hitherto neglected legend, the work is by nature a preliminary exploration. The arguments that I make are by necessity broad.

I do not claim that this work provides a complete history of the form and function of the legend of the Seven Sleepers in English oral and literary tradition; rather I offer the reader a snapshot of some of the major ways this legend has played a part of English tradition. Whether this snapshot will serve as a starting point for subsequent scholarly research is up to future scholarship.

While I have attempted to be as inclusive and thorough in my summary of the known manuscript versions of the Seven Sleepers legend, some omissions of manuscripts and references are unavoidable. I expect and welcome feedback from scholars pointing out manuscripts and allusions I have neglected in this study. The bibliography reflects my interests and necessarily leaves out issues unrelated to these interests.

I do not have the space or inclination to do justice to the resurrection aspect of the legend[2] and I am omitting it entirely from this study. At any rate, my own efforts would be rather unnecessary, since most scholars with an interest in this legend have already done a great deal to illuminate this interesting subject (Magennis, "Aelfric and the Legend" 320). In these pages I pursue the big picture: what is this legend and how and what did it mean to medieval people in England?

[2] See Literature Review below.

I will not attempt to prove or disprove that *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* are part of English oral tradition.[3] This would be an impossible task; instead I focus on the features in the texts that relate to my interest in the legend of the Seven Sleepers. I will suggest that there is a certain amount of evidence that indicates that we should take oral tradition into account when we study *Piers Plowman*.

Literature Review

With the exception of Robert Alexander's unpublished thesis, the Critical Edition of the Old English Seven Sleepers Homily[4] there was no large scholarly work that addressed the Legend of the Seven Sleepers until Magennis' 1994 publication of The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers.[5] Despite the previous lack of an all-encompassing edition of the legend, scholars in folklore and medieval literature have considered the Seven Sleepers from a variety of angles—though never in the context of *Piers Plowman* until this study.

Among twentieth-century folklore scholarship, W. Bonser, Martin Colker, David Gay, and J.R. Simpson have been the lone voices reminding us of this interesting and neglected legend. Bonser considers the legend in two short articles, one in 1926 and one in 1945; his primary concern in both seems to be to identify the particular species of

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[3] For a concise literature review of opposing viewpoints on the connection between oral tradition and fourteenth-century alliterative poetry, see Maring, 49-50.

[4] See Alexander, Robert Joseph. A Critical Edition of the Old English Seven Sleepers Homily. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1973.

[5] Magennis, Hugh, ed. The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers. Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1994.

supernatural creature described in Anglo-Saxon metrical charm 3. Gay takes up Bosner's question in his 1988 article, and proposes that the charm is really a description of witch-riding. In contrast, Colker and Simpson concern themselves with the legend tradition itself. Colker focuses on the "Rip Van Winkle" tradition in his 1963 article and compares the Seven Sleepers legend to a little-known medieval narrative concerning the burial of the apostles and the gravedigger's miraculous sleep. Simpson makes the important link between legends of King Arthur's miraculous sleep and the legend of the Seven Sleepers in his 1986 article, "King Arthur's Enchanted Sleep: Early Nineteenth Century Legends." Unfortunately, the above articles are extremely limited in focus, and none of them considers the legend itself with much depth or displays particular theoretical concern. Others simply have nothing in common with the focus of this study besides discussing the same texts from a folkloristic perspective.

Scholars of medieval language and literature have yet to explore the legend in depth. W. W. Skeat translated the anonymous Old English version of the legend that appears in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* but provided little critical evaluation of the legend. Charlotte d'Evelyn considers one version of the legend from the South English legendary, but her conclusions are slight and unrelated to my interest in the tradition of the legend. Robert Alexander's unpublished 1973 doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin at Madison is the only book-length study of Aelfric's homily on the Seven Sleepers. Alexander's study includes his own translation of the homily, an extensive review of the manuscript tradition, and some brief analysis of the narrative. Sadly, the dissertation was never published, though it is frequently cited in subsequent scholarship on the legend. Hugh Magennis is the current recognized authority on the legend of the Seven Sleepers.

He has published several articles and one book on the subject. Magennis' work focuses largely on the manuscript tradition and the resurrection aspect of the legend. He is fundamentally concerned with the ways the legend functioned as a teaching tool during times of debate about transubstantiation and resurrection. Magennis' translation of the anonymous Old English version of the Seven Sleepers legend in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* is the only edited edition of the work.

History scholars have treated the legend of the Seven Sleepers rather lightly. P. Michael Huber's 1910 work Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschlafern has been the traditional starting point for studies on this legend. Brian S. Merrilees' 1977 book, *La Vie des Set Dormanz by Chardri* considers the Old French manuscript tradition of the legend with the assumption of a known poet (Chardri) for his particular version. Francoise Laurent's 1998 book, *Plaire et Edifier: Les Recits Hagiographiques Composés en Angleterre aux XIIe et XIIIe siécles* devotes a chapter to the Anglo-Norman versions of the Seven Sleepers legend.

Biographer and historian Frank Barlow uses the inclusion of the legend of the Seven Sleepers in the anonymous *Vita Aedwardi Regis* to argue that the *Vita* was revised to promote the canonization of Edward the Confessor. Barlow's 1965 article, "The *Vita Aewardi* (Book II); The Seven Sleepers: Some Further Evidence and Reflections," represents his evolving study of King Edward which culminated in his 1970 book Edward the Confessor. Barlow's work on the anonymous *Vita* and other lives of King Edward, and his biographies of William Rufus and Thomas Becket, are authoritative and thorough.

The Story

Most scholars agree that the earliest manuscript versions of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus date to sixth-century Greece (Hansen 400). The legend of the Seven Sleepers varies widely in details from source to source, but the basic structure, characters, and setting of the story remain the same. In the following sections I will give a brief summary of the story itself, and then discuss the variations present in different manuscript versions of the legend of the Seven Sleepers.

The Benedictine brothers of St. Augustine's Abbey in Ramsgate quite succinctly sum up the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. Their Book of Saints contains this entry:

> Seven Sleepers (Saints) Martyrs.
> Martyrologium Romanum. July 27
> 250-362. The legend of the Seven Sleepers states that seven youths of Ephesus were walled up in a cave under Decius in the year 250 and were found alive there in the time of Theodosius II (362), having spent the intervening period in sleep. The R[omanum] M[artyrologium] gives their names as: Maximian, Malchus, Martinian, Dionysius, John, Serapion, and Constantine. There are, however, three or four sets of different names and a large number of variants of the legend. (535)

The majority of the versions tell the story as follows: During the Emperor Decius's persecution of Christians, seven young Christian men divested themselves of their possessions and hid in a cave on Mount Celion. They fell asleep in the cave, and God caused them to sleep miraculously for an unnaturally long time.[6] They awoke during the reign of the Christian emperor Theodosius, and were entirely unaware of the miracle. Malchus is sent to the market to buy bread for the hungry sleepers. He is shocked to see

[6] As will be discussed later in this chapter, the span of their sleep varies from account to account.

signs of Christian worship displayed in the town of Ephesus. When he tries to pay for the bread with a coin (now antique), the baker accuses him of robbing an old treasure. He is summoned before authorities and questioned; when the miracle is brought to light, all present (including the emperor Theodosius) praise God for this tangible proof of resurrection.

This miraculous sleep, bestowed upon the sleepers by God, saved the lives, and arguably the souls, of the Seven Sleepers.[7] As one might guess from the name, sleep is an intrinsic element of the legend. As this study shows, the legend of the Seven Sleepers became associated with medieval British beliefs about sleep and its relationship to salvation, vision, danger and protection.

The Variants

As scholars have rather superficially observed, the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is part of the familiar "Rip Van Winkle" tradition (though obviously predating Washington Irving's literary version by more than a millennium) that continues through the present day. The legend of the Seven Sleepers is most technically classified as tale-type AT 766,[8] *The Seven Sleepers*, and variations occur in both folktale and

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[7] See Chapter 5 for more discussion of the relationship between religious sleep and salvation.

[8] Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne developed a system for classification of folktales by motif and published it in 1910. Stith Thompson, an American folklorist, expanded Aarne's system, translated it into English, and published it as the AT-number system in 1928. Classification of folktales has largely fallen out of academic fashion in American folklore scholarship but still provides a useful international system of tale-type identification. German folklorist Hans-Jorg Uther further expanded the catalogue in 2004, and the system is now properly referred to as the ATU system.

legend form (Hansen 397). For the purposes of this chapter I will confine myself largely to narrative Christian versions of the legend circulating in the vernacular in England, and will only briefly touch on variation in other forms invoking the legend (for example, charms) at the end of this section.[9]

Generally speaking, variation in the manuscript versions of the Seven Sleepers legend tends to occur in a few major areas. First, the names of the sleepers are not always consistent. Various iterations of the legend give different names of the sleepers, and various versions list the sleepers in different orders. Certain characters appear in some versions of the legend and are left out in others.

Second, the number of years that the saints slept differs.[10] Aelfric tells us they slept for 372 years; alternatively, the Cotton Corpus text gives the number as 370. The Benedictine brothers of St. Augustine in Ramsgate authoritatively claim the sleepers slept from 250 AD to 362 AD, putting their span of sleep on the low end, at 112 years (535). The disagreement surrounding the number of years extends to scholarship as well; Bonser claims, apparently erroneously, that Aelfric gives the number at 371 years.

Third, the wording of the legend varies in major and minor ways. Magennis notes what he feels are emotive details in the anonymous Old English version in Aelfric's *Lives*

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[9] Significant work has been done by Brian S. Merrilees on variation within the Old French manuscript tradition; unfortunately, the limited scope of this study does not permit me to explore this area at this time.

[10] For detailed discussion of the various calculations of the span of the Sleepers' sleep, consult P. Michael Huber's Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschlafern. (Leipzig, 1910).

of Saints[11] and argues that the brevity of Aelfric's homily is indicative of his own particular understanding of the "bare essentials" of the legend (Magennis, "Aelfric and the Legend of the Seven Sleepers" 320). In the anonymous Old English version and the anonymous Latin *passio* the Seven Sleepers are members of the emperor Decius' household, and because of this status, Decius does not want to harm them; Aelfric's version avoids dealing with this conflict by eliminating the relationship between the emperor and the saints. The anonymous Old English version of the legend devotes a great deal of space (a third of the text) to Malchus' trip to the town to buy bread, whereas Aelfric's version does not include this episode at all. Magennis points out that some versions (notably the Cotton Corpus version) claim that the sleepers distribute money to the poor "secretly and openly," but Aelfric's version omits the "secretly."[12]

Fourth, the legend varies in its treatment of the Seven Sleepers after they awake from their sleep. Some versions explicitly tell us the sleepers die after they are awoken, prove their innocence, and give thanks to God for the miracle; other versions make no mention of the subsequent activity of the saints. I will consider this variation in more depth in Chapter 6.

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[11] Magennis considers the description of Decius as "tham haethenan cwellere," and "gehathyrt," and the description of the saints as "geleaffullan" to be particularly indicative of heightened emotion, and unique to this particular manuscript version. He considers these emotive details as evidence for the argument that Aelfric did not write this particular piece of the *Lives of Saints* ("Aelfric and the Legend" 319).

[12] Magennis attributes this variation to scribal error, and fails to consider the aesthetic, political or creative roles a scribe might play in the development of a legend ("Aelfric and the Legend" 318).

Variations among medieval charms invoking the Seven Sleepers tend to be centered around the instructions for the use of the charm. Most charms involve writing the names of each of the sleepers on separate hosts, slips of writing material, or, in one manuscript version, on a goat's horn. After writing the names the practitioner or patient recites a charm. The method of applying the written names of the sleepers to the body of the afflicted person differs widely among variants.[13]

Scholars devoting time and attention to the Seven Sleepers legend invariably insist on making arguments about which specific earlier manuscripts influenced which specific later manuscripts. Zettel and Magennis focus on Aelfric's version in his *Catholic Homilies*. Zettel argues that Aelfric uses the anonymous Latin *Passio Septem Dormientium* (BHL 2316), as preserved in the Cotton-Corpus legendary, as the basis for his version, given the great number of correlations between manuscript versions.[14] Magennis somewhat disagrees with this argument, because of inconsistencies throughout the Cotton Corpus text itself, and because Aelfric departs from the aforementioned text in several instances. Magennis proposes that these variations can be traced instead to Gregory of Tours' *Passio Septem Dormientium apud Ephesum* (BHL 2312), because it is the only known manuscript that parallels Aelfric's "departures" from the Cotton legendary.[15] Magennis' desire to find a written source for Aelfric's version leads him to

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[13] See Bonser for a concise exploration of variation among charms in extant manuscripts.

[14] These correspondences include the ordering of the saints' names, the exact number of years they slept, and the formula of the prayer uttered for emperor Theodosius (Magennis "Aelfric and the Legend").

[15] Magennis, Hugh. "Aelfric and the Legend."

argue for a source that he acknowledges was not (as far as we know) read in Anglo-Saxon England.[16]

Study of the manuscript tradition of the Seven Sleepers is necessary, although it may also be somewhat deceptive and unproductive unless the larger social and cultural context is considered. This study endeavors to draw attention to the forces affecting variation in the manuscript tradition that may not be immediately apparent to literary or historical scholars. Though Chapter 2 will concern itself entirely with the manuscript tradition of the Seven Sleepers legend, Chapter 3 argues that it is more fruitful to consider the role oral transmission and tradition have played in the evolution of the legend's composition and its presence in ensuing narratives and manuscripts.[17]

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[16] See Chapter 3 for further exploration of Magennis' complex attitude toward oral traditional theories.

[17] As Barre Toelken explores in his book, The Dynamics of Folklore, folklore is not, and cannot be, static. Folklore is, by nature, dynamic and changing. Only by evolving to meet particular needs does folklore persist.

Chapter 2: Summary of the Seven Sleepers' Presence in Manuscripts

The "complete" story of the legend exists in two Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.[18] The earliest known versions of the Seven Sleepers legend written in English date to the Anglo-Saxon period. According to Magennis, "The earliest reference to the Seven Sleepers by an Anglo-Saxon writer is in the *Life of St. Willibald*. This was written c. 780 by an English nun, Huneberc, but on the continent and was perhaps not known in Anglo-Saxon England."[19] Aelfric includes a version of the legend in the manuscript of his *Lives of Saints*, though scholars attribute this version to an anonymous author.[20] Aelfric's own rendering of the Seven Sleepers legend (titled *Sanctorum Septem Dormientium)* appears in the Second Series of his *Catholic Homilies.*[21] A fragmentary version occurs in Cotton Otho B. x (Magennis, The Anonymous Old English Legend 6). According to several scholars, the Old English versions are derived from the Latin *Passio septem dormientium*

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[18] For a broader understanding of the Old French manuscript tradition of the Seven Sleepers legend, readers are encouraged to consult the works of Brian S. Merrilees, most particularly his 1977 book, *La Vie des Set Dormanz by Chardri*. See also Francoise Laurent's recent book, *Plaire et Edifier: Les Récits Hagiographiques Composés en Angleterre aux XIIe et XIIIe siécles*. (Paris: Champion, 1998).

[19] For an in-depth evaluation of the manuscript tradition of the Anonymous Old English version, consult the introduction to Magennis' The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers.

[20] Magennis notes that this legend is one of four pieces in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* that scholars believe was not written or composed by Aelfric himself ("Style and Method" 285).

[21] Of which there are eleven surviving manuscript copies.

(BHL 2316) edited by Huber (Magennis, "Style and Method" 286).[22] Among the other surviving manuscripts of the Latin *Passio* are the eleventh-century British Library MS Egerton 2797 and the later British Library MS Harley 3037. Certain scholars, notably those with classicist leanings, tend to attribute the later textual origins of the legend to Jacobus de Voragine (Hansen 401).[23]

The story was given in Latin in Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards I* and in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*. An Anglo-Norman version (*Vie des set dormanz*) ascribed to the poet known as "Chardri" occurs in common in two closely related manuscripts: Oxford, Jesus College, MS 29 (II), and London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ix (C). Cartlidge notes that in 1400 several texts "were recorded in the library of the Premonstratensian abbey at Titchfield in Hampshire. One of the Titchfield manuscripts (QIII) apparently contained a *Vita septem dormientium*" (251). In his brief critique of Stith Thompson's failure to study a different "medieval Rip Van Winkle story,"[24] Colker observes that the Seven Sleepers legend even appears in the Koran (Sura 18) (131).

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[22] Elsewhere Magennis notes, "The edition by Huber, though useful for comparative purposes, is based on a manuscript somewhat removed in its text from the copy which the Old English writer must have used" (The Anonymous Old English Legend 286).

[23] Hanson argues that this thirteenth-century Latin rendition was most influential.

[24] A "Pseudo-Dionysian letter to Timothy on the deaths of Saints Peter and Paul." See Colker 131-132.

Book II of the anonymous *Vita Aedwardi Regis*[25]details Edward's vision that the Seven Sleepers had "suddenly turned over and would lie on their left sides for seventy-four years—a sinister event which heralded the disasters for the world foretold by Christ" (Barlow, "The *Vita*"387). This allusion occurs in revised versions of the life, but certain scholars believe it was included in the original, written as early as 1067 (Magennis, The Anonymous Legend 5). As Frank Barlow notes, some scholars trace the version of the Seven Sleepers legend in the anonymous *Vita* to the *Chronicon ex chronicis*, Bodleian MS 297.[26] The anonymous *Vita Aedwardi Regis* exists in one manuscript (c. 1100) and contains many lacunae. Several later versions of the life of Edward the Confessor were written during the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries.[27]

The legend is also invoked in Anglo-Saxon metrical charm 3 ("Against a Dwarf"), from the late tenth-century recipe book, the *Lacnunga* (Bonser, "The Seven Sleepers" 254). As Bonser notes, "The names of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus occur in various charms of the Middle Ages. They are usually, as might be expected, to secure sleep, but in some cases are to be employed against fever" ("The Seven Sleepers," 255). Charms invoking the Seven Sleepers occur in a variety of manuscripts. One charm against a fever occurs in a manuscript (Napier (A): Altenglische Miscellen, II) in

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[25] See *Vita Aedwardi regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescit* (? 1065-67), Osbert of Clare's *Vita beati Eadwardi regis Anglorum* (1138), and Ailred of Reivaulx's *Vita sancti Edwardi regis et confessoris* (1163), as cited in Barlow ("The *Vita,*"385).

[26] See Barlow for an explanation and evidence of this claim ("The *Vita"* 387).

[27] William of Malmesbury and Osbert of Clare were both energetic supporters of the Edward's canonization and wrote extensively on his life and posthumous miracles. See Barlow, The Life of King Edward for a thorough investigation of the tradition of the *Vita* after the anonymous version.

Worcester Cathedral Library; the instructions are written in Anglo-Saxon and the words of the charm are in Latin (Bonser, "The Seven Sleepers"255). Additional charms in Latin against fever that invoke the Seven Sleepers are found in MS Royal 12. E. xx. fol. 162v [unpublished], MS Colton Faustina A. x. fol. 136, Anglia, Bd. 19, and MS III. Q. I. fol. 95 v.

In addition to the previously discussed manuscript versions of the narrative and the charms, multiple so-called literary manuscripts include references to the legend of the Seven Sleepers. Unfortunately, I am not able at this time to conduct a major search for references to the Seven Sleepers in the entire corpus of Anglo-Saxon and medieval manuscripts. Instead, I am limiting my attention to two texts that refer to the legend of the Seven Sleepers: the *Vita Aedwardi* and *Piers Plowman*. I have already mentioned the manuscript tradition of the *Vita Aedwardi* (whether or not it ought to be included in literary categories is for other scholars to debate). Finally, it remains to briefly discuss the manuscript tradition of *Piers Plowman*.

Piers Plowman exists in three distinct versions: the A text (c.1368 and 1374), the B text (c.1377-1381), and the C text (c.1381-1385) (Baldwin 67).[28] More than sixty manuscripts survive. In his introduction to the 1995 edition of the B text editor A.V.C. Schmidt says, "*Piers Plowman* has a good claim to be the greatest English poem of the Middle Ages. It was certainly one of the most popular. Over sixty manuscripts survive, compared with over eighty of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and some forty of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*...In its own day the poem appears to have made a powerful impact, as

[28] Creatively titled by W. W. Skeat. There is also a Z text that is not universally accepted as authentic (Schmidt "Introduction," xvii).

is attested by the well-known letter of the insurrectionary leader John Ball" (xix-xx). Based on internal and external evidence, George Kane and W. W. Skeat, in addition to many subsequent scholars, authoritatively claimed that the poem was authored by one William Langland.[29] For the purposes of this study, I work with the B text, revised and edited by A.V. C. Schmidt.

[29] See Schmidt xx-xxiv for an overview of authorial evidence.

Chapter 3: The Seven Sleepers in Anglo-Saxon Oral Tradition

In this chapter I argue that the legend of the Seven Sleepers was part of medieval British oral tradition. First and foremost, this proposition only makes sense, given the diverse ways Anglo-Saxon and other medieval people communicated shared cultural ideas. I will suggest that the legend's ubiquity, variation, and likely oral composition[30] indicate that the legend was transmitted orally within a tradition of religious verbal performance. I will not attempt to convince the reader that the legend was definitely told in specific ways or under specific circumstances, as it is clearly impossible for us to know such details. As John Miles Foley asserts, "voices from the past are not—and can never be—as economically defined and delimited as oral performance or voiced texts. Too much remains either unknown or dependent on composite media to settle unambiguously on single options for composition, performance and reception" ("Indigenous Poems" 25).[31] It is extremely difficult and not necessarily productive to attempt to prove without a doubt that something was, or was not, a part of an oral tradition. Nancy Mason

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[30] For an understanding of the concept of oral-formulaic composition, see Lord, The Singer of Tales. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960, and Foley, The Theory of Oral Composition. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988. For an understanding of oral formula in Anglo-Saxon poetry see Magoun, "Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry." *Speculum*, Vol. 28, No. 3, July 1953. 446-467, and Olsen, "Oral-Formulaic Research in Old English Studies: I." *Oral Tradition.* 1/3,1986. 548-606.

[31] Foley also strongly cautions against imposing our own scholarly biases on texts that resist our own modern worldview.

Bradbury observes that, "even for single narratives, amassing the evidence for oral and textual transmission or modes of thought and expression is a slow and complicated process" (6).[32] Given the parameters of this study, I do not have the space, nor the inclination, to deal in absolutes. Nor will I engage with Ruth Finnegan's critique of the "Great Divide,"[33] which renders oral tradition and textuality as mutually exclusive. As Foley argues, "the 'either-or' strategy has run its course; in the present state of knowledge it only distorts what we can learn about oral poetry" ("Indigenous Poems" 11). My goal for this study is to demonstrate the extreme likelihood that the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus was part of an ever-evolving oral process that carried the story through generations.

Some scholars find it difficult to think about or study a work that may have existed simultaneously in manuscripts *and* oral tradition. However, just because it is difficult does not mean that it is not worthwhile. Foley poses a frame of reference for this type of situation:

> I propose a third category of oral poetry: voices from the past... Simply put, it offers a slot for those oral poetic traditions that time has eclipsed and that we can now consult only in textual form...any given poem's

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[32] As Bradbury quite rightly observes, "the irrecoverability of unmediated medieval oral traditions would put severe strains on...credibility" (6).

[33] Foley cautions scholars:

> If the pristine orality of verbal art has been sabotaged by the incursive forces of writing and texts, so goes the argument, then it is a text, and if it is a text, it is not oral tradition. Such an attitude has the advantage of whittling down an enormously complicated field to manageable size and complexity, but of course it does so only by defining most of the field's contents out of existence. ("Indigenous Poems" 10).

> original composition may have been oral or written; in many cases we just cannot tell whether the document we hold in our hands is a direct transcription of an oral performance or an artifact some generations of editing and recopying removed from performance. The particular version that survives to us may even have been composed as a text, written down by a poet adhering to the rules of oral performance. All of these possibilities must be kept open or we run the risk of claiming more than we really know and as a result falsifying any conclusions we may try to draw. ("Indigenous Poems, Colonialist Texts" 21)

In the spirit of Foley's proposal, I have chosen to keep possibilities open, rather than run the risk of claiming to know more than is possible.[34]

The relationship between textuality and orality was quite complex in the Anglo-Saxon and later medieval periods. According to Draper, "In antiquity, oral forms were the usual and preferred cultural norms for both the ruling elite and the underclasses, in spite of the pervasiveness of literacy in the culture" (3). The ability to understand and appreciate (or "read") an oral performance was as learned and as culturally enforced as literacy is for us today. Thus, medieval readers approached written texts with a different set of expectations and assumptions than we do today. As Michael Clanchy notes, "Medieval texts were designed to be read in a variety of ways—orally or silently, by one person or in a group—and at different levels of meaning, taking account of word and image and a variety of linguistic registers" (qtd in Cartlidge 261). Therefore, even the

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[34] Foley usefully observes,

> In the early going some specialists believed that the mere density of such patterning could serve as a litmus test, that it constituted 'proof' of the actual orality or writtenness of a manuscript poem--whether the text in hand was originally an oral performance or not. We now claim much less but at the same time something much more fundamental: that these features signal a background in oral poetry, though they do not magically reveal the precise story behind any given text. ("Indigenous Poems" 24)

most "literary" of Anglo-Saxon texts would contain components of orality, whether in composition, traditional stylings, or performance.[35] Even the act of scribal manuscript copying contained aspects of the oral tradition that was a fundamental part of medieval communication and aesthetics.[36]

Importantly, oral poetics did not carry the stigma of ignorance that it does now. Our modern veneration of text may have roots as old as text itself, but our preconceptions about orality, and its relationship to reading, have changed over time. The acts of composing, reading, and writing were conceived of very differently in the European medieval worldview. It is important to remember that modern ideas about reading and literacy can be dangerously misleading when applied to medieval cultures. A different aesthetic applies to these texts, and they cannot be judged by our modern text-based, silent-reader standard.

The style of the Anonymous legend in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* (as previously mentioned, generally not attributed to Aelfric) is indicative of Anglo-Saxon oral tradition. As Magennis notes, the version contains "balanced phrases" achieved through

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[35] According to Foley, "The evidence for calling them 'oral poetry' is of two sorts: direct accounts of how they were composed and performed on the one hand, and structural symptoms of oral composition and performance on the other" ("Indigenous" 22).

[36] Bradbury notes that,

> scribal copying in the Middle Ages had itself a considerable auditory and memorial component. Long ago, H. J. Chaytor's *From Script to Print* made the important point that the scribes themselves vocalized the texts they copied and could create errors that might look to us to be auditory in origin...Can we hope to distinguish the short-term memory of a copyist from the longer-term memory of a performer? (18)

alliteration—one of the fundamental aspects of Anglo-Saxon poetics.[37] The anonymous version in the *Lives of Saints* reflects what Magennis calls "a rhetorical fondness for doublets" ("Style and Method" 287). A scholar of oral tradition might have called this a key to oral performance and composition, to borrow a term from Richard Bauman.[38] This anonymous version is, in contrast to Aelfric's version in his *Catholic Homilies*, full of embellishment and flourishes. Such embellishment may reflect not only a heightened sense of aesthetics, but also cultural expectations of an oral performance.

Though Magennis thus consistently ignores the possibility that oral tradition played any role in the development of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, his interpretation of the anonymous Old English legend's "author" (as he would have it) is highly suggestive of oral traditional theories. Magennis observes:

> Although the overall structure of the Old English text is determined by that of the original, and no scenes are omitted or added, within these limitations the writer is free and imaginative in his response to the story. In particular, he alters the emphasis and proportion of parts to the whole in significant ways. ("Style and Method" 293)

In this brief passage, Magennis searches for an explanation of the poetic beauty of the anonymous Old English legend. He grasps the fundamental oral traditional concept of variation within limits; he acknowledges the skill and aesthetics of the performer (or for Magennis, the writer); without knowing it, he even observes the impact of the audience

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[37] Magennis goes on to observe that "as with the vast majority of the doublets in the Old English none of these examples is taken over from the Latin" ("Style and Method" 287).

[38] In his tremendously influential work, *Verbal Art as Performance*, Richard Bauman identifies "keys" to identifying performance. The informed audience will recognize the cue, or "key," and understand that a performance is immanent. Bauman's theories can be usefully applied to oral tradition as it occurs in a textual context. For more information consult Richard Bauman's *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1984 (originally published 1977).

on the performance, in the form of altered emphasis and proportion. Yet, Magennis fails to make the final leap from observation of phenomena to recognition of tradition. He is so fixated on textuality and the text-based pedigree of evolution that he cannot interpret what he already sees. Unfortunately, Magennis concludes with, "the writer clearly worked with the Latin book open before him" (294), though it does not seem very clear that this was the case at all.

Oral performance was a fundamental part of medieval Christianity.[39] Verbal skill was essential for gaining coverts during the missionary period, and missionaries relied heavily on orally performed stories to capture the attention of the heathen masses. Not only were stories "portable," as Tudor argues (143), but they were emotionally engaging. Certain stories were more effective than others; for example, stories from Genesis were quite effective conversion tools among Anglo-Saxon populations because the stories were able to function syncretically with preexisting cultural beliefs. Miracle stories, as I will discuss below, were also particularly well received in missionary efforts. In addition to storytelling, verbal art was necessary for successful preaching; sermons and homilies drew on cultural aesthetics and appreciation. Verbal art was necessary to communicate church doctrine to the people; medieval Christians were not bible-readers like modern Christians are today. Instead, passages from the bible were read aloud to congregations or students. Preaching and sermons formed an entire genre of medieval oral performance by

[39] See Tudor, "Preaching, Storytelling and the Performance of Short Pius Narratives" for a discussion of performativity of religious narratives like the Legend of the Seven Sleepers. Though Tudor considers French primary sources, he does analyze the "performability" of saints' lives and miracle stories.

themselves.[40] In addition to church doctrine, church music was learned and performed aurally and orally; as Milis[41] notes, hymns were memorized, not read from individual hymnals (102). Everyday Christian practice, not only for monks but for lay Christians as well, depended on oral and verbal traditions to an extent hard to imagine for us today.

Furthermore, Anglo-Saxon popular culture included a strong belief in miracles and relics, and this popular belief tended to operate on the margins of the church. The legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is part of this tradition; though there is no evidence to suggest that the Seven Sleepers ever enjoyed their own cult of saints, the legend seems to have been in circulation during the peak of saint-worship.

Narratives about saints who performed miracles (particularly posthumous miracles) were an extremely effective conversion tool for missionaries in the British Isles. The pagan populace seized upon the idea of powerful, miracle-wielding saints with unexpected vigor. According to Ronald C. Finucane, in his groundbreaking study Miracles and Pilgrims, "for the novice barbarian Christians, miracles and saints' relics attained a significance far beyond what the missionaries may have intended" (22). The miracle-working saints resonated with the powerful culture-heroes of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons; syncresis between Christian heroes and pagan Germanic heroes permitted Christianity to thrive in Anglo-Saxon cultures.

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[40] See Tudor 144-150 for an analysis of the performativity of medieval sermons, and some preliminary arguments about voice (pitch, rhythm, speed, volume, and register), meter, music, participation, gesture, and discourse markers.

[41] While I disagree with a great deal of Milis' book Angelic Monks and Earthly Men, he does provide an interesting dissenting viewpoint as to the impact of Benedictine monasticism on "ordinary" people in the Middle Ages.

From the (almost certainly orally performed) stories of miracles used to convert the Western heathen grew the medieval cults of saints. Finucane observes the church was notably ambiguous about popular belief in miracles and saints, particularly as "rustic tendencies to overdo saint-worshipping grew more irksome and embarrassing" (32). The church (which Finucane points out was hardly a unified entity, but rather a huge, incredibly diverse institution[42]) acknowledged the power of saints and the existence of miracles, but became increasingly concerned about the popularity and self-sufficiency of belief in miracles and saints at the expense of official theology. According to Finucane, "among barbarians [the English] the powers of holy men both living and dead took the place of abstruse doctrine and theological subtleties" (23). Not only did popular belief and culture tend to ignore doctrine and biblical understanding in favor of miracles and relics, but this belief in miracles and relics did not rely on the help of the church and did not derive its power from institutionalized religion. The do-it-yourself nature of popular belief in miracle was threatening to the established Christian church by virtue of its sheer intensity.

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[42] Finucane provides an effective caution about careless use of the phrase "The Medieval Church"

> "The Church" is really a convenient expression almost devoid of meaning. At its extremes it embraced the Church of the Lateran in Rome and the Church as known, say, to the medieval villages of Oxenton in rural Gloucestershire. There was not only an Italian and an English medieval Church...There was a French Church and a Spanish, an Icelandic and a German, each with its own history, traditions, liturgical uses and saints. Within these Churches were hundreds of divisions subdivided again into thousands of smaller units, ending at last with a semi-literate cleric in some rude chapel in the midst of inhospitable forests or fields, surrounded by peasants who muttered charms over their ploughs and whispered magic words at crossroads. It was a very long way from pope or prelate to peasant-priest, a long way in distance, education, and attitude. 10-11.

This strong popular belief in saints and miracles existed in relative independence from church institutions. It was a tradition that operated without the explicit, standardized, written teachings of the church—*it thrived by means of oral transmission*. The Seven Sleepers legend is by nature a part of this folk religion.[43] As such, it is hard to imagine that the legend was not part of the larger oral tradition that included verbal art about saints and miracles. Over time, the church instituted more and more policies regulating miracles and saints in an effort to control the burgeoning popular belief,[44]but popular saint worship persisted up to the present day, as Jean Claude Schmitt points out in his excellent study, The Holy Greyhound.[45]

Charms, like legends, are a well-established genre of folklore and oral tradition. By definition charms are both oral and performative. In her article, "Anglo-Saxon Charms in Performance," Lori Garner states, "the Old English healing charms offer us a relatively rare glimpse of poetry in performance in the Anglo-Saxon world. The well-studied verse incantations as well as the lesser known non-metrical remedies function as part of rituals performed to cure disease, improve crops, and even return lost or stolen property" (20). The charms invoking the Seven Sleepers fall into the category of healing

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[43] For the canonical definition and discussion of folk religion see Yoder, "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion." *Western Folklore*, 33, i, Symposium on Folk Religion. (January 1974), pp. 2-15.

[44] See Finucane, particularly chapter 1, "Dark Age Christianity: Miracles in the Missionary Epoch," chapter 2, "The Holy Dead and their Relics," and chapter 6, "Recording and Sorting Poshumous Miracles" for a description and analysis of medieval popular culture and belief in miracles.

[45] For a good example of interdisciplinary legend study that responsibly draws on folklore, history, literature, and theology, consult Schmitt's 1977 book on the legend of St. Guinefort, The Holy Greyhound.

charms, and their stated purpose is to protect the individual from dangers associated with sleep and night. However, just because the charms perform a medical or psychological function does not separate them from aesthetics, as Garner argues. "The placement of the charms in a range of manuscripts suggests that the charms now classed as metrical were not valued solely on the basis of their alliterative meter, nor were they viewed as the exclusive domain of medical instructions" (31). The prevalence of charms invoking the Seven Sleepers convincingly indicates that the legend was an evolving and important part of medieval oral tradition that cannot be as easily classified as past scholarship has claimed.[46]

Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 ("Against a Dwarf") is perhaps the most widely studied charm invoking the Seven Sleepers, but other examples abound. Bonser tracks the instances of charms based on the Seven Sleepers legend; as noted in the previous chapter, he finds one eleventh-century and two twelfth-century versions in Royal manuscripts (now housed in the British Museum) in Latin (all individually unique versions), one fourteenth-century charm (also in Latin), and a Welsh variant in the medieval Physicians of Myddvai. The geographic and temporal diversity of the surviving charm texts strongly

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[46] See Garner's 2004 article "Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charms in Performance" for more discussion of this intriguing point. Garner says,

> Taken collectively the charms blur distinctions between the oral and the literate, the Christian and the Germanic, the metrical and the non-metrical, the poetic and the practical, even the sensical and the non-sensical. In performance the charm's function as healing remedy becomes all-encompassing, and once-familiar dichotomies quickly break down, revealing insightful intersections between categories that might at first seem mutually exclusive. In many significant ways, awareness of performance contexts allows us to transcend potentially reductive binaries and thus enhance our understanding of these complex texts. (20-21)

indicates that the Seven Sleepers played a functional role in medieval belief about health and magic.

Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3, *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* refer more or less obliquely to the legend of the Seven Sleepers. This referentiality provides further evidence that the legend of the Seven Sleepers was a dynamic part of English oral tradition.[47] These three works all invoke the Seven Sleepers (not uniformly, of course), but do not explicitly tell the legend; these references indicate that the legend was familiar to the culture at large, and its centuries-long role in magical practices argues that the legend performed functionally outside of institutionalized Christianity. These references deepen the context of the performance, whether it be spoken or read. Briefly summed up by Maring, "each individual oral composition functions metonymically in relationship to a culturally inherited body of traditional poetry whose traditional concepts were never written down, nor needed the assistance of writing" (34). References to the Seven Sleepers activate this inherited body of knowledge for the contemporary listener.

In the case of *Piers Plowman*, the reference to the Seven Sleepers acts as a very brief inset story, and, by virtue of its traditional nature, can "summon a larger context" for the audience (Foley, How to Read 113). Of course, the allusion to the Seven Sleepers is not the only reference in *Piers Plowman*; as Chadwick notes, "there were many legends which had been adapted to contemporary taste and inserted into the popular accounts. Amongst those found in *Piers Plowman* are the legends of ... the Seven

[47] For a discussion of referentiality as evidence of oral tradition, see Foley, Immanent Art, 7.

Sleepers" (98). The two-line reference in *Piers Plowman*[48] functions to jog the audience's memory. The poet invokes a shared knowledge of this traditional material, which in turn invokes certain cultural ideas. Patience has no need to tell the entire story; his brief mention summons an understanding of the story, which, as previously discussed, would have been familiar to a contemporary audience. According to Foley, references like the one in *Piers Plowman* act as "a key, a way into the experience—at least for the initiated"(How to Read 86). He argues that "figurative language does much more than prettily embellish the basics; it alerts the audience to the nature of what is transpiring" (How to Read 88). I will revisit this topic in greater detail in Chapter 5.

That the Seven Sleepers is a part of medieval oral tradition is supported not only by the legend's prevalence in manuscripts,[49] beginning with the Anglo-Saxon period through Langland's era and the variation present in extant manuscript versions, but also by the context in which references to the legend occur in *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi*. This final point will be more fully explored in chapters five and six of this study.

In addition, the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus falls within a strong tradition of magical sleep. Stories like Thomas the Rhymer and Rip Van Winkle[50] play upon this theme of enchanted, long-lasting sleep. As folklorist J. R. Simpson notes, stories like the nineteenth-century legends of King Arthur's enchanted sleep have their

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[48] See Chapter 5 for an in-depth discussion of the allusion to the Seven Sleepers in XIV, 68-69 of *Piers Plowman*.

[49] See the preliminary overview of the manuscript tradition in Chapter 2.

[50] See Colker, who considers Rip Van Winkle in the context of the Seven Sleepers.

roots in a much older tradition of cave legends that includes the legend of the Seven Sleepers (207).

Charlotte d'Evelyn notes that despite significant variations among Middle English versions of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, "the perennial appeal of the legend of the Seven Sleepers lies in its effective handling of a human predicament: the mounting bewilderment and fear of Malchus matched against the mounting incredulity and hostility of the Ephesians. No version...fails to bring this conflict to life" (93). Whether or not d'Evelyn is correct in her claim,[51] it is impossible to deny that the legend had an intense appeal that lasted more than ten centuries. Folklorist Phillip Redmond collected verbal references to the Seven Sleepers in Wexford in 1899.[52] My preliminary research indicates that the Seven Sleepers are part of many twenty-first century American and European people's oral tradition.[53] If we, in our modern, high-tech, text-biased culture, still traditionally reference the Seven Sleepers, isn't it highly probable that the story was an even greater part of medieval oral tradition? The recurrence of the legend in charms and other magical practices throughout the last millennium indicates that the legend was well-known; the allusive use of the legend in textual literary works further supports this claim.

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[51] Apart from any question of the accuracy of her claim about the legend's appeal, d'Evelyn forgets that Aelfric's version of the Seven Sleepers legend eliminates the Malchus episode.

[52] In 1899 Redmond observed that in Wexford, "hibernating animals are called 'seven sleepers.' 'I didn't know that efts were *seven-sleepers*,' said B. to me one day, 'until I was pulling down an old wall in winter, and found about a hundred of them,' &c." 364.

[53] See Appendix A.

Chapter 4: The Function of the Seven Sleepers Legend

If, as argued in the previous chapter, the legend of the Seven Sleepers was a part of medieval British oral tradition, it must have performed some kind of cultural work. Folklore does not exist in an un-peopled vacuum; its continued existence is predicated on fulfilling some community role and performing some cultural function.[54] This chapter will focus on the possible functions of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, and will consider how this function may have evolved to fit changing circumstances and cultural needs. The final two chapters will consider functionality in the context of referentiality—specifically the function of the legend in the context of *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi Regis*. [55]

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[54] See William Bascom's tremendously influential article, "The Four Functions of Folklore" in the *Journal of American Folklore,* 67 (1954) 333-349. Brunvand summarises: "Bascom demonstrated how folklore fills particular functions in various cultures: it may simply be a mirror of culture; it may validate aspects of culture; it is a means of education; and it works to maintain conformity to expected patterns of behavior" (27). Brunvand fails to mention that folklore is highly mutable, and changes to fulfill evolving needs.

[55] Before I continue, I think it is necessary to cheerfully acknowledge that any sophisticated argument about the function of the Seven Sleepers legend in medieval culture is by definition hypothetical. We cannot know for sure how tellers or listeners understood this legend, and how this view may have evolved in time or varied in geographical space. Furthermore, we cannot know how this legend functioned for communities on a subconscious or unconscious level. We are missing the context in which the Seven Sleepers legend was told and heard, and without that vital piece it is impossible to make claims about how the legend worked "in general." The most we can do, so far removed in time, is to consider the obvious and suggest some compelling ways of thinking about the functionality of the legend in a literary context.

Scholars have half-heartedly debated the uses of the Seven Sleepers legend, but have failed to conduct any substantial analysis of its function. As discussed in the literature review in the introduction to this project, most historical and literary scholarship (spearheaded by Hugh Magennis) focused on the pedagogical function of the legend for reinforcing doctrine on resurrection. Scholars have, perhaps rightly, confined their analysis of the Seven Sleepers narratives to the context of the historical Christian church. While this is a very sensible and cautious choice, a broader inquiry into the legend's cultural function may yield a deeper understanding of the legend and the cultures in which it was told.

In contrast to the narrative focus of literary and historical scholars, folkloristic scholarship has largely confined its functional analysis of the Seven Sleepers legend to the charms. The cultural use of Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 has received particular attention from folklorists. The limited discussion has focused on the obvious—that the Seven Sleepers legend as it appears in charms has something to do with illness and sleep. David Gay simplistically observed that, "previous scholarship has tended to view the charm as against an illness of some sort" (174). Skemp claimed that because the names of the Seven Sleepers are invoked the charm must be against a convulsive disease (Gay 175). However, Gay disputed this conclusion and made the case that "the description in lines 9-12 more closely matches the general pattern encountered in accounts of witch-riding" (174).[56] Early in his career, Bonser contended that Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm

[56] See David J. Hufford's book The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions (1982) for an in-depth study of the folklore of sleep, particularly in regard to belief in witch-riding or hag-riding. Hufford connects belief in hag-riding to sleep disorders now diagnosed as sleep paralysis,

3 is a Christianized version of an older pagan Celtic charm to repel elves, specifically, nightmares caused by elf malice ("Magical Practices" 361-362); however, twenty years later Bonser refined his conclusion and argues that "an appeal to the Seven Sleepers is thus appropriate for those suffering from insomnia or any disease in which sleep would be especially beneficial" ("The Seven Sleepers" 256). Whether or not Bonser is right, and Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 is a pagan charm that evolved to include Christian elements, the syncresis of magic, healing, theology, history, verbal art, cultural aesthetics and belief embodied in the charm itself calls for an interdisciplinary consideration.

My goal in this and the next two chapters is to show the benefits of responsible interdisciplinary scholarship; I bring literary, historical, theological and folkloristic scholarship together, and in doing so, show how the legend of the Seven Sleepers performs different cultural functions in different circumstances; how and what the legend means can provide scholars with a better understanding of the needs of communities. I will suggest some general preliminary conclusions here before moving to specific texts in Chapters 5 and 6.

As briefly noted above, evidence suggests that the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus played an important role in the protective folklore and oral tradition of Great Britain up to the twentieth century. In many instances, such as Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3, this protective function is specific to sleep. As Bonser notes, the charm was performed by writing the names of the Seven Sleepers upon seven communion wafers

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nightmares, or hypnagogic hallucination. Rather than addressing belief and folk medicine from a strictly medical perspective, Hufford employs what he calls an "experience-centered approach to the study of supernatural belief" (x).

and performing an incantation, and was held to be "the best charm for nightmare" ("Magical Practices" 351) Evidence indicates that this legend was appreciated for its protective properties (Gay; Redmond; Bonser 1926, 1945; Sawyer), and that sleep and the church were associated in the minds of the charm's practitioners.

In the texts analyzed in this study, sleep seems to be regarded as precious, even sacred,[57] yet simultaneously fraught with danger.[58] The Seven Sleepers themselves slumber in a dangerous situation—they are hunted by the pagan emperor and are vulnerable in their helpless state. In the versions of the story when they are walled up in the cave while they sleep, sleep itself prevents them from saving themselves. The seven would have died if not for God's miraculous intervention. In this instance, the very fact that they sleep places them in physical, perhaps even spiritual danger, from which they are rescued at last by divine grace. The charms invoke this divine grace. By calling upon the sainted sleepers, the practitioner can protect the patient from the dangers of sleep. In situations like Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 and *Piers Plowman* the Seven Sleepers seem to become the patron saints of safe sleep. I do not have the space in this study to closely analyze the very real physical and spiritual dangers often associated in the medieval worldview with sleep. Nor, alternatively, do I have the space to analyze the precious and holy aspects of medieval sleep in depth. However, suffice to say that for many people in medieval England, sleep was a complicated and fraught topic, containing conflicting elements. From contagious illnesses to sinful dreams, and dream visions to

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[57] See Chapter 5 for a preliminary exploration of religious sleep.

[58] Consult Hufford's The Terror that Comes in the Night for a thorough exploration of what he refers to as "nocturnal assault."

revelations, the visitor to the realm of sleep needed protection and right-minded guides. The Seven Sleepers may have filled that role.

Of course, the function of the legend would have varied from time to time and from place to place. For example, Sawyer notes that in later charms the Seven Sleepers are considered rain saints in Germany[59] but not in Great Britain. Later appearances of the Seven Sleepers legend in British oral tradition indicates a shift in function away from sleep, healing, and protection, and toward an understanding of the world.[60] We can see this "meaning making" function in modern examples of references to the legend, when the legend is invoked to explain or describe the behavior or animals, people, or the weather. See Appendix A for examples and discussion of modern instances of the Seven Sleepers legend.

[59] See Appendix A.

[60] See Redmond for examples of meaning-making function.

Chapter 5: *Piers Plowman* and the Seven Sleepers

Why would I approach an obviously literary poem like *Piers Plowman* from an oral traditional perspective? Because, as Maring so succinctly puts it, "written medieval poems were often hybrids that employed both literary and oral-traditional strategies to communicate their message" (14). It just makes good sense. Perhaps a more pertinent (though unanswerable) question is, why hasn't anyone else done this yet? Oral traditional theory can open up a new way to read *Piers Plowman*. Even though a great deal of manuscript evidence points strongly to a single, identifiable author (presumably William Langland), that does not mean that the author conceived of his poem as somehow different from the other forms of poetry with which he was familiar. Langland did not exist in a vacuum. He lived in a hybrid culture and his composition style and aesthetic were necessarily influenced by the hybrid nature of medieval poetry. From the limited number of manuscripts available to us today, scholars believe that alliterative poetry enjoyed a varied career, coming in and out of fashion through centuries. Extensive scholarly work with Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry indicates that the alliteration functioned in part as an aid to oral composition;[61] there is no reason to doubt that alliterative poetry in Middle English continued to be performed orally during the periods

[61] See Foley 1988; Niles 1983; O'Brien O'Keeffe 1997; Olson 1986 for additional scholarship on alliterative verse and Anglo-Saxon oral-formulaic composition.

that have given us few or no manuscripts containing alliterative poetry.[62] Many scholars agree that alliterative poetry was produced through both literary and oral composition. As I mentioned in the beginning of this study, it is often a waste of time to make broad generalizations about whether a given text is oral or literary; Rosenberg paraphrases Finnegan in saying, "Oral and literature societies exist in a continuity, not a dichotomy, as do their lyrics and narratives" (25).[63] A folkloristic and oral traditional approach to the legend of the Seven Sleepers as it exists within the world of *Piers Plowman* provides a deepened cultural context for an examination of the poem's motivations. This chapter is the first step in what I hope becomes a fruitful path for Langland studies.

The medieval dream-poem *Piers Plowman* interrogates diverse notions of the correct path to salvation. The work of Langland scholars in the last quarter-century, including Anne Middleton, James Simpson, Anna Baldwin, John Alford and D. Vance Smith, greatly enhances our understanding of the poem's complex thoughts about salvation. However, scholars have not yet considered how *Piers Plowman* obliquely proposes that religious sleep can provide an alternative route to salvation. In Passus 14 of *Piers Plowman,* Patience alludes to the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, and suggests that their miraculous sleep was a god-given, *mesure*-approved path to spiritual

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[62] It is important to note that Anglo-Saxon poetic alliteration and Middle English poetic alliteration must not be conflated. Alliteration is a metrical requirement for Anglo-Saxon poetry, and an important factor in oral-formulaic theory; alliteration in Middle English poetry is an ornamental device but not an essential element of poetics. For more information, consult Robert Fulk's A History of Old English Meter, and Christine Chism's Alliterative Revival.

[63] For an expansive exploration of the relationship between folklore (and oral tradition) and literature, see Bruce Rosenberg's rather misleadingly titled Folklore and Literature: Rival Siblings.

and physical safety. I contend that this allusion acts as a spiritual tool in the quest to achieve holiness. The legend provides an example of how an individual can gain entrance to the liminal space of sleep. Once inside this passive, liminal space, the sleeper (or dreamer, in the case of Will) can actively participate in his/her own spiritual progress and society without fear of spiritual or physical harm. Considering the positioning of the legend in *Piers Plowman* from a folkloristic perspective gives us a better understanding of the cultural ideas about religious sleep in Langland's time.

Before we consider the implications of the Legend of the Seven Sleepers, it may be beneficial briefly to return to the legend itself, beginning with its location in *Piers Plowman*. Patience mentions the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Passus XIV, after promising Haukyn the Actif Man that he can count on God to provide *liflode.* Patience says,

> It is founden that fourty wynter folk lyvede withouten tulying,
> And out of the flynt sprong the flood that folk and beestes droken;
> And in Elyes tyme hevene was yclosed,
> That no reyn ne roon—thus ret men in bokes,
> That manye wynter men lyvedon and no mete ne tulieden.
> Sevene slepe, as seith the book, sevene hundred wynter,
> And lyveden withouten liflode—and at the last thei woken.
> And if men lyved as mesure wolde, sholde never moore be defaute
> Amonges Cristene creatures, if Cristes wordes ben trewe. (XIV 63-71)

The "sevene" that Patience alludes to are, of course, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, whose protracted and miraculous slumber seems to have had a profound impact on medieval notions of the functions of religious sleep. In this chapter I will concern myself with the nature and function of the religious sleep experienced by these saints, and suggest that Langland uses it as a model and analogue for the religious sleep in the world of *Piers Plowman*.

As Patience seems to suggest, the necessity of *liflode*, or livelihood, is one of the existential conflicts negotiated by the legend of the Seven Sleepers. Before their miraculous sleep the Seven Sleepers were grievously persecuted by the Emperor Decius. Christians were forced to worship the heathen "devil" or be tortured and killed. Aelfric describes (albeit with his biased agenda) the persecution:

> Behold, what can weeping or sorrow be, if that was not the greatest of both, or what can lamentation or bewailing be, if that was not the fullness of both, when afterwards they thus seized and bound the Saints, and scourged and burnt them and cut them up like stuck swine, and tormented them with every misery? And kinsmen beheld how their kinsmen suffered and hung on the town walls for a spectacle; and the brother beheld his sister in torment, and the sister beheld her brother in misery; the father forsook his child, and the child forsook the father, and at last every friend forsook the other, by reason of the great horrors which they saw there; and the tortures were specially intended for themselves, unless they straightaway ran and sacrificed to the idol and denied the Lord. (Alexander 122-135)

In this world of terrible violence, where survival hinges on the ultimate sin of denying Christ, the Seven Sleepers must search for a safe space. They "unanimously" say, "Better we should free ourselves from the tumult of this population" (235-236). The world itself and its violent population demands they do spiritual violence to their souls.

The struggle to obtain and maintain *liflode* places individuals, by necessity, in the *actif* life. Being in the *actif* life meant being out in the world, and thus subject to physical and spiritual assaults. The alternative to the *actif* life was, of course, the contemplative and cloistered monastic life. The cloistered life was not available to everyone, however. The majority of people lived in the world and struggled physically and emotionally to obtain resources, or *liflode*. In the time of political and social instability when *Piers Plowman* was composed, the inevitable, sometimes dire, need for *liflode* subjected people

to heavy mental and physical stress. To live, most men and women had to subject themselves to the dangers, temptations and contamination of the *actif* life, and endure the subsequent spiritual damage.

The character Haukyn the Active Man in *Piers Plowman* is a cautionary example of the dangers of the *actif* life to those who must obtain *liflode*. Haukyn has a wife and children (XIV 2) for whom he is responsible. He has been driven into the world because he must secure *liflode* for himself and his family. Haukyn's status as an "*actif man*" means that he has been spiritually damaged, as symbolized by his stained and tattered cloak. Haukyn cannot keep himself clean because he is forced into the world. As Robert Frank argues, "what Haukyn with his spotted garment illustrates is the fact that active life, living in this world with its many demands, especially those of the body, inevitably involves man in sin" (X). As Frank observes, sin is *inevitable* for those who must struggle for *liflode*. Haukyn wants to be good but his need to obtain *liflode* makes this impossible.

However, Patience claims that God will provide *liflode* for those who place their fate in His hands. Patience tells Will that there is no need to enter the *actif* life and struggle for *liflode.* Instead, he says, a passive retreat into the keeping of the Lord will protect Will from the sin and danger that have ravaged Haukyn. God will provide for Will just as He provided for the *"Sevene"* who slept "*sevene hundred wynter"*(line 68). Patience insists that one should not focus on *liflode* but rather passively submit to the will of the Lord. According to John Alford, "To cast oneself wholly on the will of God is the essence of patience, the ground of charity, the way to truth" (51). Patience tells Will that

passively submitting to the will of the Lord will protect the individual from want and privation.

This protection takes the form of religious sleep. Will, as well as the Seven Sleepers to whom Patience alludes, passively retreat into God-given sleep. During Will's dream visions he has no need to eat. He does not want for shelter or money. Similarly, the Seven Sleepers are removed from the *actif* world and do not feel hunger or cold during their long sleep. Patience gives Will an example in the Seven Sleepers of how a man may trust God to protect him from the *actif* life. By alluding to the legend of the Seven Sleepers, Patience calls the audience's attention to the cultural notion that religious sleep offers a great deal of power and safety.

Religious sleep provides an egress into a protected, liminal space. Unlike ordinary sleep, it brings the sleeper into closer contact with the divine. This theme can be traced through the corpus of medieval English dream-poetry. Spearing notes that dream vision poetry is "a tradition of visions of a certain place, or group of places: the other world" (16). Entry into this "other" world ultimately brings the dreamer closer to holiness and salvation, despite the complex geography of the dream-place. In the legend of the Seven Sleepers, Aelfric says the sleepers "fell into that quietness" (304-305). In the legend, quietness is constructed as a place, a particular space into which one can fall. This contact with spirituality occurs within the highly specialized space, wherein the sleeper is safe from moral and physical dangers, and daily physical wants and privations become irrelevant. This "safe space" can be accessed only through religious sleep, and spiritual pursuits are the primary concern. Within this place Will as dreamer and the persecuted Seven Saints of Ephesus find refuge from the spiritual and bodily violence of the world.

Will, like the Seven Sleepers, seeks to live in the world, but he cannot avoid the spiritual damage that is so aptly figured in Haukyn the Actif Man's cloak.

Will is harassed by the conflicts and violence of the world. His desire to learn and understand matters both sacred and secular within a dangerous world drives him into a state of sleep that seems to be facilitated by a higher power. As Piers Plowman himself laments, "The world is a wikked wynd to hem who wolden truthe" (XVI 28). In order to successfully search out truth, Will must escape the world. His frequent dreams, which last throughout twenty passus in the B text, allow him passage into the liminal world of sleep. Once he has entered the space of sleep the worldly dangers to his body and soul recede. No longer must he consider the pressure of *liflode*; he is free to explore his faith actively. This space of religious sleep protects the sleeper from the physical and spiritual danger in the outside world. In his dream state Will is able to consider politically dangerous questions about the authority of kings (Prologue 123-127), the empowerment and spiritual superiority of the working class (V), and the nature of God (XVI 180-201). The political and ecclesiastical pressures of the world cannot harm Will in his dream; the safety of religious sleep allows Will to negotiate both spiritual and political concerns without fear of danger to his body or soul.

We can see this same protection from the pressures and dangers of the outside world in the Legend of the Seven Sleepers. Not only are they harassed and persecuted by the emperor Decius, but they, like Haukyn, are tormented by the need of *liflode*. God has preserved the sleepers despite their lack of *liflode.* Aelfric concerns himself in his homily with the problem of getting food to the persecuted Christians (256-264); the struggle to stay physically alive threatens to eclipse the struggle to stay spiritually righteous, honest,

and pure. However, once the sleepers slip into a God-sent religious sleep, they can survive without *liflode*. Aelfric says, "He Himself thus ordained these things, and by his mighty disposing ordered it, that one of them should feel how they fell asleep, and none of them knew where their souls rested. It was all unknown to them, but it was fully known to God" (298-301). Once God awakens the sleepers (in order to prove to heretics in later-day Ephesus that the resurrection really *will* involve the actual body of the deceased person),[64] they are immediately thrown back into the struggle for *liflode*. Upon waking, the saints' thoughts turn to food (*liflode*), and the poet dwells upon the struggle of the Seven Sleepers to obtain bread with old coins for nearly a third of the poem (565-577a; 677-734.). Once God has withdrawn his protective sleep, the dangers of *liflode*, in the form of suspicious townspeople, immediately assault the bodies of the newly awakened saints. While they were sleeping under the protection and will of the Lord, the sleepers were safe physically and spiritually; there are no guarantees of safety outside the sleeping space.

Entering the space of religious sleep not only protects the body and soul, as discussed above, but also enables the sleeper to become, through passive sleep, an active

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[64] Robert Alexander translates the passage thus:

> Some of the chief heretics said that men would never arise from death. Some of them said that the body, which alone is corrupted and turned to dust and sown widely, would never come together again, but the souls alone on Doomsday, without any body, would receive the joy of their resurrection. Thus, they erred with their lying speech, and they utterly stopped up their minds' understanding, so that they could not think of any of the words which our Savior Himself said in the Gospel concerning the resurrection...then it happened that God willed that the holy company should be waked, who had rested in the cave a fitting time."

participant in his spiritual progress. Spearing describes dream visions as "spiritual adventure" (xx) and the shift between passive, often involuntary sleep, and intense action and searching within the world of the dream-vision sets up a system that allows the dreamer, or seeker, to pursue his quest in safety. The protected, liminal space of religious sleep allows the seeker to take an active role in his own spiritual quest without subjecting his body and soul to the inevitable harm that comes from the "active" world. We can see this phenomenon in both the Legend of the Seven Sleepers and in *Piers Plowman*. By passively entering the space of religious sleep, the men in both stories assume active roles in their difficult progress toward salvation.

The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus owe their sainthood (as well as their lives) to passivity. As Magennis notes, "they are not in control of their own destinies: to all intents and purposes they are martyred without knowing it, for God causes them to fall into a miraculous sleep before they are walled up in the cave" ("Aelfric and the Legend" 321). However, their passivity ultimately allows them to become living, miraculous proof of God's divine grace and power. Despite their passivity, they are described as "heroes" ("Aelfric and the Legend" 320), a characteristic that associates the Seven Sleepers with action. According to Magennis, Aelfric endows the sleepers with "exemplary perseverence in the face of torture" ("Aelfric and the Legend" 324). Religious sleep has allowed the men to become agents in their own survival; their passivity has given them action. We can see this idea even more forcefully in *Piers Plowman*.

In *Piers Plowman*, Will's dream visions allow him passively to enter an active space wherein he can vigorously pursue his goal of salvation. Will apparently has no choice in when or how he sleeps and wakes; like the Seven Sleepers, God sends him

sleep when he is most in need of spiritual help and divine intervention. Will, like the Seven Sleepers, is wholly at the mercy of religious sleep. At the beginning of the poem, Will "slombered into a slepyng, it [the stream] sweyed so murye" (Prologue 10). When he wakes in Passus V, "wo was withalle" (V 3) because of the overwhelming sadness of his vision, but before he

> ...hadde faren a furlong, feyntise me hente
> That I ne myghte ferther a foot for defaute of slepynge
> And sat softely adoun and seide my bileve;
> And so I bablede on my bedes, thei brought me aslepe. (V 3)

Will collapses; he unquestioningly accepts that he is being forced into sleep by a power outside of his control, and he apparently does not resist. Interestingly, Will says that it is his beads, rather than his tiredness, that puts him to sleep. At this moment he acknowledges the religious or spiritual source of his dreams. Will's passivity in succumbing to sleep is extreme.

Within the world of his dream, however, Will is intensely active. Alford notes that the dream world "suspends the main action, allowing the dreamer...to step back and analyze what has gone wrong...The internal fiction forces a character to confront his own moral imperfection and by this means activates his sense of guilt" (47). In his dream visions Will travels far and wide; he is inquisitive and visits the very poor and the very rich. He lives an entire lifetime, complete with a wife, family, and riotous living, in his dream-within-a-dream in Passus XI. He meets and interrogates dozens of allegorical figures that travel with him and guide his way. Despite his penchant for engaging in long philosophical conversations, Will takes a very active role in his search for understanding his own salvation. The dreams are figured as a continuous quest or journey, and Will is

figured as the impetuous, vigorous, seeker. His restless movements in the dream bring him into dangerous places; he can even harm himself spiritually, as he does in his sinful lifetime-within-a-dream-within-a-dream, and yet emerge unscathed when he wakes up. As Alford notes,

> The intervening action does not really "happen." He still has not *seen* or *tasted* the fruit of the tree for which he would travel...'twenty hundred myle.' He has not witnessed as actual events the Crucifixion or the defeat of the devil. He has not come face to face with his ideal, Piers. All this lies ahead—as if Will's second inner dream, like the first, were a prophecy, a mirror of himself *in potentia*, a privileged foretaste of the outcome of his present course. (53)

In conversation with Alford, I contend that the dream is not a mirror, as he would have it, but instead a vehicle that transports Will to a different kind of space, like an alternate dimension. If it is a mirror, it is a mirror with abilities like Alice's looking glass. Though these events don't "happen" in the "real world," they *do happen* within an unearthly space accessed by means of religious sleep. The intense actions within the dream-space have a very real and lasting impact on Will's struggle toward salvation. His experiences inside his dreams have real consequences, but by being in this liminal space he is shielded from consequences that would do him harm. As Spearing observes, "the dream has become a means of breaking the tyranny of chronological narrative, and making past and present, whether real or fictional, equally present" (153). By means of religious sleep, Will is able to bring his past and future in line with his present, and experiment with this juxtaposition without fear of harm.

By considering *Piers Plowman* with an emphasis on folkloristic scholarship, we can work within a much broader frame of reference. Given the bewildering size and scope of *Piers Plowman*, a broad, interdisciplinary approach may yield surprising results.

I contend that folklore and oral tradition scholarship has a great deal to offer Langland studies; by taking advantage of critical and theoretical work done by scholars like John Miles Foley, John D. Niles and Ruth Finnegan, *Piers Plowman* scholars may find that the relationship between written and oral narratives may be more allusive and significant than previously thought.

Langland wrote *Piers Plowman* from inside a vigorous folk tradition, and I contend that a greater understanding of Langland's fluency in the oral traditions and folklore of his day will benefit Langland studies. Conversely, a greater understanding of *Piers Plowman* can also greatly benefit scholars of medieval folklore. *Piers Plowman* is a relatively untapped source rich with evidence about medieval folklore and folklife. As Middleton notes, "the poem has been a treasury of lively information about the daily habits, domestic life, agrarian and commercial practice, petty crime, popular pastimes, common sayings and beliefs, and political sentiments of its society" (3). Middleton's extensive list reads like the table of contents for an anthology of folklore, and it is a pity that more scholars have not used folklore and oral tradition as a way to unlock this poem's complex meanings. While *Piers Plowman* is certainly not ethnography, it does provide ethnographic information. The poem gives scholars the opportunity to improve their general fluency in medieval folklore. A richer understanding of *Piers Plowman* can give us a more complete picture of medieval popular beliefs about sleep and its connection to salvation. Understanding the coded meanings embedded in glancing references, as I have discussed above in the case of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, can bring us closer to an understanding of Langland's nuanced and complex worldview. By simply referring briefly to the legend, Langland brings the audience to what Maring has

described as “a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself” (34).

Chapter 6: The *Vita Aedwardi Regis* and the Seven Sleepers

In the previous chapter I have shown how an oral traditional approach can give us new ways to understand "literary" poetry. In this final chapter I demonstrate how an understanding of the Seven Sleepers legend can illuminate and deepen our understanding of the meaning of kingship in Book II of the *Vita Aedwardi Regis*.

The *Vita Aedwardi Regis* is an anonymous work dedicated to Queen Edith (or Eadgyth). The work exists in a single, damaged, surviving manuscript (c. 1100[65]). Scholars generally agree that the *Vita* was written by a single author[66] between 1065 and 1067.[67]Book I is an historical prose narrative of the great deeds of Queen Edith's family, interspersed with poetry. Book II, written after 1066 and also dedicated to Edith, is a semi-hagiographical narrative of the religious life of King Edward the Confessor. It contains no poems.

As does *Piers Plowman*, the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* invokes the Seven Sleepers legend in a religious, Christian context of dreams and visions. Among Edward's many

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[65] See Barlow, The Life of King Edward, xxv-xxx for a synthesis of evidence for the dating of the manuscript.

[66] Frank Barlow argues that the author was a foreigner, probably Lotharingian or Flemish, and spends several pages exploring possible identifiable candidates for authorship, including Goscelin and Folcard, both monks from the Continent who came to England prior to 1066.

[67] According to Barlow, "It seems better to...accept the internal evidence and date Book II to 1067 and to write the history of Edward's cult according to the probable facts than to demand a date which suits a preconceived theory about the cult" (xxx).

visions was an Easter revelation of coming disaster, foretold by the Seven Sleepers.[68] Barlow summarizes the scene in the *Vita* thus:

> Edward on Easter Sunday, possibly in 1060, when dining with his court at Westminster after attending mass, burst into indecorous laughter. Pressed by Earl Harold, a bishop, and an abbot to explain his unusual behavior, the king disclosed that it had been revealed to him in a vision that the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, who had been lying on their right sides, had suddenly turned over and would lie on their left sides for seventy-four years—a sinister event which heralded the disasters for the world foretold by Christ...his interrogators sent legates to 'the Emperor Maniches' to investigate the truth of the vision. And not only was it found to be correct—to the amazement of the local inhabitants—but the truth of the prophecy was proved by the subsequent events. (387)

This version of the Seven Sleepers legend varies in several accounts from those considered previously. First and foremost, it implies that the Seven Sleepers are still sleeping and did not wake up after a miraculous span of time.[69] While some variants explicitly state that the sleepers died after the miracle was revealed, others make no mention of the subsequent exploits of the saints after their holy awakening. This version is radically different from the others because it lacks the miraculous awakening motif. In the context of the *Vita* we have an image of constant slumber, changing only to signal impending danger to the Christian world. I argue that this element of variation is significant to an understanding of the function of the legend in the *Vita*. This version of

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[68] Though it may seem obvious to some, I believe it is worth pointing out again that the legend of the Seven Sleepers seems to be inextricably linked in the medieval literary mind with the dream vision tradition.

[69] Speculatively, I would like to suggest that this variant may be indicative of the same legend tradition that grew into the King Arthur/Barbossa-as-sleeping-savior legend traditions.

the legend invokes fundamental ideas about kingship in the context of dreams and visions.

As in *Piers Plowman*, the oral traditional nature of the legend of the Seven Sleepers is implied by the referentiality in the *Vita Aedwardi Regis*. The legend is not told at full length;[70] it is only referred to. The reference invokes in the reader or hearer the entire story of the Seven Sleepers, and its presence gives the *Vita* deeply enriched cultural context.

Not surprisingly, a great deal of scholarship surrounding the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* focuses on tracing manuscripts and discovering an "ur" text. Thus, scholars have been quite alert to what appear to them to be irregularities in composition. Frank Barlow argues that Edward's vision of the Seven Sleepers is "clearly a composite piece" ("The *Vita"* 391) and feels that it "hangs badly together" ("The *Vita*" 392). To explain these apparent flaws in composition (and historical accuracy) Barlow proposes a rather hopeful and vague set of origins for the manuscript tradition that resulted in the inclusion of the Seven Sleepers vision in the *Vita* as we know it today. I would suggest that, instead of searching for definitive proof that the legend was copied from manuscript X by brother Y in the monastery at Z, it is more fruitful to suggest that what Barlow perceives as flaws

[70] Though the legend is not told, Edward explains the Seven Sleepers to the bishop and abbot. This is interesting, because Edward's apparent need to explain these official saints to such knowledgeable and high-ranking representatives of the church may indicate that in contemporary experience the legend functioned largely outside of church doctrine. As discussed in Chapter 4, miracle legends were often taught to the people by the people, rather than by high-ranking bishops and abbots. As Degh claims, "it is common knowledge that the human being is, by nature, a *homo religiosus*, who by compulsion constructs personal variables of the established Church in which he or she has been indoctrinated by public education" ("What is a Belief Legend?" 35).

are actually the footprints of a cultural process that dictated the composition of the *Vita.* Barlow sees the "composite" nature of the episode as a sign of sub-standard composition. He does not seem to consider that he is imbuing the historical contemporary audience with 21st-century aesthetics. As discussed in Chapter 4, medieval literary composition cannot and should not be evaluated according to twentieth century tastes and values. Scholars should endeavor to investigate the work on its own terms.

In his painstakingly researched book, Edward the Confessor, Barlow makes the case that the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* was revised between 1100 and 1124 to expand accounts of miracles, revise Kind Edward's deathbed prophecy, and add Edward's vision of the Seven Sleepers. This presumed reworking of the *Vita* was part of an overall revision (or "refurbishing" as Barlow calls it) of King Edward's image during his posthumous journey toward canonization. These efforts were undertaken by William of Malmesbury and Osbert of Clare, among other monks, in a campaign to reinforce the rights and claims of Westminster Abbey by effecting the canonization of Edward, the abbey's greatest patron (272-273).

I contend that the inclusion of Edward's vision of the Seven Sleepers in the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* was a political and social endeavor to construct Edward as a powerful protector of the English people after his death. The insertion of the episode draws a comparison between Seven Sleepers and Edward. The Sleepers act as a permanent protecting force for England in the *Vita*. They appear to Edward on Easter—the holiest of Christian holidays—and warn him of the coming disaster. Though the *Vita* avoids making this claim, the inclusion of the legend implies that Edward will perform a similar function for England. After his death, Edward, like the Seven Sleepers, remains an active

participant in the lives of his people, as evidenced by the vigorous cult of Edward the Confessor.

By linking Edward to the well-known legend of the Seven Sleepers, the *Vita* promotes the image of Edward as a saint. If Barlow is correct in his claim that the *Vita* was overhauled during the campaign to officially recognize Edward as a saint, then the inclusion of the Seven Sleepers legend reinforces Edward's connection to other saints. Edward is granted a vision of the Seven Sleepers, who are already officially saints; he is privileged with official knowledge of these holy bodies' status.

By including a version of the legend that states that the seven sleep indefinitely, the *Vita* suggests that Edward, like the Seven Sleepers, will become a permanent protector after his death. Edward's vision reveals that the Seven Sleepers are actually still sleeping in Ephesus. Despite their enduring sleep, the Sleepers communicate a message of warning to Edward. Later, Edward's own enduring and powerful status as a cult figure echoes the permanent, protective status of the Seven Sleepers.

Edward's vision of the Seven Sleepers is not out of character for him. Barlow observes that "nearly all the miraculous stories about Edward involve visions and their fulfillment. Most of those whom he cured are advised in a dream that the king would heal them" ("The *Vita*,"391). Edward's association with dreams and visions parallels the legend of the Seven Sleepers' similar associations. Thus it is, perhaps, only natural that Edmund would experience a vision of the Seven Sleepers.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The preceding chapters have shown that the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is a fascinating part of medieval oral tradition, and eminently worthy of further consideration. The legend was obviously popular and widespread during the medieval period, yet it has received little serious critical attention. In this preliminary study I investigate the legend of the Seven Sleepers on the macro level and show the big picture of how this legend existed in medieval England. I have argued that a better understanding of the legend of the Seven Sleepers from a folkloristic and oral traditional perspective can give scholars a richer, more complete understanding of medieval literary productions like *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi Regis*.

This study is informed by folklore and oral tradition theory and scholarship, as well as medieval literary theory. Using folklore and oral tradition scholarship in concert with literary scholarship provides depth to the study of medieval texts. An interdisciplinary approach allows one to engage one's research topic with a fully-stocked toolbox.

The legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus tells the story of seven young Christian men who fall asleep in cave while hiding from the persecuting Emperor Decius; the men miraculously sleep for centuries and awaken in the reign of the Christian emperor Constantine. Versions of the legend are found throughout the Western world, and analogs have been identified in Asia. The manuscript tradition of the legend spans fifteen centuries.

The ubiquity, rate of variation, referentiality, and traces of oral poetics provide convincing evidence that the legend of the Seven Sleepers was a vibrant part of medieval English oral tradition. The legend is invoked in charms, narratives, homilies, poems, and biographies. The compelling evidence that the legend of the Seven Sleepers was part of an oral tradition means that the legend performed a function for medieval English culture. The legend's frequent association with sleep and sleep disorder indicates that the legend fulfilled a protective function in the lives and minds of medieval English people.

References to the Seven Sleepers in *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* provide a useful point of entry for an examination of these texts. Investigating the legend of the Seven Sleepers as oral tradition in the context of *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita* contributes to the overall scholarly understanding of the two literary texts. In *Piers Plowman*, the allusion to the Seven Sleepers acts as a spiritual tool in the quest for salvation. Understanding the legend in the context of *Piers Plowman* gives us a better idea of how people understood religious sleep in Langland's time. In the *Vita*, King Edward's vision of the Seven Sleepers depicts his spirituality and nationalism. An understanding of the traditition of the Seven Sleepers sheds light on this mystifying passage in the *Vita.*

At this time I would like to suggest several avenues for further potentially fruitful study. First, my preliminary work with the *Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Legend of the Seven Sleepers* suggests that this version of the legend was composed within an aesthetic of oral poetics. More in-depth research with this text is likely to provide further compelling evidence. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the various texts of the legend; a detailed comparative study of these variants is needed.

For the purposes of this study I have confined my investigation to two textual references to the Seven Sleepers in *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi*, respectively. A thorough search of the Anglo-Saxon corpus and the Middle English corpus may yield additional references to the Seven Sleepers; analysis of additional references may potentially change the way scholars have understood the legend thus far.

My preliminary assessment of the legend's broad function(s) in medieval British cultures is consciously focused on the big picture; my goal is to provoke further conversation about this fascinating legend. At the end of this study I am left with many questions of my own: When and how and why did the Seven Sleepers become incorporated in healing charms? Can we link the performance of these charms to a hypothetical cult of saints? How did use of the charms change over time? How do the texts of the charms differ geographically? What kind of psychological or emotional function did these specific charms fulfill? David Hufford's study, The Terror that Comes in the Night, may help future scholars answer some of these questions, though this begs the question of whether or not one can compare modern experiences with sleep-terrors to our fragmentary understanding of medieval fears about sleep.

This study is the beginning of what I hope will be a fruitful conversation. There are many unanswered and unexplored questions surrounding the legend of the Seven Sleepers. These questions are not only relevant to medieval studies, but to studies of contemporary folklore. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this fascinating legend is its extraordinary power to make meaning for us, even today.

Appendix A

And They Look Extremely Tired to Me:
The Seven Sleepers in Current Popular Culture and Belief

The legend of the Seven Sleepers has permeated modern-day Western culture to a surprising degree. References to the Seven Sleepers occur in popular children's fiction (for example, Susan Cooper's The Dark is Rising sequence, which, in addition, curiously includes a character modeled on Langland's Haukyn the Actif Man), popular music (independent music icon Robyn Hitchcock's curious song "Ye Sleeping Knights of Jesus,"[71] which satirically echoes Patience's exhortation in Passus XIV discussed above),

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[71] Lyrics:

I have seen the sleeping knights of Jesus
Gazing out across the open sea
I have seen the sleeping knights of Jesus
And they look extremely tired to me
Dyin' of starvation in the gutter (in the gutter)
That is all the future holds for me (holds for me)
Or alcoholic poisoning in the toilet of my choice
That's all there is, as far as I can see
Fried to death in seconds by the Russians (by the Russians)
Or if you're lucky just a sudden stroke (sudden stroke)
A lingering death from fallout as your teeth and hair fall out
A certain death from cancer if you smoke
But I have seen the sleeping knights of Jesus
Gazing out across the open sea
I have seen the sleeping knights of Jesus
And they look extremely tired to me
Put your faith in God, he won't expect you
Put your faith in death because it's free
If you believe in nothing, honey, it believes in you
For God's sake don't waste any faith on me
When he comes to judge us in his glory (in his glory)
Then we'll see how old a man can get (man can get)
He must be feeling ancient up there on the rim of space
Two thousand years and he ain't been back yet
But I have seen the sleeping knights of Jesus

and every day speech.[72] Upon hearing of my project, two individuals at the University of Missouri-Columbia told me that members of their family made reference to the Seven Sleepers in ordinary, traditional speech. Dr. Noah Heringman told me his grandmother referred to people who slept late in the morning as "sleeping like the Seven Sleepers."[73] Later, Dr. Johanna Kramer informed me her mother uses a proverb that uses the Seven Sleepers in a weather-prediction context.[74] Interestingly, both people mentioned as referencing the Seven Sleepers were German, one by heritage and one by nationality. It is to be hoped that future scholarship will investigate the role that the legend of the Seven Sleepers plays in current German and German-American popular culture and belief. The legend has carried its cultural credence through centuries, and a better understanding of its meaning leads to an improved understanding of its role in Western folklore and literature.

Rub their eyes and gape at what they see
I have seen the sleeping knights of Jesus
And it looks as though they've noticed me
And it looks as though they've noticed me

[72] Redmond, Phillip. "Some Wexford Folklore." *Folklore*. 3 (1899): 362-364. 364

[73] Personal communication, December 2007.

[74] Personal communication, February, 2008. Dr. Kramer explained that in Germany the feast day of the Seven Sleepers (July 27) performs a comparable role to the American Groundhog Day tradition. The weather conditions that day are believed to indicate future weather patterns.

Appendix B

Translation from Gay

For the purposes of this study I have relied on David Gay's translation of the instructions and incantation of Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3.

> Against a dwarf one shall take seven little offerings, such as one has worshipped with, and write these names on each of the offerings: Maximianus, Malchus, Iohannes, Martimianus, Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion. Then afterwards one shall sing the charm that I say hereafter, first in the left ear, then in the right ear, and then above the top of the man's head. And then a maiden must go and hang it around his neck, and do so for three days; he will soon be well.
>
> Here he came in walking, in spider form.
> He had a harness in his hand, he said that you were his steed,
> He put his traces on your neck. Then they began to travel from the ground;
> So soon they came from the ground, then their limbs began to cool.
> Then came in walking the beast's sister;
> She put an end to this then and swore oaths
> That this would never harm the sick one,
> Nor that one who might find this charm or knows how to recite it.
> Amen. So be it.

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