

MEDIEVAL DEATH TRIP

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

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For my parents, who deserve a traditional medieval dedicatory letter of many pages and exuberant phrases of praise, but will, with their great understanding, indulge my exhaustion and accept this simple token: Mom and Dad, thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

The two projects presented here represent fruits from two vines branching out from the same furrow of inquiry. That furrow has been an exploratory trench cut into medieval narrative, and one of the vines is that of fiction, and the other is that of exposition, twining together like the balladeer's briar and rose. The first seeds I sowed were those of fiction, and initially my work was all in the service of devising a novel. What seemed ancillary to this — a commonplace book of weedy pressings and clippings — has, however, flourished as a second crop, equal to the first in both creative expression and engagement with medieval literature.

To flense this figure of its allegorical integument, let me say that what I've assembled here is a work of fiction imitating monastic prose discourse called the *Libellus de Mutationis*, or "little book of changes," and transcripts of the first twelve episodes of my educational podcast, *Medieval Death Trip*, which function as a series of short essays on a selection of medieval texts. Both are the direct products of a course of reading in hagiography and historiography of the 11th through 14th centuries.

This reading began as research for a novel-writing project. Though I was reading medieval literature as my scholarly field, I did not actually intend to write medieval historical fiction. As an undergraduate, I had worked through three or four start-from-scratch attempts to tell a story of the Black Death hitting a monastery, and my dissatisfaction with my ability to tell that story in a way that true to the time had rather soured me on medieval settings for modern fiction. But in 2007, I had the idea for a singular short fable involving an anchorite, and the writing of that tale (a version of

which concludes the *Libellus de Mutationis*) in an intentionally medieval monastic voice proved to be such a pleasure that I began to seriously consider developing a long-form work with a similar narrator as my creative project at Mizzou. Part of the difficulty with my plague story had always been a tendency for the third-person, rich novelistic description to drift into the excessively gruesome. In my imagination of the scenes, the sensory detail was overwhelming — and what it ultimately overwhelmed was the prose. But rendering such a world in the stripped down prose of a chronicler — bare of lyrical description, but not necessarily unornamented or minimalist — freed the story from the crushing burden of realistically and immersively rendering that world which is so distant from us. But while the material medieval world is distant and perceivable only dimly through bits stained glass not shattered by the New Model Army, the voices of its narrators are not.

Because my initial plan for my project was to write a fictional abbey chronicle — specifically, the chronicle of the backwater Peacock Abbey in the High Peak (the conceit being that at its 9th-century foundation, it was *peac ac* or “Peak Oak” abbey, corrupted over time and over multiple refoundations) — my first course of action was to read a large selection of monastic chronicles and local histories. My entry point was Jocelin of Brakelond’s *Chronicle of Bury-St. Edmunds*, but the one-two punch of Guibert of Nogent’s *Monodiae* (published in English translation under the title *A Monk’s Confession*) and Herman of Tournai’s *The Restoration of the Monastery of Saint Martin of Tournai* thoroughly captured my attention with their surprising depths of detail and candidness, and I began to collect one local institutional history after another, working through them voraciously.

The novel writing proceeded only in fits and starts, with the project initially suffering from an overload of stories stratified across nested time periods, legends within histories within secondhand retellings all framed within one character's memory. Characters became fragmented across these layers, as well, as a plot for one suddenly worked much better as an incident in the Anarchy under King Stephen and thus no longer fit a character who was meant to be alive during the Conquest, or a pivotal experience for a narrator involving an encounter with pagan Viking raiders became increasingly anachronistic as that character's temporal position was pushed later and later. But these are simply logistical problems that could be overcome with a combination of ingenuity and a willingness to sacrifice one's darlings. The more profound difficulty was a matter of aesthetics.

As part of my research, I sampled a range of historical novels set at least in part in the middle ages. What I found was that I was dissatisfied with nearly all of them. The predominant problem was misrepresentation. Among the mass market books, the problem was one of polarization: negative "medieval" elements were cartoonishly exaggerated and positive elements were anachronistically modern. For example, Margaret Frazer's 16th-century protagonists in her mystery novel *The Sempster's Tale* are markedly progressive in their views on religious tolerance and feminism. In *Doomsday Book*, Connie Willis represents medieval mentalities more persuasively (and is able to justify an ideologically enlightened protagonist by making her a time-traveler), but delivers a vision of the Black Death that matches the exaggerated stereotypes we have of it. The plague can't merely be devastating; it must be apocalyptic, and by the end, the time-traveler is the sole survivor in her manorial village. A powerful historical drama becomes for the

novelist something closer to melodrama once a serving of the medieval grotesque has been spackled on. Ken Follet's *The Pillars of the Earth* does its own share of playing up dirtiness and disease, but is generally more restrained and nuanced in its period details and psychology; yet, it ultimately unfolds in story-beats and set-pieces that are so clearly those of a 20th-century thriller that the medieval setting comes to feel almost incidental to the function of the novel. If my judgements of the books are a bit harsh, this is no doubt a reflection of the frustrations I had worked through myself in struggling to tell a medieval story in modern prose. It rather seems like the only way to make a medieval setting palatable to a mass audience is to either reinforce the audience's stereotypical assumptions about medieval life or dress up modern people in medieval costume (or do both simultaneously, constructing a tidy binary for distinguishing villains from heroes). In an age where a review of the historical miniseries *The White Queen* lumps in the fantasy series *Game of Thrones* in its list of similar popular "period pieces" (Valentine), it feels practically reckless to contribute to the already enormous mass of misconceptions that exist about the middle ages, and I decided that I wanted to avoid that.¹

¹ I can understand the artistic argument against a pedantic insistence on accuracy above all other considerations, but for a period so popularly misunderstood as the Middle Ages, it seems to me that some sort of principled stand is worth making. But I must also admit that this is a matter of personal disposition. Years ago, I heard a story on public radio in which a birdwatcher talked about how he couldn't enjoy a great many Hollywood movies because the sound designers clearly knew nothing about what birds lived where and thus created utterly nonsensical soundscapes, with the calls of South American waterfowl intermingled with the songs of nocturnal European birds all in a scene ostensibly set in winter in upstate New York. For him, the effect was as jarring as if an American were told that a film is taking place in Maine, and yet all the exteriors feature palm trees and everyone speaks with Southern accents. Because most of us (including sound designers) don't have much knowledge about birdsong, errors concerning them seem trivial. And I have told this story to others who find it amusing or kind of silly and roll their eyes at the birdwatcher who is narcissistically letting his expert knowledge interfere with a simple pleasure. But to me, the birdwatcher's story is a living nightmare, and the indifference of the sound designer is not artistic license, but something closer to neglect, even approaching a kind of contempt for the birdwatcher's knowledge, which amounts to no less than contempt for the reality of the world we live in and work hard to understand.

More ostensibly literary fiction fared somewhat better. I was considerably more impressed with Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play*, Frederick Buechner's *Godric*, and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. These three are all told in first-person narration. The narration of both Unsworth's and Buechner's novels remains stylistically quite modern, though the pacing of *Godric* is rather unconventional. *Godric* consists of quite short, rubricated chapters that deliberately conjure up the feeling of reading a saint's life or *confessio*, though Godric still speaks like the narrator of a 20th-century novel. *The Name of the Rose* actually presents its text as a rediscovered medieval manuscript, and Eco makes more of an attempt at pastiche in the narration of Adso of Melk, though this is not sustained, and the style frequently lapses into the conventions of the 20th-century novel (especially in dialogue scenes). I suppose it may seem a bit absurd to fault a modern novel for being written like a modern novel. But my own reading in medieval texts and analysis of them kept driving home the ways in which medieval habits of mind are not just mirrored in but actively shaped by habits and conventions of rhetoric (the work of Mary Carruthers, especially *The Book of Memory*, has been especially influential on me in this regard, along with the analyses of medieval discourse and tropes by Rita Copeland and Caroline Walker Bynum). As such, fitting a medieval tale into a modern narrative style seems to me to distort the representation of the period as much as any anachronisms of material culture or ideology.

Eco's *Baudolino* and José Saramago's *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* produce a rather different effect by adopting a more radical epistemology for their fiction. Both novels focus on unreliable tale tellers. The roguish Baudolino is telling a rather fantastical, Munchausenesque version of his life story, including a trip to the legendary

kingdom of Prester John, and the proofreader Raimundo Silva has chosen to invent his own imaginary account of the Portuguese Christians' attempt to retake Lisbon from the Moors, only in his version without the assistance of a passing force of crusaders. Though these two narratives are "unreliable" for different reasons, they both nonetheless highlight the act of challenging our belief in a story of the past. They actively embrace the reader's skepticism and undermine the unbroken, immersive "fictional dream" (to use John Gardner's famous phrase) that the more conventional historical novels all play to. Rather than being "transported" into a vividly realized reconstruction of the past — a reconstruction that conceals from us that it is half-fantasy — the reader of these two novels is continually reminded that this past is an illusion, with bits of history mixed up in pure invention. Saramago highlights this quality in one passage:

After all, this is simply another novel amongst so many, he need not concern himself with introducing what is already there, for such books, the fictions they narrate, are created, both books and fictions, with a constant element of doubt, with a reticent affirmation, above all the disquiet of knowing that nothing is true, and that it is necessary to pretend that it is, at least for a time, until we can no longer resist the indelible evidence of change, then we turn to the time that has passed, for it alone is truly time, and we try to reconstitute the moment we failed to recognise, the moment that passed while we were reconstituting some other time, and so on and so forth, from one moment to the next, every novel is like this, desperation, a frustrated attempt to save something of the past.

Except that it still has not been established whether it is the novel that prevents man from forgetting himself or the impossibility of forgetfulness that makes him write novels. (47)

This metafictional approach speaks powerfully to me because I also harbor a deep ambivalence — weighted slightly more towards resistance than acceptance — about the educational value of historical fiction. Although it's true that I can rattle off the basic chronology and careers of the emperors of Rome up to Nero far more due to reading Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* than from having (later) read Suetonius, something nonetheless rankles me about the idea — commonly expressed by fans of historical fiction — that such novels are read as a fun way to learn history without having to deal with boring “dry facts” from textbooks, or, as one GoodReads user remarks, “A good historical fiction allows me to learn without noticing it” (Saadia). My own experience reading historical fiction set in the middle ages has only drawn my attention to the inescapable falsification that fiction brings. I'm deeply skeptical that fiction is a good medium for acquiring knowledge about anything (nor does “without noticing” strike me as a good way to learn anything). If anything, I'm coming to hold the conviction that art is not particularly good at conveying affirmative truths; what it really does is show us the many fascinating ways in which we continually get the world — and ourselves — wrong.² And though it may seem to be a passé bit of Seventies postmodernism, I still find very attractive the quasi-ethical power of metafiction to refuse to let artifice become

² This is a theme I discuss in greater depth in Episode 16 of *Medieval Death Trip* (not included in the selection of episodes here) as part of a memorial to the then recently deceased Oliver Sacks. There is a connection, I think, in the way that neuroscientists can learn about how the perception works by observing its failures in patients with neurological disorders and the way fiction offers us its own range of constrained and distorted models of the world and human experience.

transparent. Fiction that to some degree undermines its own claims to historical authority actually demonstrates a greater respect for history as a discipline than fiction that presumes to deliver a seamless verisimilitude in its representation of the past.

And so I found myself dissatisfied with the act of representing medieval life in conventional novelistic scenes, both in the work I was reading and in the writing I was attempting. I found myself unable to suspend disbelief; all I could see were the bits of slight of hand, the fudges, the outlines of index cards diligently marked up with fun historical factoids. And yet, at the same time, I was anxiously looking forward to each primary source I opened up. These I found engaging and aesthetically interesting in ways the modern fiction was not. Even coming to recognize similar seams and tricks where the medieval writer's own artifice shows through, these fascinated and delighted me where the modern writing tired me. And in my own writing, I pulled away from the attempt to write as though I could see everything, as though I were striving for a photorealistic painting of a medieval scene, and attempted instead to imitate the narration through which medieval people — well, at least a narrow class of monastic people — represented themselves. This was the voice of “The Legend of the Anchorite” that had started me down this road, and so I continued with more short pieces in the voice of a medieval chronicler or encyclopedist, drawing on Gerald of Wales, Walter Map, and Thomas of Marlborough (author of the *History of Evesham Abbey*) as particular models.

What I realized was that my artistic interest wasn't really in medieval history, and only somewhat in medieval life and people, but much more in medieval storytelling. I liked the sparseness of the descriptions and the directness of the action. My normal tendency in writing scenes is towards rather baroque descriptions, deep interiority, and

naturalistic dialogue; the discipline required to produce narration that hewed more closely to the aesthetics of high medieval prose narrative was invigorating, as constraints often are. These pastiches are the fiction I present here. In the future they may well find a place as one layer in a larger narrative, but for now they stand as a bit of costume jewelry, not seeking the false fidelity of a counterfeiter or forger, but instead only evoking the impression of the gems and settings which they imitate.

One of the constraining features of the texts I'm imitating is a narrowness of focus, a deliberate elimination of ancillary elements of plot and description. This mode is similar to what Erich Auerbach terms the "legendary style," which he somewhat uncharitably describes thusly:

Even where the legendary does not immediately betray itself by elements of the miraculous, by the repetition of well-known standard motives, typical patterns and themes, through neglect of clear details of time and place, and the like, it is generally quickly recognizable by its composition. It runs far too smoothly. All cross-currents, all friction, all that is casual, secondary to the main events and themes, everything unresolved, truncated, and uncertain, which confuses the clear progress of the action and the simple orientation of the actors, has disappeared. (19)

This basic stylistic principle applies to the embedded narratives of the *Libellus de Mutationis*, which aren't necessarily lacking in uncertainty or ambiguities, but which tend not to interpolate subplots or explore secondary characters or provide complex motivations. Instead, the complexities of real life live only in glimpses at the level of the

metanarrative and in the motivations of the narrator. You can see something like this in the work of Walter Map, who tends to tell fairly straightforward exemplary stories for the edification and entertainment of his audience, but whose wry personality and feelings about his contemporaries slip through in the framing commentaries. And, if you accept J. J. Cohen's reading, a more complex personal psychology is reflected in the seemingly straightforward narratives of animal and human hybrids that appear in the works of Gerald of Wales. Here the juxtaposition of these descriptions with historical narratives of the English conquest of Wales manifests Gerald's own conflicted, Cambro-Norman heritage and borderland-infused sense of identity in ways that he couldn't express (or perhaps even fully conceptualize) directly. Therefore, in this kind of framework, the complexities lie less in the plots of the stories or the minds of their main characters and more in the underlying purposes for telling these stories. The fables and tales aren't just stories; they are speech-acts, feints and blows in a larger argument.

A convention of this style that I've made conscious use of is a utilitarian approach to characterization. For the most part, characters are initially described almost entirely by their social role or occupation. Physical description is limited to traits that explain something about the character or signify status, be it social or moral. This is part of the legendary style as it runs from classical writers through to their medieval imitators, which features an "ethically oriented historiography" that could not conceive of social forces on a large scale and so represented the causality of history either through the wheel of Fortune or the exemplary moral character (positive or negative) of important people (Auerbach 38). The moral or hierarchical status of a character is the key measure for the appropriateness of an outcome, and so that is the most important thing to know about a

character. Similarly, space is only described enough to color in its status; rich detail is generally lacking and description is more likely to be by simile or analogy than by direct description of features. I like to think of this effect as archaeological: you see a person or a scene figuratively in terms of a broad and bold floorplan, but the details of that space come only in fragmentary pieces, so that you know a room you're excavating is a kitchen because you have the head of a spoon, the handle of a large pot, some fragments of pig bones, and a ring of ashy earth.

A stylistic side-effect of this principle is a convention that seems quite odd by modern standards but is common to this kind of medieval writing. This is the odd delay in furnishing characters with proper names or distinctive characteristics. A person may appear earlier in a story and may even be a prominent actor in a scene, but will not be described or named (beyond being identified by occupation) until a later moment when their characteristics matter or they are set in relation to another character. Certainly, this trait conveys some concept of the relatively low priority put on individual identity in medieval consciousness, but more to the point I find it a delightful bit of stylistic inflection precisely because of how much it seems to flout modern narrative convention; I use such a delay with the character Pandulf in the Tale of the Troublesome Thane.

Perhaps the most trying stylistic trait I've attempted to honor is restricting dramatized speech only to formal speech, especially for the more ostensibly historical episodes. In these, incidental conversation is generally conveyed through paraphrase or summary, whereas direct representations of speech tend to fit conventional set pieces or patterns, such as speeches, oaths, boasts, and questions. Only in the more fable-like tales does conversation (especially among those of lower status) begin to blossom into slightly

more naturalistic dialogue, though even then, dialogue is a minimal vector for characterization. This principle is a challenge because it runs so squarely against the modern creative writing axiom of “show, don’t tell.” But speaking from my own experience, I found that trying to minimize the use of dialogue also helped me shake off the cinematic influences on scene-staging that are always encroaching up any 21st-century fiction writer.

And while I have been rather proud of these stories and took great pleasure in producing them, I also experienced a nagging doubt. Was I in danger of turning myself into a Pierre Menard? What is the point of writing in the style of medieval narrative for a modern audience that by and large isn’t reading medieval narratives (and even when they are — or are encountering in the forms of television miniseries — aren’t praising the style)? On the one hand, I do truly believe in the benefits of reviving and reintegrating old forms and modes as a form of artistic development. I use this principle in my creative writing pedagogy. But for every Bob Dylan riding the wave of the folk revival or Quentin Tarantino reestablishing the relevance of the exploitation flick, you have a David Cope composing original, computer-assisted Bach fugues or a Guy Maddin getting his quasi-silent films shown on a few art-house screens. This is not to assert that mass market popularity is the proper measure of success, and, indeed, I consider myself a big fan of Guy Maddin (Cope’s work does seem somehow more redundant rather than transformative). But it does seem that embracing an archaic style (especially one that — unlike folk music and Seventies exploitation films — hasn’t really had any practitioners in several generations) poses the risk of slipping into mere novelty. And as I try to picture a full-length novel that is essentially a Walter Map or chronicle pastiche, I struggle to

articulate an answer to the question of why someone should read that instead of reading Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* or *The History of Evesham Abbey*. One possibility is to take the pastiche and do something more transformative with it, as Thomas Pynchon does in *Mason & Dixon*, and let the style itself serve as a form of commentary on the distance between ourselves and the past (and our perceptions of it). Of course, Pynchon also ends up creating essentially an 18th-century cartoon in that novel, and cartoonishness is one of those qualities I'm concerned that popular representations of the middle ages are already overburdened with. So my uncertainty and ambivalence remains.

But another answer is that if I'm writing my own narrative *exempla* and chronicle episodes because I want to share the aesthetic pleasures of that style of writing, then perhaps the logical thing is to cut out the middle man and share directly. If my conviction is that these texts are interesting and engaging without having to be reworked for modern tastes, then surely I should be advocating for the original texts. Throughout my research reading, I had been collecting details and idioms and proverbs, bits of incident and explanations of monastic or political practices, building up my own digital sourcebook. At one point, I copied out an item from one of the sources I was reading that had really captivated me — a tale of prisoners attempting to poison their jailer with a toad — and after e-mailing it to some of my friends, it occurred to me that it might make for a new category of blog post that I could put onto my personal website. I named this category “Medieval Death Trip,” after Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip*, a book for which I have been an unabashed evangelist since I first encountered it around 2002.³ The blog postings only continued for a short while, but the label stuck in my mind and the concept

³ For more on this book, see the Prologue episode for *Medieval Death Trip* below.

of doing something with a series of these texts kept me marking them with the label “MDT” and putting them into my collection. In late 2014, I finally brought to fruition a long-simmering plan to take the concept of those posts and produce it as an online audio series. And in this way, *Medieval Death Trip* the podcast was born.

I became familiar with the podcast format through my work as the Web Editor of *The Missouri Review*. I was one of the producers of the magazine’s podcast from 2007–2011, contributing primarily to the technical aspects of preparing and releasing episodes. The format greatly appealed to me, as audio has always played a large role in my consumption and enjoyment of fiction; the authors who made the strongest impression on me as an adolescent and as a teenager I primarily encountered through audiobooks. I also have found that I am very much an aural learner and have taken in an enormous amount of information through non-fiction podcasts and iTunes U courses over the past seven years. It’s an area I’d been interested in contributing to, and the democratic nature of the podcast medium provided a relatively simple entry point.

So in late 2012, I began to formulate the idea of making a podcast that would share the kinds of fun excerpts from medieval texts that I’d been putting on my blog. I had some successful models to consider. There are many popular podcasts that could be broadly described as organized around textual analysis. However, these focus primarily on pop culture, with “bad movie” podcasts being an entire genre unto themselves and the smaller number of book-oriented podcasts consisting either of fan discussions of popular genres and franchises or of interviews with and readings by authors. Outside of a subcategory of podcasts made by teachers as part of their course materials, there were very few shows that focused on actually sharing and featuring specific texts (as opposed

to featuring reviews of those texts). There are a large number of history podcasts that focus on a specific event, person, or text each episode, but these generally adopt a lecture/presentation format, including only short extracts of primary sources and spending much more time summarizing, explaining, and commenting on the episode's topic. Most of the "medieval" podcasts currently produced fall into this category.

Of podcasts covering medieval topics that are actively in production, the one which dominates search results is the *Medieval Archives* podcast. It is a typical example of the format of history podcast that I've just described, essentially providing half-hour lessons on medieval topics, along with interviews with academics and authors as well as occasional reviews of medieval-themed television shows, such as the miniseries adaptation of *The Pillars of the Earth* and History's (formerly the History Channel) *Vikings*. Medieval topics are also regularly featured on the far more mass-audience programs *Stuff You Missed in History Class* (which follows a similar "lesson" format, but with two hosts) and the BBC's *In Our Time with Melyvn Bragg* (which uses a panel discussion format with guest academics). One smaller podcast that comes closer to my own goals is *Saga Thing*, in which two hosts summarize (with excerpts) and discuss Norse sagas. There are also a number of defunct podcasts that covered medieval history and literature, many of which were produced by teachers as ancillary course materials.

But nearly all of these (with an exception for *Saga Thing*, which does highlight the pleasures of the text itself) tend to treat the primary sources as things to be abstracted and recast, as material that must be gleaned and rendered and otherwise extensively processed for the audience to be able to enjoy. My goal for *Medieval Death Trip* was to give these texts a chance to spread out, to be more than one- or two-sentence soundbites

in a lecture, to let an audience listen to the medieval author and experience some immersion in the aesthetic flavor of the text. My central conceit was to take the texts and not edit and chop them up, but give them a form of audio illumination, on the model exemplified by *This American Life* in the way that it presents its stories (especially those that are set-text essays or memoir). I would give the text a subtle sonic backdrop, with sound effects and occasionally musical underscoring, not for literal dramatization but as aural ornamentation. Somewhat like the graphic illumination of manuscripts, this marginal audio is not necessarily meant to directly represent the action of the text, but to set a tone or make glancing allusions to other bits of culture. I do, of course, utilize some mimetic cues and soundscapes, but I often try to deploy these in a way that anticipates the action of the story, to prime the reader for it, rather than simply accompany and illustrate the action. Indeed, as the podcast has evolved over its first year, I've found myself moving more and more away from the mimetic and into the suggestive and allusive. The produced performance of the text would be the centerpiece of each episode, and I would surround it (without interrupting it) with my own commentary, meant partly to provide historical context and a bit of a lesson on medieval culture but also to essentially make a pitch for why this particular text ought to be interesting to a modern reader, not that those are mutually exclusive goals by any means.

The first episode of *Medieval Death Trip*, with an accompanying prologue, was released on Halloween of 2014, and as of the end of November 2015 there have been twenty episodes (including the prologue). I discuss the rationale for the podcast and its format in the prologue episode, so I'll let that speak for itself in just a few pages and

won't rehearse it all here. However, I will elaborate on some of the critical influences that shaped those goals.

Certainly, the show operates within the context of the de-marginalization of medieval studies as described by Lee Patterson, of the deconstruction of the “master narrative” of Western history that defines the medieval as the antithesis of the modern and puts the Gothic in opposition to Renaissance humanism (7–8). Patterson’s concerns are, of course, with the state of the discipline and its ability to not only embrace but contribute to and shape contemporary critical approaches. And while I take to heart Patterson’s concern over the distorting effects of this presumptive alterity of the medieval world, my own focus is on a broader level of reception, which makes the issue of the costs and benefits of utilizing the “otherness” of the texts rather more complicated. The show specifically focuses on passages or narrative episodes within texts that engage with the startling, unusual, or macabre, tracing the same kinds of themes of violence, anxiety, and the marvelous that Michael Lesy pulled out of the late 19th-century newspapers of rural Wisconsin. But while the starting place is our natural curiosity about the extremes of human experience — which we share with the chroniclers and compilers who chose to write about these events — my goal is to identify and highlight connections between the medieval text and modern culture.

In this effort, I’ve found Hans Robert Jauss’s concept of readers navigating “horizons of expectations” quite useful as a framework for articulating my pedagogical goals in presenting these texts. Jauss offers one justification for embracing the alterity and strangeness of the medieval text (an otherness that encompasses both content and style): the aesthetic pleasure of encountering that strangeness leads the reader into the

deeper process of reconstructing for oneself the original context of the discourse. This process begins with the initial encounter with the text, which produces an aesthetic experience. This aesthetic experience (whether one of pleasure *or* displeasure) produces awareness of the “astounding or surprising otherness of the world opened up by the text,” which in turn leads to a “consciousness of this otherness of a departed past” which further can only be examined methodologically through “the reconstruction of the horizon of expectation of the addressees for whom the text was originally composed” (182). In other words, an awareness of difference leads to curiosity which leads to inquiry. But the recognition (and reconstruction) of otherness “cannot in itself be the absolute goal of understanding” — instead, “In passing through the surprise of otherness, its possible meaning for us must be sought: the question of a significance which reaches further historically, which surpasses the original communicative situation, must be posed” (182). For Jauss — and, I think, for the non-specialist audience that I am trying to reach — just explaining the way the text would have been originally received is insufficient. If the text is to retain literary significance in addition to mere “historical interest,” then there must be a “fusion of the past horizon of aesthetic experience with the present one” (183). In order for such a fusion to happen, the reader has to attempt to reconstruct the medieval mindset, which requires some inquiry into historical context, but the reader also has to construct bridges between that remote and indirectly perceived experience and their own aesthetic and semantic experience of the text.

In the show, I try to strike a balance between filling in the historical context for a text, examining its specific rhetorical features, and connecting it to 21st-century culture and experiences. But in trying to serve as a mediator of these texts (while getting as

little in their way as possible) for the audience, I've found the greatest challenge is not the distant horizon of expectation, but the current one. I have at present very little concrete data on who my listeners are and what their levels of medieval cultural and historical knowledge might be. Based on what I can glean from the podcast's Twitter followers, they encompass a range of professions and ages from both Europe and North America — they are by no means all medieval studies graduate students, as I had half-suspected might be the case when I started out. I believe I can safely assume the majority of my audience is college educated, but even that demographic detail provides little guidance; you can have a highly intelligent person with a degree in English who has read *Wolf Hall* and watched *Cadfael* and is interested in medieval stories (and might subscribe to a podcast called *Medieval Death Trip*) who nonetheless wouldn't recognize the name Gerald of Wales or know what the Second Baron's War was or understand the distinction between a friar and a monk (except maybe as a vague memory of footnote in their Norton anthology back when they spent a week reading the *Canterbury Tales* as a sophomore). So I struggle routinely with determining how much I need to explain to the general audience without seeming patronizing on the one hand (might it be insulting to define *historiography* or to "remind" the listener that the Battle of Hastings happened in 1066 or that Yorkshire is in the north of England?) or simply boring on the other (a medievalist might not be thrilled to hear the history of the Cotton collection rehashed yet again). One strategy I use — one which taps into the principle of bridging horizons by employing the techniques or modes of the past in the present work — is overt intertextuality. I try to be fairly transparent in identifying the sources of my historical information and invite listeners to follow-up themselves on subjects that may be unfamiliar to them. Fortunately,

in a digital world this is much easier for them to do than it was for a medieval reader advised by an author to consult Isidore of Seville or Bede for further explanation or details. I have also made an effort to share the process of inquiry and present the scholars I'm using as people engaged in argument and interpretation, avoiding distilling a scholarly conclusion into a seemingly bare statement of fact (a fault, I believe, of many popular history programs). If anything, I am perhaps overly equivocal and skeptical of potentially useful generalizations.

The structure of a typical episode also loosely reflects a medieval form: the refectory reading. Because the reading itself remains the central component of each episode (unlike in other shows, where the topic is central and primary source quotations are mere ornament), the commentary, though sometimes longer than the text itself, remains functionally ancillary. The text is the day's *exemplum*, and the commentary is gloss upon it that attempts to link it in some way to the audience's own needs and interests. To this end, I do try to draw connections between the medieval text and modern culture, high and low. In the early episodes, so much time is spent in establishing the medieval context that these connections may be little more than brief allusions, some being comic and of no great significance (though their purpose is to help establish a sense of relatability and lightheartedness). But as the show has continued and I have fewer basic definitions that I have to provide, I've tried to put more emphasis on these medieval-to-modern links. Sadly, one of the best I had was originally part of the first episode, which I sacrificed in the interest of keeping the length down. But as I have the opportunity, I'll mention it here. One of the points I make in the first episode is that the detail of a prison being full of poisonous toads is perhaps not mimetic but is rather a

literary trope — places of punishment are associated with deadly vermin, and toads were in this category for the medieval artist. My excised 20th-century connection was to Tod Browning's choice in his classic 1931 film adaptation of *Dracula* to include among the creepy-crawlies of Dracula's castle a pair of armadillos and a scruffy-looking possum. This shot seems patently ridiculous to a viewer today (and it likely would have been ridiculous to rural Southerners of the 1930s, too), but that's because we're applying our more mundane knowledge of what these animals are and where they live to the situation rather than focusing on the features Browning likely was: their creepy and unnatural-looking bodies. There is a gap between our current assumptions about those animals and the connotations they were intended to evoke.⁴ In more recent episodes, I've made a greater effort to look for ways to let modern culture illuminate medieval culture, holding *Mad Max* up against the hero of chivalric romance and eulogizing Wes Craven by finding a reflection of the ambiguous morals of his monster movies with a similarly ambiguous tale of a demon child from the *Lanercost Chronicle*.

The other medieval mode that the podcast plays with is, of course, oral performance. Jauss specifically cites the oral/aural culture of medieval poetic performance as a frame of mind that a reader from the post-print, mass literacy modern world is profoundly alienated from (189). It would, of course, be a mistake to think that just because podcasts themselves are an aurally consumed medium that they recreate a preliterate experience of performance and reception. But the medium does allow me to

⁴ And even today, a viewer who scoffs at *Dracula*'s possum has probably forgiven countless New World tarantulas that have been used as the simple signifiers of "terrifying spider" in all kinds of global cinematic settings or the giant Madagascar hissing cockroach as an emblem of urban decay in a Hollywood rendition of a New York tenement. And here we find ourselves in yet another example of the Birdwatcher's Dilemma.

highlight the performative qualities of these texts (albeit translated from their original languages), and medieval prose texts in particular are so rarely consumed in this way in the modern era that it seems to me a rather valuable service to offer. The aesthetic effect of the typical balancing of antithetical clauses or the triplet variation of a descriptive phrase, so beloved of medieval Latinists, can be relished in performance when it seems merely prolix on the page. The spoken word helps bring out the poetry in a passage like this climactic moment from Symeon of Durham (see Episode 4), in which the syntax embodies both the mental and physical dilemma of the character: “Surrounded by death in different shapes, he did not know which to choose. The fire was forcing him to cast himself on to the weapons of his enemies, the weapons were forcing him back to the fire. The longer death was delayed, the worse would be the torment. Anything that brought death quickly seemed also to promise relief for his anguish” (217, 219). And while the translators do not always make oral performance of these texts easy (especially those of the mid-19th century), I do have a secondary pedagogical conviction in the power of taking in syntactically complex language by ear, which I think, at the risk of sounding like the typical Luddite scold, is a rarer and rarer experience in a broadcast culture that prioritizes conversational speech. Furthermore, the sound design and underscoring that accompanies the reading of the text, by evoking the style of typical NPR storytelling segments, helps signal to the listener that we are now in a special performative space (which is why I don’t do similar audio production on the framing commentary).

There is also a macro level to the aesthetic pleasure of variation that the podcast as a series is able to engage with. For me, this emerged not so much from an effort to employ a medieval mode as it was simply to imitate the collage effects Lesy achieves in

Wisconsin Death Trip, but in reviewing Jauss recently, I've been reminded that this kind of anthological variation on a theme is a significant part of medieval literary performance, both in oral culture and manuscript creation. Jauss remarks,

The reader's pleasure can spring today, as it already did with the medieval listener, from an attitude which does not presuppose a self-submersion in the unique world of a single work, but which rather presupposes an expectation which can only be fulfilled by the step from text to text, for here the pleasure is provided by the perception of difference, of an ever-different variation on a basic pattern. (189)

In devising the sequence of texts for the podcast, I've been quite conscious of implementing variation on a pattern. In some ways, the discussion of the readings would be easier and require less repetition and recapitulation if I exhausted all my selections from a single text one after another before moving on to the next (which might turn the podcast into something more like an audiobook in installments than the series that it is). But I've chosen to deliberately hop from one chronicle to another, from one genre to another, and even from one tone to another, while nonetheless adhering to the basic "death trip" themes of, as I say in each episode's introduction, "wit and weirdness." I've done a few texts that I continued across two or three episodes, but generally I try not to stay in one place too long.

One final symbolic — but quite deliberate — gesture towards the fusion of past and present literary horizons is the theme music for the podcast. I knew from the outset that I didn't want to use a recording of medieval music from an actual early music

ensemble. For one thing, the *Medieval Archives* podcast already does this. For another, I wanted to signal from the beginning that the podcast was about the meeting of sensibilities and not presenting the texts as faithfully preserved relics under glass, but letting the modern seep into them. Faithfully reconstructed music would seem to signify that the material of the podcast is of the past. So I decided to take a piece of medieval music but perform it with modern instrumentation. The track that is the show's intro and outro music was created by my brother, Chris Lane (a professional composer and sound designer), and is an electronic version of a piece of organ music from the 14th-century Robertsbridge Codex. While I'm paranoid about (and judgmental of) accidental or careless anachronism in the sound design of the podcast, I think deliberate anachronism can have quite a powerful effect in nudging one towards accepting the blending of modalities and folding the Other into ourselves.

Of course, the simplest goal of the podcast is just to make these texts somewhat more accessible to a modern audience and encourage them to take pleasure in them. I often remark in the podcast that it is not meant to be a history show. It is a literary show, and it is fundamentally about the craft of these texts. I may frequently be *historicist* in my readings, but I use history to help explain the texts, rather than the other way around (the latter being, as I've said too many times already, the typical approach to primary sources in podcasts that engage with them at all). And the modern pleasure in medieval texts may begin in a kind of gawping at their bizarre features, but if it is to endure it cannot end there. In the Prologue episode, I state that "I hope that as we move through some of these texts that we'll grow to recognize the complex human responses to the world that they demonstrate, rather than only seeing examples of stereotypical medieval ignorance or

superstitiousness or barbarism.” This is but my own reflection of Jauss’s call to arms for “the recognition of a significance in medieval literature which is only to be obtained by a reflective passage through its alterity” (198).

The podcast has been one of the most rewarding things I have done. At the time of writing, *Medieval Death Trip* has a 5-star rating in the iTunes store, based on 9 customer reviews and 7 additional ratings. Raw audience figures are somewhat harder to discern, since I have only rudimentary ways of collecting the data, but I can say that as of the end of November 2015, the first episode has been downloaded over 7,300 times, and at the time of writing, the most recent episode (Episode 19) has been out for less than a month and has already been downloaded over 1,400 times. As I mention in Episode 10, this audience has found the show with my having done practically nothing to promote it beyond listing it on iTunes and having a website that shows up in Google searches. Now that I feel as though the show is somewhat established, I believe I can grow that audience considerably more by actually pursuing more than just word of mouth and search engine rankings to reach potential listeners.

I’ve found in *Medieval Death Trip* a truly meaningful platform for exploring and expressing the ideas that have preoccupied me over the last decade. Far from being a mere sideline project, it represents exactly the kind of work with medieval literature that I’ve been seeking throughout my studies. And so I present it here, along with a piece of the creative work that cut the trackways which led me to it. Though one is fiction and the other nonfiction, they are both represent the kind of creative engagement with the middle ages that I intend to continue as long as I can convince an audience to follow along with

me — and I'll probably still be doing it, even if it as a digital anchorite, narrating visions through a crack in the wall.

PART I (WIT):
MEDIEVAL DEATH TRIP

Episode 0: Prologue

Release date: 31 Oct. 2014

Length: 16:20

Site URL: <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/episode-0-prologue/>

File URL: <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/podcastfiles/mdt-episode-000.mp3>

Transcript:

[Theme Music]

Hello, and welcome to the Prologue episode of *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I'm your host, Patrick Lane, and I'm excited to give you Episode 0 of this podcast — not Episode 1, but a Prologue to Episode 1 (well, a prologue to the entire series, really). So the purpose of this prologue is to give you the mission statement for the show, to explain what it is I'm trying to do and why.

So let's start with a basic description of *Medieval Death Trip*. Well, the idea is that each episode will present a selection from a medieval text (in translation, of course) and then provide some relevant and hopefully interesting commentary on that text. What I want to do with this format is give the text a chance to speak for itself, for a few minutes at least. It's rare enough for most of us encounter these texts at all outside of an academic context, and when we do, it's usually as soundbites on history podcasts or in documentaries or as little extracts in history books. You very seldom get full paragraphs — much less pages — of primary source, and I think that's kind of a shame. Chopped up, paraphrased, bracketed off — these are sad ways to experience these narratives, and it's very hard to get a good sense of the minds and mentalities at work behind them when you get them in that kind of form. You also miss out on a lot of their actual aesthetic qualities. These texts can be entertaining and even beautiful in their own ways, or at least that's

something I'll be trying to making a case for as we go along, though no doubt some texts will make that more difficult for me than others.

The name of this podcast is a tribute to Michael Lesy's book *Wisconsin Death Trip*. This book had a huge impact on me as an undergraduate in the nineties. I don't exactly recall how I first discovered it. There was a film adaptation that came out in 1999, and I probably learned about it through the reviews that came out around then. One of those reviews — which I know I most certainly read — was from the *A.V. Club*'s Keith Phipps, who described *Wisconsin Death Trip* as “probably the only doctoral thesis with a cult following.”⁵ Now, how can you resist a description like that? That is humanities nerd catnip. No, that's humanities nerd crack.

Anyway, as indicated by that quotation, *Wisconsin Death Trip* began as Lesy's doctoral dissertation and was published in 1973. The book is decidedly unconventional as a work of scholarship. The only academic material in it is a relatively brief introductory essay.⁶ The rest of the book combines excerpts from a variety of print sources and records from the town of Black River Falls, Wisconsin, in the late 19th century, along with photographs recovered from a local photographer's studio. What Lesy did as he combed through the town's newspaper and other sources was pull out items that pointed to the strange, to the gruesome and grotesque. Items, in other words, that hint at the anxieties — both manifest and latent — that roiled under the surface of late-Victorian Midwestern life. We have murders, epidemics, and madness; armies of tramps, bank and business failures, as well as surprisingly matter-of-fact notices of lake monster sightings. The

⁵ More accurately, Phipps reviewed the book *Wisconsin Death Trip* for the *A.V. Club*, and Nathan Rabin reviewed the documentary; both reviews were posted on the same day to complement each other.

⁶ Correction: There is also a relatively short concluding commentary.

cumulative effect of reading this stream of startling incident is to convey a kind of communal psychology, without Lesy having to step in as a scholar to explain the connections for you. It's a form of argument by montage. I wouldn't blame anyone who deemed it to be insufficiently scholarly (and it's no surprise that one doesn't find very many *Death Trip*-style dissertations out there these days), but it absolutely compels you to engage with the material with a richness that more conventional scholarly surveys all too often fail to deliver.

Here are few examples of some items from the book to give you a sense of what the thing is like:

[Sound of fire burning.]

Aristide Griffel, known as 'Frenchy,' was arrested at La Crosse in the act of firing a barn on the North Side. He confessed to a multiplicity of incendiary fires that have occurred in North La Crosse during the past 2 years.... At least 50 fires can be laid at his door. Griffel had a mania for excitement, and this kind suited him best. He had always been the first at the fires and took great interest in the work of putting them out. At home he would keep the alarm clock continually ringing. [3/12/1896, State]

A wild man was captured in the woods 50 miles north of Chippewa and placed in the county jail there. He is 60 years of age and has lost nearly all resemblance to a human being. His hair and beard are 2 feet long and his raiment consists of a solitary gunny sack wrapped around his body, and on his head a coonskin cap. It is impossible to hold conversation with him as he has lost all

knowledge of speech. This strange creature has been seen many times for the past 10 years by land hunters and is a hermit. [7/13/1899, State]

A horrible murder was committed in the town of Melrose, on the old Marshall farm, near North Bend, on Tuesday afternoon. The perpetrator was George Palmer, between 17 and 18 years of age.... The victim was Hazel, the little 4 year old daughter of Oscar Marshall. The murderer seems young for his age and would not be taken to be over 14. He had recently been adopted by Mrs. Marshall from the state school for dependent children.... [The murderer] was found lying on the sawdust in the ice house, apparently unconscious, with a smell of carbolic acid about... he said that he had taken poison because he had killed the girl.... The murderer made a statement to the authorities saying that he had always been well used by the Marshall family and had nothing against them. [He] said he thought a good deal of the child and did not kill her out of any spirit of revenge, but it had been in his head all day that he ought to kill the girl and her mother, and he could not be satisfied till he had gone at it.... It seems that he took the child to the barn and struck her on the head with an ax.... It was thought that the taking of the poison was only a sham, but he is now reported in serious condition.... The young man's father is an inmate of the Oshkosh insane asylum... the general belief is that the malady has cropped out in the boy. [10/29/1896, County]

“Henry Ehlers, a Milwaukee butcher, died from nosebleed. His nose had been bleeding for 9 days.... He was 37 years old and had been a great meat eater.”
[8/24/1899, State]

“Red Cedar Lake near Ft. Atkinson is again agitated by a monster who has lain dormant through the cold months.... William Ward lost 5 sheep by the visit of the serpent. Their bodies were found in the mud partly devoured.” [6/9/1892, State]

[Sound of a flock of sheep.]

So, that’s just a tiny sampling of the kinds of items you’ll find in the book. I should also mention that there is a film adaptation of the book by documentarian James Marsh, who’s now probably better known for the Academy-Award-winning *Man on Wire*. I find that documentary to be quite good, though it can only present the tiniest sliver of what’s in the book. Nonetheless, I think it captures the feel of the book surprisingly well.

Anyway, that’s *Wisconsin Death Trip*; now, what about *Medieval Death Trip*? My plans here at the start (subject to change and evolution, of course) are for episodes to have a fairly fixed format. Each one will begin with a fairly brief introduction, then I’ll read a short excerpt from a medieval text, and after that offer some commentary on the text.⁷ So, rhetoricians, it’s basically a sermon format. You get a prologue, an exemplum, and an analysis of that exemplum. My intent right now is to be deliberately loose with the

⁷ As subsequent developments show, some texts necessitated introductions among whose attributes brevity would not be listed.

commentary. Sometimes it might be a bit more historical and academic, sometimes more of a meditation on a particular image or idea. Sometimes it might even be a bit personal and memoirish, though I don't want to be overindulgent in that vein. But the main thing is to maintain some variety in the commentary, at least until we sort out what works well and what doesn't.

As for the texts, presently the nature of the texts is determined by what I've read — in other words, what's interested me. I'm very interested in monastic chronicles (somewhat less so in courtly chronicles), so I have a lot of material already gathered together from those and related saints' lives and such. Most of what I've studied is based in England, so many of these texts will be English. I am certainly interested in expanding my horizons, but just wanted you to know that my stockpile right now is going to be mostly British material. My interests also skew earlier rather than later, so there will likely be a stronger representation of texts from the 10th through the 13th centuries, but I'm certainly not going to ignore the later medieval material. It's also possible we might dip into some Late Classical texts, particularly if they are significant for later medieval culture.

I also intend to stick largely to historical sources rather than fictional literature. *Wisconsin Death Trip* does itself quote from regional novels amongst its newspaper clippings and asylum records, so there's precedent there in our namesake for using fiction. And, of course, even in the present day the line between historiography and fiction can be blurry, and in the middle ages it's less of a line and more of a huge smear across the entire chart that you've written those two words on. I'm generally going to be selecting texts, though, that present a certain degree of verisimilitude — that at least

make pretense of reporting things that actually happened — but I’m not ruling out the occasional fable or lyric poem or episode from chivalric romance.

The last tentative criterion is that I’m more interested in presenting texts that even someone taking an undergraduate course in medieval literature would be unlikely to encounter. I’m not ruling out hitting a few famous episodes, but generally if the text is available in a trade paperback Penguin edition, then I’ll be slightly less inclined to cover it here. In general, I’d like to get off the beaten path — not that there is much of a beaten path in medieval literature as far as most 21st-century readers are concerned.

Anyway, that is our path ahead. But before we get fully underway, I’d like to address one more thing matters a great deal to a very small group of people, but it cuts to the heart of this project, and some of those people may well be my listeners. One of the laments you often hear from medievalists — that is, scholars who study the culture and history of the Middle Ages — is that the middle ages have been rather unfairly represented in most modern culture as fundamentally grotesque. One version of this academic narrative puts the blame squarely on Renaissance and Enlightenment scholars, who in order to champion the humanism and rationalism of their chosen eras emphasized all that was irrational and superstitious and inhumanly cruel in the previous era.⁸ After all, in order to have an Enlightenment, you have to have started out in the dark.

Hence the term “Dark Ages,” a term that’s been deprecated, at least among medievalists. Of course, even then we’re still saddled with the bias inherent in our own defining label: *medieval* — literally, “middle ages” — a period defined as falling between

⁸ For this perspective, see Patterson, “On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies,” as briefly discussed in the Introduction.

two other ages that each deserve their own names, the Classical and the Modern, and we're just the stuff in the middle.

So all of that is just to say that medievalists are rather sensitive to depictions of the middle ages as a grotesque mire of gruesome torture, fantastical and fanatical beliefs, and cultural and political insanity.⁹ We've had quite enough of that, and it's time to bring balance to the general perception of what *medieval* means, to try to rectify the assumptions that lead pop culture to describe the use of egregious physical brutality as "going medieval" upon someone or something.

It would seem, then, that a project called "Medieval Death Trip" must be thoroughly in the enemy camp, contributing to the already very successful stereotyping of the middle ages as a site for historical rubbernecking along the lines of "look at how crazy / gross / monstrous people were back then!"

I have two responses to this. The first is to kind of shrug sheepishly. But I think this is a common dilemma, especially among people who teach medieval literature. We can be high-minded about the prejudices and biases against the middle ages that exist, genuinely desiring to help our students see past them and see the commonalities we share with medieval people rather than getting stuck on the differences. But I've talked to a good number of other readers and teachers of medieval lit, and it is clear that one of the things we love about this literature is that vein of weirdness that runs through it, and we delight in sharing that with our students. We'll teach the Parson's Tale (sometimes), but we get excited by the Miller's Tale. We'll teach Julian of Norwich for the beauty and theology, but I think most of us look forward to sharing the excesses of Margery Kempe

⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum offers one example of this complaint ("Miracles and Marvels" 800–801).

a little bit more. And, certainly, to try to downplay that streak of the grotesque is as much a distortion as downplaying its opposite. Medieval people certainly loved the grotesque and the weird and the shocking, too, and quite deliberately incorporated those things into their art and included it in their histories. And that's something we have in common with them, not something that sets us apart.

But I think there is a difference between enjoying the grotesque and fetishizing it. And that brings me to my second response. Yes, this is a project that chooses to focus on episodes and images from the middle ages that are surprising, sometimes shocking, and often grotesque from a modern perspective, but it is my goal to consider these moments with more depth than just "Look how crazy those olden times people were!" I hope that as we move through some of these texts that we'll grow to recognize the complex human responses to the world that they demonstrate, rather than only seeing examples of stereotypical medieval ignorance or superstitiousness or barbarism.

If you just read a few selections from *Wisconsin Death Trip* — you know, like the ones I just read — it's very easy to take it as little more than a diversion, a bit of light entertainment, a cousin to the "News of the Weird" column that you might find in your newspaper or alternative weekly. But if you sit down in earnest and read the book, you come to see past the novelty and begin to recognize the patterns and themes, the obsessions and anxieties that are threaded through some of these otherwise fragmentary curiosities. And I hope over the course of the podcast to tug on and trace similar sorts of threads through a collection of stories that also have the benefit of being a bit strange and startling and... curious.

And that's all I have to say about that for now, so those of you who are not particularly interested in the identity crisis of medieval studies, you can unroll your eyes back down into a more comfortable position and join us on this journey. I'm posting the first real episode alongside this prologue, so you can go download it now, if you haven't already, and we'll begin.

[Closing music.]

*Episode 1: Concerning Poisoning by Toad***Release date:** 31 Oct. 2014**Length:** 28:35**Site URL:** <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/episode-01-concerning-poisoning-by-toad/>**File URL:** <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/podcastfiles/mdt-episode-001.mp3>**Transcript:***[Theme music.]*

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Friday, Oct. 31st, 2014: “Episode 1: Concerning Poisoning by Toad.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to the first proper episode of *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m Patrick Lane, and if you want to know more about this podcast and its principles, there’s a prologue episode available that lays out our mission statement. And if you’ve just come from listening to the prologue, then well done. That’s probably the best order to go in.

But let’s get straight to our first text. I don’t have a cohost or any guests, so there’s need for chitchat; nor is there any news of note. And given that this is our first episode, there’s no feedback to gloat or cringe over. So that rather streamlines our options.

But that said, our text for today does have a little bit of personal backstory to it that I’d like to share. Before *Medieval Death Trip* was a podcast (well, actually it’s still in the process of *becoming* a podcast as I record these words) — but anyway, before the podcast, “Medieval Death Trip” was a category I’d set up on my personal blog (which

I'm not even going to bother trying to promote because I haven't done anything with in over a year, and it's all a bit embarrassing now). Anyway, today's text was the very first thing I posted there under the tag "Medieval Death Trip." When I first read this little story, I knew I had to share it somehow, and I wasn't doing much with my blog back then, anyway, so up it went. Only a handful of other posts ever went up under the MDT rubric, but the idea stuck with me, and I began collecting and stockpiling other little scenes and episodes, and now I'm finally putting them into a medium that I think they might flourish in. And it seems fitting to inaugurate the podcast with the story that led me down this path in the first place.

So, our selection for today comes from a book called *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, which was written sometime around 1173 by a monk of Norwich called Thomas of Monmouth. I'll be reading from the 1896 edition and translation by Augustus Jessop and the great M.R. James (this edition is freely available to all through Google Books). And you can find full bibliographic information at medievaldeathtrip.com.

Now, *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* is a fascinating and infuriating text. It's quite engaging to read, and it features a level of almost novelistic detail that's rather unusual for its time. The richness of the detail may, perhaps, be due to the fact that Thomas is narrating events that happened locally in recent memory — and, indeed, some events in which he himself is often a player. So you get a lot of very authentic-feeling details and little glimpses of twelfth-century town life. But there's a big dollop of poison sitting at the heart of text: William of Norwich is a saint by virtue of being a child-martyr, who, according to his legend, was ritually murdered by the Jews of

Norwich. Yeah, it's that kind of story. If you've read the *Canterbury Tales* and recall the tale of Hugh of Lincoln, William's story uses that same formula — well, in fact, his is the first child-martyr cult of that kind in England, pre-dating Hugh of Lincoln. Now, actually, there is something interesting at work in this text, because, despite the fact that Thomas our author absolutely believes in the truth of the accusations against the Jews, the text itself is full of descriptions of how, after a child's body is found in the woods, rumor spreads like wildfire that only Jews could be so inhuman as to have murdered a child at Easter, and you actually get a strikingly accurate portrayal of a kind of mass hysteria stoked into violence a rabble-rousing, self-aggrandizing public figure. Despite Thomas's conviction, there are cracks in this narrative haven't been completely plastered over, and a modern reader can sense an alternative reality winking at them through the propaganda. But I think perhaps we'll come back to this central aspect of the book in a future episode and consider it in more detail, including some of the alternate theories for this particular whodunnit.¹⁰ But why dig in to this particularly ugly matter at all? Well, because even though *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* could be used as a fairly efficient primer in medieval anti-Semitism, it's also packed with memorable scenes. I was working back through it recently to see if there was anything else in it that would be a good candidate for this podcast besides the story we'll be getting to in just a moment, and I found tons of stuff too good to ignore. But, as I say, the book keeps dampening one's enthusiasm for it with all these little veins of poison. Even once you get past the story of the murder itself and into the recorded miracles, it's hard to go more than a few pages without some reference to the alleged cruelty and treachery of the Christian-hating Jews.

¹⁰ See Episode 11: How a Blood Libel Takes Root.

And it doesn't seem responsible to draw a significant amount of material from this book while eliding its central, hateful theme. That said, I am going to kick that can a little ways down the road and save the discussion of the murder of William of Norwich for after this podcast has found its legs.

Fortunately, our first reading from this book is able to slip past the anti-Semitic venom, though, as it happens, it is all about poison. We're about to hear of the miraculous cure obtained by a most unfortunate woman who wound up on the wrong end of cup of toad-infused beer. This comes from Book 6, which consists of a catalogue of cures obtained by pilgrims to St. William's shrine.

[Here is performed the text of the story of a woman named Wimarc, who is imprisoned by pirates with a group of other people. These prisoners conspire to kill their jailor by extracting the poison from the many toads who live in the prison and putting it into his beer. However, the jailer is suspicious and makes the prisoners drink the beer first. All of them die except for Wimarc, who survives but is afflicted by chronic pain and a terrible swelling of the body. She eventually seeks out a cure at the shrine of St. William in Norwich. Upon approaching the shrine, she vomits an enormous quantity of liquid and is subsequently cured. The text is taken from the edition and translation of Thomas of Monmouth's book by Jessop and James (246–250).]

So that's our story. I think it's marvelous, and it's about as perfect an example of a "death trip" story as one could hope for. One of the remarkable things about it — and

you see this throughout Thomas of Monmouth's writing — is the abundance of little, vivid details. Now, by the standards of the modern novel, this story is still extremely spare, but compared to a lot of medieval narrative — especially ostensibly non-fictional narrative — I'd certainly rate this as unusually rich and approaching the novelistic.

But as I was thinking about this story, those details nagged at me. They bring us right up to the big question of truth in medieval history. Thomas presents this as a true story, but how much of it do we believe, if any of it?

Of course, if you're going to evaluate the objective truth of a story like this, the first enormous hurdle is that it's a miracle-cure story. If you're not inclined to believe in miracles, then that would be your first indication that this story is bogus, and we could probably end the analysis there. To be honest, I've read so many of these kinds of stories by now that I hardly even notice the miracles — frequently they just seem like formalities, and all the interesting stuff happens before and after the miracle itself — and I think sometimes the authors often felt the same way, and the miracles themselves get a rather perfunctory treatment, as we have in this story, in fact. There's no real reason for Thomas to begin anywhere other than “One day a woman afflicted with a terrible bodily swelling came to the shrine of St. William.” And many, many miracle-cure stories begin exactly that way. But Thomas begins his story with pirates and prisons and toads, and *that's* how you start a story.

But before we get there, let's just take a quick moment to address the fundamental plausibility of the central event of this story — the miracle cure. Now, my own feeling is that this one actually falls into the category of reasonably plausible cures — or, let's not say “cure,” let's say “experience.” The experience described here does not dramatically

contradict natural science, especially if we do allow that a certain layer of exaggeration and hyperbole has been applied to whatever the original experience was. We have a woman suffering a rather mysterious ailment — a kind of generalized swelling and chronic pain. Putting my amateur diagnostician scrubs on for a moment, I'd hypothesize that maybe we're looking at some kind of autoimmune disorder or perhaps an allergic reaction. These are exactly the kinds of conditions that come on suddenly and mysteriously and have a tendency to depart or go into remission just as suddenly and mysteriously. Pain conditions are highly subjective and influenced by mental states, so I can imagine a real scenario in which a woman comes to the shrine, has an ecstatic experience, and reports an immediate improvement in her condition. If you exaggerate the degree of improvement and the original degree of suffering three times greater than they really were, I think you might well get a cure story that looks a lot like this. This is not in the same category of implausibility as someone regrowing a lost limb or being cured of a congenital spinal deformity.

So, if we're playing *Medieval Mythbusters*, let's chalk the cure itself up as "plausible." And, as I said, the cure is hardly the most interesting thing about this story. Let's talk about some toads.

Setting aside the miracle, one of the first things that raised my eyebrows when I started really thinking about and interrogating this story was the image of this prison crawling with toads. Back when I was eight years old, I wanted to be a naturalist, but I'll admit I haven't quite kept up with it in the years since. Nonetheless, I have a certain sense of toad ecology, and dwelling inside dark manmade structures is not something I associate with them. But wait — is that what this prison would be? That's an interesting

question, too. What does “prison” mean in the 12th century? Turns out, that’s a rather tricky thing. It seems that lots of types of buildings could be used as a prison; the dank stone dungeon is just one variety (Geltner 262). Also, a prison — as seems to be the case in this story — need not be a governmental institution or part of the justice system at all. It was just a place where people could be held captive, sometimes for private interests, as it were (263). The jailer in this story could well be an independent contractor, so to speak, hired by the pirates to keep the hostages securely in hand. And so what the jail was is very hard to say — it could well be a wooden shed or a stone tower and anything in between. But I think the details of the cold and stench and toads do suggest to me a kind of stereotypical dungeon.

But really, whatever kind of structure it is, would toads really flock to it and thrive in it? My basic research confirms that my initial intuition that toads rather prefer to live in woodland areas, in leaf litter and such, is right. Though European toads can make shallow burrows, they aren’t really subterranean animals. That said, if you Google “toad in basement,” you can find a decent number of people talking about finding a toad in their basement, so maybe some European listeners can write in and correct me if being afflicted by the attacks of toads is a common occurrence when you venture into your dank basements and moldy woodsheds.

So, we have a few possibilities. One, the toads were naturally dwelling in the prison, which on balance seems pretty darn sketchy. Two, the jailer was deliberately populating the prison with toads as a form of punishment. I suppose that’s possible, but it strikes me as unlikely. However, there is some potential support for this idea in a rather famous passage from the Peterborough Chronicle, covering the year 1137 — roughly the

same time period that Wimarck would have found herself imprisoned. This passage seems to be a favorite in Old English textbooks, so if you've taken an Old English class, you may well have had to translate it. The passage reads — and this is from the 1953 Garmonsway translation — it reads:

When the traitors saw that [King] Stephen was a good-humoured, kindly, and easy-going man who inflicted no punishment, then they committed all manner of horrible crimes. They had done him homage and sworn oaths of fealty to him, but not one of their oaths was kept. They were all forsworn and their oaths broken. For every great man built him castles and held them against the king; and they filled the whole land with these castles.

They sorely burdened the unhappy people of the country with forced labour on the castles; and when the castles were built, they filled them with devils and wicked men. By night and by day they seized those whom they believed to have any wealth, whether they were men or women; and in order to get their gold and silver, they put them into prison and tortured them with unspeakable tortures, for never were martyrs tortured as they were.

They hung them up by the feet and smoked them with foul smoke. They strung them up by the thumbs, or by the head, and hung coats of mail on their feet. They tied knotted cords round their heads and twisted it till it entered the brain. They put them in

dungeons wherein were adders and snakes and toads, and so destroyed them. (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 254)

So here we have an account of the use of poisonous animals as a way of torturing imprisoned people that occurs during the reign of Stephen, just like our story, which, you might remember was set “in the time of king Stephen, when the days were evil.” But there are reasons for skepticism even here: some historians have argued that the so-called Anarchy of Stephen’s reign was exaggerated by monastic authors, who had their own political reasons for doing so, and that they used rather extreme rhetoric to convey what were in fact relatively modest damages (Callahan 218–219).

There is a third possibility for where these toads come from, and that is that Thomas the author has put those toads in the prison in an act of imagination (as the Peterborough Chronicler may well also have done). Why might we suspect that? Well, there’s an answer: prisons being full of poisonous animals is something of a literary trope. More specifically, it is a trope of depictions of hell. The association of hell — or other ideas of a punitive afterlife — with poison is present in the Greco-Roman world (who specifically have mythological links between frogs and the afterlife); poison-torture also in the Norse/Germanic pagan domain of Hel (single-*l*), from which Hell (double-*l*) gets its English name. Many early Christian and medieval visions of hell show the damned souls being tormented in some way or another by venomous animals — usually serpents, which have their own devilish connotations, but also toads. One nice example of this comes from a great text — one I might have to feature in a future episode — another late twelfth-century item called the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, or *A Tract Concerning St. Patrick’s Purgatory*. This text describes the allegedly true story of a

knight named Owen who went into a cave in Ireland and was taken on a journey through a purgatory space — this is from a time before the concept of purgatory has been ironed out theologically — and he sees souls being tormented by devils. Here's the relevant passage, as translated in the book *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*, edited by Eileen Gardiner:

They [the devils] then threw him [the knight Owen] on the ground and tried to nail him down like the others; but, when he invoked the name of Jesus Christ, they were unable to do him further injury in that place and dragged him away into another open plain. Here he saw a difference between these and the first. In the first place they had their bellies to the ground, here all were lying on their backs. Fiery dragons were sitting on some of them and were gnawing them with iron teeth, to their inexpressible anguish. Others were the victims of fiery serpents, which, coiling around their necks, arms, and bodies, fixed iron fangs into their hearts. Toads, immense and terrible, also sat on the breasts of some of them and tried to tear out their hearts with their ugly beaks. Demons also ran along over them, lashing them as they passed, and they never let them rest a moment from their sufferings. (139–140)

Okay, we've had a lovely detour now through two other medieval texts. So what? Well, the point is that among other poisonous animals, the toad is something a stock image for depictions of hell. As such, when it comes time for an author to describe an

earthly prison that they want you to think is particularly horrible, it makes sense that they might draw upon the imagery of hell to do that.

“But Patrick,” you say, “it’s one thing if the toads were just mentioned as a bit of descriptive detail, but they’re a vital plot element here. The whole story falls apart if these toads are fictitious!” Well, you don’t say? Here’s the thing. Maybe the prisoners did try to poison their jailor with a toad. But maybe they had the toad smuggled in or gathered it themselves in a courtyard or maybe it was just there in the prison as one of those unusual things that happens. Even if we grant the presence of a toad and its use as an instrument of poisoning a mug of beer, could it kill somebody (much less several people)? Wikipedia tells me that the skin of one European toad does contain enough bufotoxin to potentially kill a human being (“Common Toad”); my admittedly brief survey of the medical literature shows that human fatalities from ingesting toads are quite rare. But let’s give these would-be poisoners the best case scenario. But even then, would bufotoxin cause someone to swell up horribly? The modern medical answer is, by all accounts, no. But there’s a very good *medieval* reason why ingesting toad poison would make you swell up, and this the notion that animals can transmit their own traits to people. You still see this in traditional or folk medicine, particularly in the types of animal parts considered to be aphrodisiacs. Anyway, one of the things a toad does when it’s feeling threatened is puff itself up — this behavior is frequently mentioned in medieval descriptions of toads. So if you are poisoned by a toad, it makes sense, according to this logic, anyway, that you would swell up just like a toad. Of course, poetic as that idea is, it does not follow the laws of nature as we now know them.

But if you were a medieval person confronted by a woman with some kind of terrible swelling and did have to conjecture about what caused it, toads might well be one of the more obvious culprits, and where would a person be afflicted by toads? Why, hellish prisons, of course! Now, my own gut instinct tells me that there probably is some skeleton of truth in the narrative of what brought poor Wimarc to the shrine of St. William, but it's worth noting that there's actually a relatively simple chain of reasoning that might lead one to produce this backstory which on the surface appears to be almost needlessly complicated.

Now, I can practically hear some listeners rending their garments and howling that it's absurd to ask any of these kinds of questions or to expect to find any profit in interrogating the verisimilitude of a piece of hagiographical propaganda. Why should we care at all if this story is faithful to some original reality? That's a fool's errand. You know, I can't exactly refute that, and it's certainly not my plan going forward to try to debunk or confirm the historical or objective truth of the narratives I present. But I do think that if one wants to try to get at the human experience that the rhetoric of this kind of storytelling is reflecting, it's worthwhile starting from a position of trying to take their claims seriously, if not as historical fact then at least as collective memories. And then I think you're in a better position to start recognizing and even resisting some of their assumptions and claims.

But before we leave this story, there is one detail here that has — for me, anyway — a powerful ring of truth. That would be the detail of the woman spewing this incredibly vile vomit all over the shrine — and specifically that it was so bad that besides just cleaning it up, the monks had to sprinkle fragrant herbs all over the spot to counteract

the smell. First of all, who knew that that cedar sawdust that school janitors spread over vomit-stains had such a long history? And secondly, this detail just reeks of truth to me because it's exactly the kind of story any worker would come back into the breakroom and just repeat over and over again to whoever walks in. "You won't believe what happened at the shrine today. This woman — you should've seen the state of her — she just puked all over the shrine. And the smell! Godric and Ranulph scrubbed and scrubbed, and you can *still* smell it." It's the kind of gross story you would tell to other monks who came visiting — it's a perfect little "Guess what happened at work" anecdote, and the detail of the spreading of herbs to try to cover up the smell just smacks of lived experience. And those are the kinds of nuggets and odd little scenes that I hope to bring you many more of here on *Medieval Death Trip*. This concludes our first proper episode. I do hope you'll rejoin me for our next episode in two weeks (or right now, if you're downloading this weeks, months, or years in the future, as I suspect the vast majority of you have done, since basically nobody knows this show exists right now).

Anyway, I'll leave you with one final piece of wonderful but useless knowledge. Did you know that the vomit-covering cedar sawdust beloved of janitors the world over has a trade name? It does, and it's called VoBAN — capital V, lowercase O, capital B, capital A, capital N. VoBAN. And it looks like they haven't changed their packaging in fifty years. So now you know.

And that brings us to the end of our first episode. I'll be back in two weeks with another. In the meantime, you can find full bibliographic information about today's reading at medievaldeathtrip.com, and you can follow us on Twitter @mdtpodcast.

Thanks for listening, and I'll leave you this week with the words of Hugh the Chanter:

“Looking back, far or only a short way, is a great help to looking forward” (31).

[Closing music.]

Episode 2: Concerning Another Miracle Cure for Extreme Swelling, a Sinful Clerk, and Some Lightning Bolts

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Transcript:

[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Friday, Nov. 14th, 2014: “Episode 2: Concerning Another Miracle Cure for Extreme Swelling, a Sinful Clerk, and Some Lightning Bolts.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. In this episode, we’re going to look at a snapshot of the kind of grab-bag of events you often find when you read a medieval chronicle. When we talk about medieval history — or, more specifically, the writing of history during the middle ages — anyway, when we talk about medieval historical texts, we’re really talking about a wide range of writings that crisscross a bunch of genres.¹¹ We do have things that you might properly call histories in the way we would think of a history book today, grand narratives that attempt to describe and explain the rise of kingdoms or the spread of Christianity. But one major difference between medieval and modern histories is that medieval historians are far less concerned with causality than we are today.¹² We

¹¹ The following discussion owes much to the overview provided by Antonia Gransden in her *Historical Writing in England*.

¹² In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach argues that classical and early Christian historiography could not conceive of or represent broader socio-economic forces at work in history, and so reduced historical causality to the

tend to approach history books to learn the reasons why something happened the way it did. Medieval historians were more content to simply record *that* something had happened, and then to meditate more on its value and meaning — and since most of our medieval historians are churchmen, finding meaning usually involves relating the event to God’s providence and making moral evaluations of lives and deeds. So they can sometimes give us a sense of the human motivations that might drive events, but they have very little conception of the kinds of larger socio-economic forces that we tend to focus on as the engines of history today.

So there are medieval histories with a capital *H*, so to speak, but historical narrative is also embedded in a number of other genres. Hagiography and biography are two key genres, as we saw last episode. You also have travelogues, autobiographies, and spiritual confessions that can give you history (and history-gathering) in the first person. You also have historical events filtered through epic poetry and chivalric romance. All of these are rooted in narrative and for the most part they use narrative to support some kind of evaluative goal: they justify the current political order; they prove the sanctity of the local saint; they exalt the lineage of the local lord; *et cetera, et cetera*. They use the narratives of history (and sometimes even invent them) in the service of providing support for a lesson of some sort. This is a well-known bit of medieval genre theory.¹³

fortunes of individual great persons (40). V.H. Galbraith is even harsher on medieval chroniclers, saying that “History, for the medieval chronicler, was apt to be just one thing after another: a series of disconnected acts, each judged separately as good or bad” (119), and suggesting of Gerald of Wales that “in place of causation, he interprets every domestic and public misfortune in terms of divine vengeance for past sins” (120). More generously, Robert W. Hanning allows that Anglo-Norman historians “allow [their histories to portray] a larger role for purely human causation, and to reflect a lively interest in psychological motivation,” though they still rely heavily on principles of divine providence or cyclical fortune to explain outcomes (126).

¹³ The three categories of narrative that follow — replacing my label of *exemplum* with the more classically accurate *argumentum* — are given by Cicero (*De inventione* I.19) as well as by Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologies* I.40–44. My error in the episode of substituting *exemplum* for *argumentum* was due to my

The super-simplified version is that stories can be of three types. They can be *historia*, or history, which is things that actually happened. They can be *exempla*, or parables, which are things that didn't necessarily happen, but which serve to illustrate truths. And lastly they can be *fabulae*, or fictions, which at best are make-believe fantasies and at worst are diabolical lies. These three genres roughly overlap with the three main purposes that literature was said to serve, which are that it could preserve knowledge or memorialize, it could teach values (either directly or by example), and it could entertain. And entertainment was the least important of these. Good history could do all three things: preserve, teach, and entertain. Good parables could do the last two: teach and entertain. But fiction, alas, was only good for entertainment, and because it was defined by its falseness, it was always in danger of actively undoing the first two goals by making people believe lies and providing bad examples for people to imitate. What's interesting is that despite this extremely dominant ideology surrounding medieval literature, you get remarkably elaborate and sophisticated fiction — the heroic epics, the romances — even though that's supposed to be the bottom rung of the cultural ladder, whereas history, which by rights is the noblest *narrative* genre — non-narratively, theology always holds the trump card) — but history is in contrast often a kind of slap-dash and provisional affair. Not that that's a negative assessment — personally, I find that slap-dash quality quite charming.

memory associating the morally instructive category of parable with the label *exempla*. The Ciceronian triad is definitely *historia*, *fabula*, and *argumentum*, but in my defense, later medieval poets and rhetoricians often defend fiction by citing the use of parables in the New Testament. See, for example, Boccaccio: "If they condemn the third form of fiction, it is the same as condemning the form which our Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, often used when He was in the flesh, though Holy Writ does not call it 'poetry', but 'parable'; some call it 'exemplum', because it is used as such" (Minnis and Scott 424)

But this brings us to the other major historical genre that slips uneasily around on the fringes of this larger genre theory. This would be the annal or chronicle. These are defined by their form — they're organized almost entirely by chronology and present events year by year. In fact, an annal by its most common definition is basically little more than a bulleted list of years, with significant events (especially deaths and appointments to office) attached to each item, whereas (again, using a rough definition) a chronicle is an expanded form of the annal, usually in more fully developed prose with transitions and such. That's the strict definition of a chronicle — chronicle is, of course, also often just used as a synonym for history, so not everything called a chronicle is a chronicle in the strict sense of the term. But anyway, for both chronicles and annals, often these kinds of texts have been written by several authors over many years or even many generations, and so one common characteristic is that they lack thematic unity or design. Chronology, for better or worse, *is* their design (Gransden 29–30). Their authors are certainly still sensitive to the major goals that I just mentioned, but they can't pursue them in as consistent a way as other historians and storytellers — indeed, such texts often sometimes hook their purpose almost entirely to the preservation of things from the oblivion of forgetfulness.

But one of the effects of the simplicity of the chronicle formula is that you get these fantastic juxtapositions. In fact, reading a chronicle of this kind is remarkably similar to reading the clippings collected in *Wisconsin Death Trip* — that's the namesake of this podcast, and you can find out more about it in our Prologue episode, if you missed that. You get a pattern that's basically, "Here's something interesting that happened. Oh, and here's something else memorable that happened about the same time. And then

people also said that such-and-such occurred after that.” And so on. It’s a style that’s oddly appropriate for a low-attention-span 21st century. It has a whiff of internet clickbait about it, and it reminds us that there are commonalities — maybe we can even go so far as to say universals — about human curiosity across time and culture. So, for example, because I’m apparently painfully unhip, I still use the Weather Channel’s *weather.com* as my go-to weather forecast. Sure, you cool kids can use your trendy weather services like Weather Underground or Weather Bug, but I’m sticking with the Wonder Bread, Miracle-Whip, bologna sandwich of weather forecasts. But, I’ve noticed over the last couple of years that *weather.com* pushes these ridiculous clickbait quote-unquote “news” videos at you, things with titles like... let’s see... “Passengers Terrified After Freak Accident,” and “Mysterious Deaths in Texas,” and “When Taxidermy Goes Wrong (with Photos),” and “Can You Spot the Snipers Hidden in These Photos?” And though I’ve trained myself to never, ever click on any of those — the general rule of thumb is that if a headline ends in a question mark, that’s a major red flag — I nonetheless feel the pull, the tingle of curiosity to find out why “This Secret Graveyard Will Make You Angry.” And today’s stories are relatively tame; I distinctly remember earlier this summer seeing headlines about sea monsters and ghost ships and other things that used to just be the domain of the old *Weekly World News* tabloid.

But these kinds of incidents would be right at home in the source of our text for today, the *Chronicle of Lanercost*. This chronicle is practically the perfect stereotype of a medieval chronicle. It’s largely a string of incidents, often shifting from one kind of event or topic to another with hardly any buffering transition. Items are grouped together simply because they all happened in the same year, and so you get major historical events

sandwiched between local miracles and oddities. The deaths of leading aristocrats are recorded alongside the births of deformed — and therefore portentous — calves and lambs. It's a fantastic historical miscellany. That said, the *Chronicle of Lanercost* is of particular interest to historians because it records with some degree of authentic local testimony the events of the Scottish-English Wars of the late 13th-century, the conflict that's featured in the movie *Braveheart*. This bit of historical witness is the Chronicle's main claim to fame. But we'll not be dealing with that today. I'll likely come back to *Lanercost* in future episodes to look at some of these battle narratives — there are certainly some interesting ones — but today we'll be focusing on its historical miscellany function. But before we get there, some very quick and rough historical data about this text. It survives in a single manuscript and was probably written during the 13th and 14th centuries by a series of monks from Lanercost Priory in northern England, rather near to the Scottish border (Wilson xix–xxi). None of these individual monks has been identified, even though you'll hear a first-person narrator often intruding into the discourse, and it's also unclear how much earlier sections may have been edited or revised by later individuals — that is to say, it's clear from evidence in the text that there must be multiple contributors, but there's not enough evidence to clearly distinguish one from the other. One thing that is apparent about the monks who produced the *Lanercost Chronicle* is that at least some of them had a very strong positive bias in favor of the Franciscan order (which is something we'll actually see right at the start of today's excerpt), and also that they had a very negative bias against the Scots (which doesn't factor so much into today's reading, but will certainly come up whenever we come back and visit some of the war narratives).

I'll be reading from a translation of the latter part of the chronicle by Sir Herbert Maxwell, published in 1913 (and available freely on Google Books). We'll start by looking at a series of events recorded for the year 1288, and then I'm going to jump ahead a few years to add in a related event from a few years later in 1291. So, let's dive in.

[Here is performed a selection from *The Chronicle of Lanercost* as translated by Maxwell. It narrates first the tale of a burgess of Newcastle, who suffered a terrible swelling of the legs and body. He finds his cure after pledging to visit the tomb of St. Francis. A second tale tells of a sinful clerk who falls mortally ill and while atoning for his misdeeds receives a vision that foretells the imminent death of both himself and his servant. This prophecy comes to pass exactly as the clerk has stated. A third miracle is then recorded, in which King Edward and his queen are spared from a lightning bolt that flashes into their chamber, killing two of their servants but leaving the royal persons unharmed (53–55).]

So that's our first selection from the *Lanercost Chronicle*; I'll now skip ahead about thirty pages or three years to relate another description of a dramatic lightning strike.

[Here is performed another selection from *The Chronicle of Lanercost*, which describes an incident in which lightning struck a parish church and not only caused great damage to the building and its contents, but killed and injured some

of the priests inside. This account ends with an appeal by the author that “Such mysteries as these deserve to be shrewdly investigated at leisure and to be gravely considered” (82–83).]

I love that last line about considering the mysteries. Let’s hold onto it for a moment; we’ll come back to it in a little bit.

The first thing that strikes me about this whole selection is how the individual episodes really do sound like they could come right out of *Wisconsin Death Trip*, minus the rhetorical ornaments of Victorian newspaper prose. This is history as a *News of the Weird* column. But there’s one key difference between this and the *News of the Weird*. *News of the Weird* is presented simply as a catalogue of surprising and improbable things. Its purpose is really just to say “Look how strange the world can be,” or to reinforce the old cliché, “Truth is stranger than fiction.” A publication like the *Fortean Times* might at least make a show of analyzing and interrogating the odd phenomena it tracks, but *News of the Weird* is strictly a sideshow. It’s factoid exhibitionism.

At first, it might seem that the *Lanercost Chronicle* is doing the same thing. It’s recording things that are of interest because they are curiosities. That’s true. But the impulse to share such strange events is also invested with this idea that they are worth knowing about because they have *meaning*. Their strangeness certainly does give them a kind of rubbernecking entertainment value, but that same strangeness also marks them as portents, as signs. Their strangeness is what demands that they be interpreted. We aren’t asked to interpret the significance of the items that show up in *News of the Weird*. If anything, their strangeness marks their meaninglessness — these are the aberrations, the

outliers, the exceptions to the rules of normal experience. They are the data points you are supposed to toss out. That said, I'm sure there is a caste of people who do read those same data points as the evidence that our science is too limited, that there are more things in heaven and earth, *et cetera, et cetera*. This is the mentality that fringe beliefs are somehow *more* true, or at least more noble, because they challenge the authority and complacency of the mainstream. That sort of mentality is kind of half-medieval and half anti-medieval. It's medieval in the sense that it is willing to privilege the marvelous as especially significant;¹⁴ but where your typical medieval mind would recoil is at the idea that the strange validates the unorthodox position. That's a gross generalization, of course, and there's a major thread of revolutionary and dogma-challenging discourse also coming out of monasteries at various points in time, so we shouldn't think of the middle ages — or even the elite classes that have access to writing and manuscript production, like churchmen and monks and clerks — we shouldn't think of them as universally conservative. But I do think we can safely say that the *Lanercost Chronicle*, at least, is not particularly concerned with advancing any heterodox positions, not theologically, anyway. And let me just say that I do apologize for being so equivocal on things so often — all this “on the one hand” and “on the other.” I know that can be frustrating. But as I see it, the middle ages suffer enough from enormous misconceptions that a little equivocation is better than reinforcing those misconceptions, and the world is better off with a bit more grey in place of black-and-white, anyway, even if it does sometimes makes our arguments a bit less clear. Don't tell that to my composition students, though.

¹⁴ See, for example, Caroline Walker Bynum's discussion of wonder in *Metamorphosis and Identity*: “If to theologians, chroniclers, and preachers, the wonderful was indeed often the strange, the rare, and the inexplicable, it was never the merely strange or the simply inexplicable. It was a strange that mattered, that pointed beyond itself to meaning” (71–72).

Anyway, the chronicler's impulse here is to provide some kind of interpretation of the events he records. Often this is basically a moral interpretation: here's how this story shows you what to do or what not to do. We see that in the episode of the man with dropsy, who does the right thing by trusting in St. Francis for a cure. In the second story about the clerk's deathbed repudiation of his sinful life and sinful friends, the writer tells us it's presented to "instruct posterity how great is the difference between God's service and worldly vanity." And when the king and queen survive a lightning strike that kills others in the same room, this is presented as evidence of their divine blessing.

But the story of the other lightning strike resists any easy lesson. Lightning strikes a church. Priests are killed — one in an especially gruesome way — and the building and its ornaments are damaged. Now, I think many medieval authors faced with this would conclude that this must be an expression of divine punishment, and some of them probably wouldn't balk at inventing a crime or blasphemy to attribute to the dead. But our chronicler here does not do that. For this terrible event, he does simply stand back and say: Isn't this a strange and terrible thing? "Such mysteries as these deserve to be shrewdly investigated at leisure and to be gravely considered."

Well, on the subject of mysteries, I thought I'd introduce a new feature to the podcast: a closing riddle. At the end of each episode, I'll give you a medieval or sometimes classical riddle, and you'll have to tune in next episode to get the answer. So here's our first riddle: "A silent guest, a speaking house; the guest will be caught, while the house gets away through a hole." So if you can name what that is or what that describes, tune in next week for the satisfaction you'll feel at having guessed correctly. There are no prizes as of yet.

And that brings us to the end of this episode. I'll be back in two weeks with the answer to the riddle and another medieval text. You can get bibliographic information for today's selection at *medievaldeathtrip.com*, and you can follow us on Twitter @mdtpodcast. I welcome your comments and feedback, either through Twitter or at *medievaldeathtrip.com*, where you can also access our previous episodes. So, until next time, thanks for listening!

[Closing music.]

Episode 3: Concerning a Vision of Heaven and Hell and a Bad Outlook for the Bishop

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Transcript:

[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Friday, Nov. 28th, 2014: “Episode 3: Concerning a Vision of Heaven and Hell and a Bad Outlook for the Bishop.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I only just realized that this episode will drop on Black Friday, and I’m wishing now that I’d dug up a story about a mercantile dispute of some kind. I have a really short item about people fighting over getting to loot a shipwreck, but that one will need an appendix or two before it really constitutes an episode. So maybe next November I’ll come up with a more appropriately themed episode. But today, we’re going to hear an eleventh-century vision of hell, one that reminds us that such visions — and, indeed, the idea of putting one’s political enemies in hell — that these have a literary history long before Dante. And, you know, as I think about it, American listeners who have just made it through extended family gatherings and possibly braved the Black Friday sales, for them maybe a vision of hell is an appropriate holiday theme after all.

I should note that this episode is a two-parter: what happens in today's reading is going to set up what we'll hear next time, and this two-parter will also transition us from a supernatural episode to one of purely human violence. We're going to have plenty of stories with supernatural or miraculous elements on this podcast, but I want to balance that as much as I can with accounts of more clearly historical (or at the least naturalistic) human outrages and other sorts of experiences of people *in extremis*. But that more journalistic record of a rather horrible murder will come next time; right now, let's take a little trip to the other side.

Our passage for today comes from one of the great Northern English medieval histories, the *LIBELLUS DE EXORDIO ATQUE PROCURSU ISTIUS, HOC EST DUNHELMENSIS, ECCLESIE*, which is to say, the *Tract on the Origins and Progress of This the Church of Durham* by Symeon of Durham (and I was able to say that entire title without stumbling entirely through the magic of editing). This book's also sometimes known more simply as *The History of the Church of Durham*, and that is generally how I'll refer to it from this point forward. This is one of those histories that pops up everywhere, because it was so liberally appropriated into the texts of later historians, sometimes with attribution to Symeon, but often without. This, of course, was perfectly standard practice in its day. In fact, just recently I was reading a lesser known monastic chronicle hunting up material for future episodes of this podcast, and I started copying out some passages until I realized they seemed very familiar. And a quick check later, and I discover that they're stories that came almost verbatim from Symeon, which in some cases I'd already earmarked for use. I do have to confess that one of my greatest anxieties in doing this podcast is that I'll make myself look foolish to more serious

scholars by eventually crediting a story to some minor text without realizing that it's been borrowed straight from some much more famous source that I'm really supposed to know about. I imagine there are some circles where failing to recognize another author's cribbing from Symeon of Durham would be a gaffe on the same level as thinking that Jimi Hendrix wrote "All Along the Watchtower" instead of Bob Dylan — well, a gaffe among rock and folk aficionados, anyway.

But: the basic bibliographic facts. *The History of the Church of Durham* was written sometime in the first two decades of the 12th century by Symeon, a monk of Durham — at least that's what the rubrics on a couple of the manuscripts tell us. There's virtually no biographical information embedded in the text itself, and so Symeon remains to us one of the many medieval authors who is really little more than a name and a job title (xlii–xliv). His history covers the development of Durham from the mid-7th century to pretty close to Symeon's own day over 400 years later, so it's a nice, expansive regional history. One of the main themes of the text is the history of the cult of St. Cuthbert, including all the various adventures the saint's supposedly incorruptible corpse went on during the various dislocations caused by the Viking raids of the 8th and 9th centuries. We'll almost certainly hear some of those in future episodes, but today's text is not a Cuthbert story. Today we're focusing on the nearer end of the timeline, on an event which would have occurred during Symeon's own lifetime.

The larger context for this story is tied into significant political history of the decades immediately after William the Conqueror took over England. But this podcast isn't *really* about the history, and I don't want to get bogged down in trying to explain the politics and motives of all the characters — and I would have to do a lot of work to be

able to do that; that's not all information I have entirely in my head. So even if the characters are historically famous or important characters, if they're not directly relevant to the basic comprehension of the specific scene I'm sharing, I'll leave them to your own Wikipedia searches to explore. But here's a very brief sketch of two of the key figures that show up in today's selection. The first character is the Bishop of Durham, Bishop Walcher (that's spelled with a *ch* and not a *k*, so it could also be pronounced "Wal-cher," "Valker," or "Wal-share," depending on language and dialect, but I'm going to go with the simpler *Walker* option).

Walcher became bishop in 1072, and Symeon tells us he was

a noble-born man of Lotharingian race, exceedingly well instructed in divine and secular knowledge, was elected by the king himself, and consecrated to the bishopric of the church of St Cuthbert. He was a venerable white-haired man, worthy of such an honour by the sobriety of his ways and the integrity of his life. (195)

Walcher's interesting because he's one of these ecclesiastical figures you do sometimes encounter in monastic histories who is praised for holiness and learning and righteous living, but who turns out to be kind of a disaster as a leader or administrator. That kind of person — be they a bishop or an abbot or a king — puts chroniclers in a tough spot, because they really like clean lines of moral cause and effect. A good person should perform good acts that produce good outcomes. And bad people should perform wicked acts that have horrible outcomes. So when a person of admirable character is causing bad outcomes, that becomes an ideological problem. One of the conventional excuses — especially for kings — is to blame everything on bad counselors, though you do

sometimes find a pragmatic chronicler who's prepared to accept that a person can be morally upright but just not equipped to do a particular job well. In this case, Symeon kind of blends those two things in his depiction of the ill-fated bishop.

The other major character referred to in today's passage is the Northumbrian Earl Waltheof, who, as Wikipedia quite succinctly puts it, was "the last of the Anglo-Saxon earls and the only English aristocrat to be executed during the reign of William I." That's a significant, if rather passive, claim to fame. Waltheof gets involved in a revolt against William the Conqueror and comes out a loser; because of his death, Bishop Walcher is actually given control of the Northumbrian earldom by the king. This act is referenced right at the beginning of today's text. Then something a bit confusing happens in our reading: within the vision of hell, there's another reference to a person named Waltheof; this person was responsible for murdering the bishop. But Earl Waltheof, of course, had been dead for about four years before Bishop Walcher was killed, so this must be a different Waltheof — but quite possibly it would be someone from the earl's family, however, and this would be a family name passed down (214–215, n. 99). That said, the precise identity of this person remains unknown.

But I think that's more than enough context for this little story. One other thing to note, though: Symeon makes a reference in his narrative to a previous miracle, one recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. This would be the famous episode known as the Vision of Drythelm. This story involves a thane named Drythelm who came back to life after having seemingly died of an illness, and then was able to share a story of about being guided through the antechambers of the afterlife. But

that's enough table-setting. Let's get to the turkey. I'll be reading from David Rollason's 2000 edition and translation of Symeon.

[Here is performed the story of how Bishop Walcher's death was foretold.

Symeon begins by explaining how, despite his piety, Walcher was ineffective at restraining the knights in his service who greatly afflicted the inhabitants of the region with robbery and violence. The ultimate outcome of this situation is then predicted by a Northumbrian man named Eadwulf, who seemingly dies and then comes back to life during his own wake. This miracle is accompanied by a huge flock of little birds who fill the house for a time before flying out. Then Eadwulf reveals the vision he received while dead, namely that the bishop will be killed by a man named Waltheof, who will suffer the torments of hell for this crime (vividly described by Eadwulf). At first the people are uncertain of whether or not to believe this vision, but they are convinced when Eadwulf also correctly predicts date of his own death on the following week (211–217).

So, when we return next week, we'll find out just exactly how Bishop Walcher meets his terrible end. It's pretty dramatic, I must say. So, this is a holiday, so I'm going to be fairly brief in my commentary on this vision. It speaks pretty well for itself, anyway. And as a general rule, I'd like for our episodes to be proportionally a bit more the text, and a bit less me rambling on. Of course, that will just naturally get easier as we go along and I exhaust my meager storehouse of knowledge.

But there is one interesting phrase in this text that grabbed my attention. When Eadwulf first appears to come back to life, everyone is terrified, which is perfectly understandable. But when he sees them freaking out, what he says is: “Do not be afraid, for I have truly risen from the dead.” In the original Latin text, that would be *Vere a morte surrexi*. It’s the *truly*, the *vere* that stands out. Now, as an adverb, it can simply be a kind of stock intensifier. It could basically mean, “*indeed*, I have risen from the dead,” or “*in truth*, I’ve come back to life!” or similar phrases. But it can also signify real truthfulness, as opposed to falsity or deception. So what would it mean to have falsely risen from the dead?

Well, the middle ages has its share of ghosts and revenants — and, indeed, medieval ghosts are very often depicted as having physical bodies. Similarly, there is debate here and there about whether these revenants are actually human spirits persisting on earth after death (which is theologically troubling in some schools), or if they’re demonic spirits possessing corpses or creating illusions of walking corpses.¹⁵ So Eadwulf’s reassurance that he has *truly* returned from the dead emphasizes that it is *he* who has come back and occupies that body, and not some imposter spirit. It also announces that he is actually back to life and not undead. Perhaps. That’s my reading of it, anyway, and I think it’s supported by the further action taken — that his assertion alone is not enough, but a comprehensive blessing and ritual purification is also necessary before everyone feels at ease. This also suggests that there’s an underlying fear of the *wrong* way to come back from the dead.

¹⁵ See, for example, the accounts surveyed by Jacqueline Simpson in her article “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England.”

The other thing that's interesting is the flock of birds, which I haven't noticed in any other near-death-experience tales of this kind — if anyone out there has seen this motif in other stories of this time period, I'd love to hear about it in the comments section of this episode at *medievaldeathtrip.com*, or via a tweet — you can tweet to me @mdtpodcast. The one connection I made, of course, is to the classical tradition of the psychopomp, birds who associated in mythology or folklore with the guiding of spirits to and from the otherworld. I wish I could say I know the term psychopomp because I was a classics major as an undergrad. I was. But, truth be told, psychopomp entered my vocabulary through Stephen King's book *The Dark Half*, where supernatural flocks of sparrows play a key plot role. Anyway, I can think of a number of examples of birds as guides or vehicles for spirits in medieval literature or allegory, but I'd be very curious to hear about other instances of supernatural flocks accompanying death-bed scenes in historical or hagiographical writing.

Last week, I left you with our very first riddle, and I promised to come back and give you the answer. Well, I am nothing if not a man of my word, so here we go. Our riddle, which I took from the Claret Riddles (or the *Clareti Enigmata*), was: "A silent guest, a speaking house; the guest will be caught, while the house gets away through a hole" (Riddle 27). This is a rather popular classical riddle that shows up in a number of variations. The answer: "a fish and water." The fish is the silent guest — they make no sound — and its "speaking house," is the babbling brook. You scoop the fish up in a net, and the fish gets caught while the "house" runs out through the holes in the net.

So now let's move on to a brand new riddle. This is one for which you can probably come up with dozens of plausible answers, but the text I'm taking this from

does actually provide what I guess we can call an “authentic” medieval answer (rather than scholarly speculation about what the right answer might be). So let’s see if we can think sufficiently medievally and come up with the right answer to it. Here’s the riddle: “What thing is it, the less it is the more it is dread?” [Repeating] “What thing is it, the less it is the more it is dread?” Well, for the answer, come back next time.

And that brings us to the end of this Black Friday episode of *Medieval Death Trip*. You get more information about today’s text at our website, medievaldeathtrip.com, where you can also access our previous episodes. We’re are on Twitter @mdtpodcast. And I’ll be back with the murder of Bishop Walcher in two weeks. Happy holidays, safe travels, and thanks for listening!

Episode 4: The Violent Death of Bishop Walcher

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Transcript:

[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Friday, December 12th, 2014: “Episode 4: The Violent Death of Bishop Walcher.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m your host, Patrick Lane, and on this episode we will continue and conclude the story of Bishop Walcher of Durham as told by Symeon of Durham. So last episode, we were introduced to Walcher, whose death was at that time forecast by a man who came back from death with a vision of the bishop’s future murderer suffering in hell. Now, you may recall that Walcher was praised for his personal virtues and learning, but criticized for letting the knights of his household run rather wild and bully the district. You combine this with some lingering resentments from the Anglo-Saxon aristocratic families who have been displaced by Continental Norman appointees like Walcher — who in addition to his bishopric had been put in charge of the earldom of Northumbria by William the Conqueror — and you can see how the bishop might develop some fierce enemies. Our chronicler, Symeon, remains rather vague about the specific political dynamics of this conflict, only indirectly suggesting that one of the lead

perpetrators — the man allegedly destined for hell — was related to the previous earl of Northumberland. But the murder is recorded elsewhere, too, including in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, where it is cast as a kind of native Northumbrian uprising against the Norman conquerors. And this is happening in the year 1080, so only fourteen years after the defeat of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings. The Normans are still very much an occupying force — one with differing degrees of local collaboration, of course, depending on where you were in the country — and hadn't yet become the cultural hybrids they later would. One thing that's interesting to note in today's selection is Symeon's own sympathies and where they fall, as much as we can discern them in his prose.

And I rather think we should get straight to that prose. As I mentioned, we're continuing straight on from last episode's selection, from Symeon of Durham's *History of the Church of Durham*, so you can get more basic background on that text by listening to the introduction to Episode 3. And, as before, I'll be reading from David Rollason's 2000 edition and translation, which you might be able to find at your local university library, but probably not too many other places, I'm afraid. We're going to start just after where we left off last time, with Symeon resuming his own tale after the insertion of Eadwulf's vision of heaven and hell and bringing us back to the consequences of the bishop letting his knights terrorize the locals.

[Here is performed Symeon's account of the murder of Bishop Walcher. The bishop sets up a meeting between his knights and the local people who have been wronged. When the bishop's retinue arrives, they find a large and angry crowd of

people gathered. The bishop takes refuge in the church and begins to start the peace conference. But outside, the crowd and the knights begin fighting and soon a massacre is underway. The townspeople set fire to the church, and the bishop is left with the hopeless choice of either dying in the flames or being killed by the armed men outside the church door. He finally opts for the latter, and is brutally slaughtered. As news gets out about the bishop's murder, the monks of Jarrow arrive to collect his body, done with some difficulty as the killers are still rampaging around the town. These rebels attempt to storm the bishop's castle, but are repelled. The rebels then disperse and go their separate ways. Eventually, Bishop Odo of Bayeux arrives with an army and ravages the land and plunders the town in vengeance for Walcher's death, with little regard for which inhabitants are innocent of the crime (217–221).]

Well, so long Walcher! Just a few observations about this story. The first is that question of sympathy. In the way Symeon portrays Walcher's final moments, I think he conjures up a lot of natural human sympathy for the bishop. By putting us inside the bishop's head while he wrestles with this horrible dilemma, whether to die by fire or by sword, he leaves us little choice but to imagine ourselves faced with that hopeless binary, and empathy is generated as a consequence. So there's not much equivocation about the awfulness of the bishop's murder, even if the bishop's moral status was somewhat complicated. As we heard last week, Symeon says of Walcher (and this quote is slightly abridged), "He was worthy of the love of all through the honesty of his life, and the sobriety and gentleness of his ways. However, because he did not restrain his men from

freely doing what they wished and indeed doing several things of a hostile nature, he offended the native inhabitants.... The knights also behaved very arrogantly towards the people, robbing many with violence, and killing some, even some of the older people. When the bishop disregarded their wrong-doing and did not constrain them with the censure of his episcopal authority, he was one day struck down along with them and died because of their sins, just as Eli once died for the guilt of his sons.” And actually, in even in this passage, Walcher’s moral character isn’t challenged — his failure to constrain his knights is not itself cast as a sin — it’s *their* sins that he dies for — instead, he’s guilty of just bad management. Now certainly it’s possible that the light touch Symeon gives Walcher is conditioned by the particularly awful way he dies, but it’s also probably connected to Symeon’s larger purpose in writing: he’s writing a history of Durham partly as a champion of its ecclesiastical legacy, and so he has reasons to cast a former bishop of Durham in a good light. Interestingly, though, as much as Walcher’s murder is couched in the rhetoric of martyrdom, we don’t ultimately get a Saint Walcher. His battered body and blood-soaked vestments aren’t transformed into relics, there’s no cult that develops, and, indeed, once he’s safely if rather unceremoniously buried, that’s the end of his legacy and Symeon is ready to move on to other things.

Which brings us to the portrayal of the other victims and of the killers. The bishop’s men have not been presented positively — and Symeon’s rhetoric does rather suggest that they do earn their deaths through their sins. And yet, in this scene, they’re jumped upon unawares and massacred. There’s no honor or chivalry to this act, but a strangely anonymous mob violence prevails. Even though the story of Eadwulf’s vision that we heard last time gives us the name of one of killers, this character does not actually

emerge from the crowd in this scene at all. There's in fact a weird kind of schizophrenia or contradiction in the depiction of the Northumbrian people. The bishop arrives at Gateshead to find "a great multitude of the whole people brought together by the worst advice," and it's a "vociferous crowd" that falls upon his knights outside the church. You know, it's easy enough to picture English villagers with torches and pitchforks attacking the Norman authorities who have taken over their local politics. And yet, Symeon goes on to say that the bishop's murder was "a crime abominable to everyone," and that though the murderous insurgents seem to run riot through the town for a few days, they're soon defeated and the murderers of the bishop, who find either death or exile, are now a distinct minority within the populace. And we have a final kind of strange reintegration of the social order when another Norman rides up from the south to ostensibly bring justice — this being notoriously ambitious and bellicose Odo of Bayeux. And Odo *is* a monster here. He's an affliction that lays waste to the land and steals the church's precious treasures. I have a few other Odo stories from other chronicles that we'll be hearing in the future, so just wait. But having lamented the death of a Norman bishop and looked askance at the natives, our sympathies are once again spun around to raise an eyebrow at Norman depredations and to feel sorry for the locals.

Anyway, we end up with a very striking narrative that ends up being surprising non-propagandistic — or, at least, it's deeply conflicted propaganda that doesn't exactly know what faction to root for and where ultimately to place the blame. No neat and tidy moral is attached here, and that's the kind of historical anecdote I certainly enjoy the most.

One final little bit of trivia. When I was searching on further information on Bishop Walcher, I came across a Google Book result for Oliver Heslop's 1892 reference work, *Northumbrian Words*, which has an entry for the word *rede* (*r-e-d-e*), which means counsel or advice. One famous etymological example of *rede*, which is the name of the Anglo-Saxon king familiar to all players of Sid Meier's *Civilization* series: Aethelraed the Unready. Where "Unready" is a translation of the Old English *Unraed*, which means without *raed* (which would be the same word as *rede* in Middle English), so in other words, "without good counsel or advice," which ends up being a pun on his own name, Aethelraed, which means "noble counsel." So he is "unready" in the sense that he has not received the right preparation from his advisors and counselors. Anyway, *rede* appears in a proverbial expression, "Short rede is good rede," and concerning this proverb, Heslop says

The proverb is specially associated with the death of Walcher, the first Bishop of Durham appointed by William the Conqueror. At Gateshead the bishop had met the leaders of the people, and on retiring to the church the cry was raised, 'Short rede, good rede, slay ye the bishop.' The church was thereupon set on fire, and the bishop was slain. (570)

Now, based on a little further searching, [I can say] this proverb no longer seems to be in use. It seems to not have lasted much beyond the early modern period. But maybe it's worth reviving in an age of unabating commentary. If nothing else, I should probably abide by it now and wrap this up.

So, let's do our riddle. Last week's riddle, which I took from a facsimile edition of the *Demaundes Joyous*, a riddle book from 1511, was: "What thing is it, the less it is the more it is dread?" (Riddle 37). The answer? What is it that you're more afraid of when there's not as much of it there? Why, it's a bridge, of course. I can't help but picture the Bridge of Death from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* whenever I think about this riddle.

[Sound clip from Monty Python and the Holy Grail.]

BRIDGEKEEPER: Stop! Who would cross the Bridge of Death must answer me these questions three, ere the other side he see!

LAUNCELOT: Ask me the questions, Bridgekeeper. I am not afraid.

[End of clip.]

And let's get a new riddle. Here's one in honor of our winter weather (well, here in the Northern Hemisphere, anyway): "What is it that freezeth never?" [Repeating] "What is it that freezeth never?"

[Sound clip from Monty Python and the Holy Grail.]

ROBIN: I don't know that! *[Screams.]*

[End of clip.]

We'll be back in two weeks with the answer and a new episode. So that's going to be Friday the 26th of December, right after the Christmas holiday. That episode is going to be an extra large, extra special episode with, I think, a really phenomenal eyewitness account of another terrible thing. Not quite as gruesome a thing as Walcher's death, but really amazing in its own way. I look forward to sharing that with you in about two

weeks. Until then, you can follow us on Twitter @mdtpodcast and check in at our website at *medievaldeathtrip.com*, where you can access all of our episodes so far and get references for the texts that are presented in each one.

Oh, and before I go, I'd like to thank a couple of people. Jo left a very encouraging comment on the website, and that really brightened my day, so thank you, Jo. And we got our first review in the U.S. iTunes store, a great little positive review from lbw2112, so thank you very much for that. These are the first bits of feedback that I've gotten on the podcast, in fact, and they're greatly appreciated. I'd love to hear from more of you through Twitter or through the website or via reviews. And you can spread the word about the podcast to friends and colleagues. I know this podcast probably doesn't have hugely broad mainstream appeal, but I like to think that there's a particular set of people who might get a lot of enjoyment out of it, and if you're one of those people, then I'm sure you probably know a few others. Oh, and if you are a student of the middle ages and you catch me saying something contentious or wrong or based outdated scholarship or ignorance of other sources or other contextual information, I do welcome corrective feedback as well. I think we can certainly introduce a corrigenda feature to the podcast to go over errors or debates, so you can leave those constructive observations on the website or tweet them at me. But anyway, thanks for listening — I really, truly do appreciate it — and happy holidays!

Episode 5: Concerning the Burning of Croyland Abbey

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Transcript:

[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Friday, December 26, 2014: “Episode 5: Concerning the Burning of Croyland Abbey.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. We have a monster text today, so I don’t want to spend too much time in introductory blather, but I do want to wish everyone a merry day-after-Christmas (if you’re downloading this on its release day). I hope your leftovers are still tasting good!

I’m very excited about today’s text — it’s one I’ve been looking forward to doing for a long time, since the earliest days that I began planning this podcast. It’s a rather long passage, but I don’t want to break it up, so I’m going to let it be our holiday special. There’s nothing directly Christmas-y about it — well, unless you’ve ever had a Christmas tree catch fire in your house. Today we’re going to hear about the great Croyland Abbey fire of 1091, as recorded in an account written less than five years later by the man who was abbot at that time, Ingulf. Well, maybe. That’s what the text tells us, at least, but as I’ll discuss after the story, there are some issues with this. On the subject of Crowland

Abbey, students of Old English might remember Crowland as the house founded in the early 700s by the followers of Saint Guthlac, for whom we have a couple of celebrated Old English hagiographical poems.

But let's start out by taking this story at face-value. I thought I would provide a few quick definitions of some potentially unfamiliar terms that will pop up here. First, a *corrody* is a thing kind of like a pension: it's an allowance usually of food and lodging at a monastery granted to an individual. Sometimes these are bestowed as a kind of favor to a servant of the abbey or to someone connected with the king or a local lord or someone else that you owe favors to. Sometimes they might be given in exchange for a donation to the abbey, so if someone promises all their property to the abbey at their death, the abbey might give them a corrody to support them in their old age. And sometimes they were given as an act of charity or a kind of memorial endowment, so when an important monk or abbot died, they might bequeath a corrody to some poor person. We'll also be hearing about *muniments* being stored in *presses*. So, muniments are legal documents — charters, privileges, things like that — texts which might well be kept separately from the ordinary books and documents of the monastery library. And presses here just refers to a kind of bookcase or cabinet for gathered parchment leaves — these aren't book-making presses. You'll also hear a slightly unusual use of the word *nadir*, as in the opposite of *zenith*, but in this case it refers to a kind of astronomical chart or device, maybe something like an astrolabe.

Now to the text. The English translation I'll be reading from is that by Henry T. Riley, from his volume, *Ingulf's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*. My text comes

specifically from a 1908 reprint of an 1854 edition, and both of these are available through Google Books.

[Here is performed Ingulf's first-person account of the fire that greatly damaged his abbey. The fire begins when a workman engaged in repairing the church roof fails to fully extinguish his own fire. As a great wind rises up during the night, the embers of this fire are fanned up, and soon the wooden beams supporting the church roof are in flames. Abbot Ingulf is awakened and sees the fire and how it is beginning to spread to other buildings in the monastery complex. He rouses the monks asleep in the dormitory, who find their exit blocked by the fire and so leap from the windows to ground, many suffering broken bones from the fall. Ingulf rushes about the grounds, observing the spread of the fire, until the tower of the church collapses near him, and he swoons into unconsciousness. His tale resumes when he comes to on the following morning and takes in the extensive damage. This tour includes a discussion what was damaged and what was saved from among the monastery's collection of books, documents, and charters (197–203). This final part of this performance is underscored with a sound clip of a choir singing.¹⁶]

¹⁶ I generally try to be quite historically and geographically scrupulous with my sound effects, while making the best of what is available in a non-attribution Creative Commons license. The toad sounds and the bird sounds all come from European species, lest bird-watchers be distracted by distinctly North American birdsongs. But the clip of this chant is a significant anachronism; it is a field recording of the *Magnificat* being sung at vespers in Westminster Abbey, but the arrangement is a late Renaissance one by Lodovico Grossi da Viadana. But let's say it's used here as a subtle way of suggesting the forgery question. Yes, let's say that.

All right. I think that's a fantastic story. It's a remarkable vivid and personal account of disaster that was a major trauma for a community. It's an amazing piece of eyewitness history.

Or is it? Here's the thing: Ingulf's Chronicle...well, it's generally considered a forgery from hundreds of years later — but even that isn't a straightforward claim.

Let's start with the simple details about the larger text from which today's story comes. The common name for this chronicle is the *Historia Croylandensis*, which starts out with Abbot Ingulf's history of the abbey, which covers the time of St. Guthlac in the 8th century up to Ingulf's own abbacy, stopping around the year 1095, which is allegedly when he is writing this history. The history is then continued in a series of additions written by a combination of named and unnamed writers that carry the history all the way into the 15th century. No manuscripts of the *Historia Croylandensis* survive which are older than the 1500s, though there are references made by Renaissance scholars to the existence of supposedly older — but now lost — manuscripts. So all we have to go on are relatively late copies of copies. Now, that in and of itself is not an uncommon situation for medieval texts. But it does mean that the original date of the text's composition suddenly relies on the evidence of the content of the text. For a long time since it first came to scholarly attention in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the *Historia Croylandensis* was accepted as a true and valuable chronicle (Searle 149), but by the beginning of the nineteenth century, historians had begun to raise serious questions about it, so that by 1826, Sir Francis Palgrave is content to declare that “the History of Ingulph must be considered to be little better than an historical novel — a mere monkish invention” (qtd. in *Ingulf's Chronicle* xii). And in this case, Palgrave would be referring

to 14th or 15th century monks, inventing this history over 300 years after the time it claims to be written. Or, at least, that's one extreme of the positions that scholars have taken on the authenticity of the part of the chronicle ascribed to Ingulf, or, as many these scholars would have, the Pseudo-Ingulf.

The basic theory is summed up by our translator, Riley. Around the year 1415, the abbey was in conflict with the residents of a couple of the neighboring villages who began encroaching on lands and fisheries claimed by the abbey. In order to win a clear legal victory and secure their property rights, the monks apparently forged ancient charters for the abbey. Riley says:

Finding among their archives a Chronicle of the convent from the earliest times, (said to have been composed by the Sempects by order of Abbot Turketul,) the monks made it the vehicle of their fictitious Charters, added to it the histories which had been written by Egelric and Ingulph, had the whole copied afresh, and deposited the manuscript in the Sacristy as corroborative proof of their title to their lands. It was for this reason, perhaps, that so few copies of the manuscript were allowed to circulate; as the forgers must have been conscious that to the scrutinizing view of the scholar, the anachronisms and contradictions with which the Charters were filled would be too evident. (xii)

Now, we might spot one loophole here through which we could pull our story of the fire from its consignment to the ranks of forgeries and duplicitous fiction (not that it wouldn't still be fascinating as a forgery, but I think it definitely alters our response to

this tale if we assume that it is). What's accepted beyond pretty much all scholarly doubt is that the charters that are interspersed throughout Ingulf's text — and incorporated into the text, not just pasted in, as it were, but fitted into the narrative and introduced in Ingulf's voice — these charters are certainly phony, invented centuries after the year 1095 (Searle 154–155, and Roffe 107). But, as Riley says, perhaps the nature of the forgery here is that your 15th-century Crowland monks took an existing, authentic chronicle written by Ingulf in the 11th century, and edited it in order to weave in fictional charters. And it has to be said that a great deal of the scholarship out there about whether or not this text is a forgery is 75 to 90% focused on charters and signatories and the documented possessions of the abbey. The debate is largely about the property and not really so much about the narrative. Anyway, in this view of the text, we could certainly still accept Ingulf's account of the fire as a bit of 11th-century memoir. And we do know that the abbey *was* consumed by fire in 1091, because this is attested by at least one other independent source, so the factuality of the event itself is not itself disputed.

But there are other problems with Ingulf's text that do encroach on areas not directly adjacent to the charters. There are other anachronisms. The writer borrows phrases from famous historians of the 12th century. There's an extensive study of the sources and anachronisms of the *Historia Croylandensis* by W.G. Searle, published in 1894. And while Searle actually defends the chronicle against a number of the charges of anachronism or error that have been launched at it, he ultimately concludes with the sceptics that the present text of "the Ingulf" was probably compiled around the year 1450, and that at best, perhaps an original Ingulf-authored text had been heavily reworked by someone about a hundred years later than the supposed origin date of 1095 (207).

And even if we hold on to the idea that the fire episode is a survival from an original account written by the abbot himself that's remained embedded in a larger assemblage of fabrications, we still have to face the fact that the ultimate purpose of this account of the fire is to explain why a bunch of original charters were destroyed and a certain special few survived. Which does sound an awful lot like the kind of narrative suspiciously convenient for a forger's agenda.

But here's my response: if this story is, as Palgrave puts it, "a historical novel," it's a kind of unbelievable example of literary craftsmanship that's perhaps not totally unprecedented but would still be pretty striking in a period where even authentic memoir is frequently rather stiff and lacking in any strong conception of scene, detail, or point of view. To see someone so expertly embody the first-person perspective of essentially a fictional narrator is a rather remarkable feat in an age before the novel.

And I have one observation of my own to add; I actually had wanted to try to write a paper or article on this, but it turns out the substance of my claim is a bit thin for that. But it might just about be perfect for a podcast. There's a concept in cognitive science that has filtered over into literary studies called "theory of mind," which is just a way to describe how we are able with our own cognitive apparatus to imagine and simulate the mental states and thoughts of others.¹⁷ It's how I know what you're thinking. Notably, "theory of mind," like object permanence, is one of those cognitive milestones that you can observe children acquiring. There's one experiment to demonstrate this where you have two researchers and a child sitting at a table and playing with a toy.¹⁸

¹⁷ The pre-eminent treatment of theory of mind in literary criticism is Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2006).

¹⁸ The classic example of this experiment is the "Sally-Anne Test" (also known as the "False Belief Test") designed by Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan M. Leslie, and Uta Frith in 1985.

One of the researchers takes the toy and puts it inside a box, then the researcher gets up and leaves. While he's away, the other researcher takes the toy out of the box and hides it under the table. Then the first researcher comes back, and the child is asked, "Where will Bob" — let's say the research who left is called Bob — "Where will Bob look for the toy?" A young child who hasn't quite attained theory of mind will point to under the table, because the child doesn't realize that Bob's knowledge about the toy differs from the child's knowledge about the toy. An older child can simulate Bob's thought process and will understand that Bob will still think the toy is in the box, even though the child knows the toy is under the table. And obviously as one develops even further, our capacity for "theory of mind" reaches greater levels of complexity.

[Sound clip from The Princess Bride.]

WESTLEY: Where is the poison? The battle of wits is begun. It ends when you decide and we both drink and find out who is right and who is dead.

VIZZINI: But it's so simple! All I have to do is divine from what I know of you. Are you the sort of man who would put the poison into his own goblet or his enemy's. Now, a clever man would put the poison into his own goblet, because he would know that only a fool would reach for what he is given. I am not a great fool, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you. But you must have known that I was not a great fool; you would have counted on it, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me.

WESTLEY: You've made your decision, then?

VIZZINI: Not remotely! Because cocaine comes from Australia, as everyone knows, and Australia is entirely peopled with criminals, and criminals are used to not having people trust them, as you are not trusted by me, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you.

WESTLEY: Truly, you have a dizzying intellect.

VIZZINI: Wait till I get going!

[End of clip.]

Now, you don't really need "theory of mind" to understand how point of view works in narrative, but I think it does help a bit, and there is a certain sense that the omniscient point of view that is common to pre-modern fictional narrative is a little bit like a child with an under-developed theory of mind. People can write in perfectly ordinary first person that maintains great verisimilitude when they're recounting their own experience, but once they start describing an imagined world, the tendency — and the rhetorical convention — is to jump into that all-knowing perspective. You're the author, you *do* know everything and what every character is thinking, so it might seem a kind of bizarre to you to limit yourself and to deliberately withhold or deny that knowledge and to model the limited perceptions of a single character. I certainly won't say it never happens, but there is some justification for why the modernists patted themselves on the back with such self-satisfaction for mastering the limited point of view.

Anyway, here's what I noticed about the fire story. We really stay in Ingulf's point of view, to a striking degree. There's a very natural place in the narrative where we might expect a chronicler who's just inventing an account of an abbey fire — and there

are many such accounts in monastic chronicles to draw from — we might expect that chronicler to expand out into a larger perspective and paint the bigger picture like most historians who might be composing third person accounts would do. This moment is when the Dormitory catches fire. And part of the reason my point is not entirely conclusive here is because, at least in strict modernist terms, we do break the first person point of view, but only a little bit. Our narrator says that he sees the fire spread to the Dormitory, and he begins shouting to awaken the monks within. Here the point of view does briefly slip inside the building and into the heads of the other monks: “On recognizing my voice, full of alarm, they sprang up from their beds, and half naked and clad only in their night shirts, the instant they heard the fire in the cloisters, rushed forth through all the windows of the Dormitory, and fell to the ground with dreadful force...” And then he describes the injuries they suffered. We’re barely inside that dormitory; we barely see the flames within the building. Instead, the primary image is of the monks plunging out the windows and falling to the ground, breaking limbs and getting horribly injured. In other words, what we really see in this passage is what someone standing outside the Dormitory and shouting up at the windows would have witnessed — would probably have had nightmares about. And shortly after that, Ingulf swoons into unconsciousness with the collapse of the tower, and we resume the narrative with what he learns when he comes back to his senses. Point of view is honored in a way that I, at least, find rather unexpected. Is that evidence that this passage isn’t a forgery? I don’t know. It’s also certainly possible that the Pseudo-Ingulf is also writing from personal experience of a church or monastery fire — they weren’t exactly rare occurrences — and maybe that’s the source of the authentic qualities of the point of view (if not necessarily

the historical realities of the scene). And maybe I'm just horribly underrating the ability of a late medieval writer to recognize and implement the first person point of view in a fictional scene. If any of you have any thoughts about any of this, I'd love to hear them. I could keep going for another half hour on this topic, but, mercifully, I won't. But thanks for bearing with me if you lasted this long.

Now let's wrap things up. First, the answer to last episode's riddle. Our riddle was: "What is it that freezeth never?" (Riddle 31). This one also comes from the *Demaundes Joyous*, as our previous riddle did, and the answer this time is... What freezeth never? "Hot water." Boo, right? That's a riddle suitable for Christmas crackers.

Normally I would be back with a new episode in two weeks, but with the holidays and preparations for the start of the new semester, I think the podcast is going to take a New Year's break, and we'll be back instead in the second-half of January with a brand new text. Well, a brand new episode — a very old text. We'll start with a fresh riddle to kick off 2015 then. In the meantime, you can follow us on Twitter @mdtpodcast or you can check out the website at *medievaldeathtrip.com*. And we now have an e-mail address if you have feedback or questions that are too long for Twitter or if you just don't like using Twitter or posting public comments. The email address is *patrick@medievaldeathtrip.com*. I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks for listening, and have a happy New Year!

[Closing music.]

Episode 6: Concerning the Year Something-Fourteen

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Transcript:

[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Monday, January 26, 2015: “Episode 6: Concerning the Year Something-Fourteen.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m your host, Patrick Lane, and I’m back after a bit of a podcasting vacation. Happy Medieval Monday — I think for the time being, we will be shifting the podcast to a Monday morning release, every other week — this semester I’m teaching five days a week, and so having the weekend to get the podcast assembled, I think, is going to be very helpful. Also, I apologize if I sound a bit croaky, but I’ve been afflicted by some late January plague. But I didn’t want to put off a new episode for any longer, lest you think this was some sort of fly-by-night operation.

It may be a bit late in coming, but I thought I would do a New Year’s episode, after a fashion. This will be a bit of an experimental format. What I thought we’d do is go to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, one of the most important sources of early English history, and just pull out all the entries for the year 14 in each century the Chronicle covers. Why the 14s and not the 15s? Well, because the Chronicle’s entries are

retrospectives, looking back and recording what had happened in the preceding year (more or less: not all the entries were written contemporaneously). But the idea is that from our perspective from the new year 2015, we take the opportunity to look back at the year 14. This approach produces a little sampler of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, but it doesn't really create any kind of cohesive narrative, and it doesn't necessarily lead us into the kind of "Death Trip" content we would usually focus on. However, as it happens, statistically speaking, a random sampling of Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entries turns out to still offer a reliably high quotient of murders and massacres and astronomical or meteorological marvels.

So you quite get a story in today's episode like we usually have, but think of this approach as skipping a stone across five centuries of British history.

If you're unfamiliar with it, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is actually a name applied to a set of chronicle manuscripts that share a common root, but go on to each develop in different ways as they were elaborated on or continued or even just recopied by various local scribes. Their defining trait is that they are written not in Latin (except for little snippets here and there), but in Anglo-Saxon, a.k.a., Old English. If you consolidate all the manuscripts together, the chronicle runs from the birth of Christ in the year 1 to the death of King Stephen in 1154. Not every year receives an entry, and the entries go from basically one or two sentence notes for most of the items from before the year 500 or so, but they gain more detail and more narrative as you get to entries for the 10th and 11th centuries. In fact, the manuscript that continues the longest — well past the Norman Conquest, which in most cases tended to put a serious damper on writing in Old English — this manuscript is the one designated by the letter E, also known the Peterborough

Chronicle, which you might recall from Episode 1 of this podcast, which I quoted from to describe torture via venomous animals during the Anarchy of Stephen's reign.

As for the items we'll hear today, because there isn't an entry for every year, there's actually only one item covering a year 14 from before 514, and that's a one sentence entry for the year 114 from the E manuscript, which happens to be one of the Latin items derived from other histories, and this item just notes that in this year Pope Alexander the first instituted the use of holy water. So we'll just skip past that one and start our reading proper with the year 514, which is the next year 14 to receive any coverage, and then we'll carry on for each century until we get to 1114. In this survey, we're going to see glimpses of the arrival of the Germanic tribes (the Angles and the Saxons) into Britain, some activity by one of the great Anglo-Saxon queens.... We're going to see the period Danish control over England by the kings Swegn and Canute, and then the reign of the Norman King Henry, son of William the Conquerer.

I'll be reading from the 1909 translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle by E.E.C. Gomme, which interpolates all the various manuscripts together and indicates where there are significant differences between entries from text to text. This translation also retains a few Old English terms that we probably should define. The first is *witan*, which is the Anglo-Saxon king's council, the wise men of the realm, including aristocrats and churchmen. And the second is *fyrð*, which is the term for an army raised by levy of the population, as distinguished from the elite warriors drawn from the aristocracy (the kinds of men who would be called knights after chivalry superseded the old Germanic system of thanes). That's probably all the preface we need, though. Let's dive into some history.

[Sound of a radio rapidly scanning through frequencies, catching snatches of broadcasts.]

[The year 514 from the A-text.] Here came the West-Saxons, Stuf and Wihtgar, to Britain with three ships at a place which is called Cerdices-ora; and they fought against the Britons and put them to flight.

[Radio scanning.]

[The year 614 from the A-text.] Here Cynegils and Cwichelm fought at Beandun, and slew two thousand and sixty-five Welshmen.

[Radio scanning.]

[The year 614 from the F-text.] Laurentius became archbishop whom Augustin on account of his holy life [and here some of the text has been cropped out by the binder of the manuscript] . . . [resuming] should be archbishop.

[Radio scanning.]

[The year 714 from the A-text.] Here Guthlac the holy died [and king Pepin].

[Radio scanning.]

[The year 814 from the A-text.] Here Leo the noble and holy pope died; and after him Stephen succeeded to the realm [meaning the popedom].

[Radio scanning.]

[And now, to be able to make grammatical sense of the entry for 914 in the C-text, we actually have to start with the entry for 913.]

[913.] Here, God granting, Æthelflæd lady of the Mercians fared with all the Mercians to Tamworth and there built the fortress early in the summer and after this, before Lammas, the one at Stafford.

[914.] Then after this, in the next year, the one at Eddisbury, early in the summer; and again in the same year, late in the autumn, the one at Warwick.

[Radio scanning.]

[The year 1014 from the E-text.] Here in this year king Swegen ended his days at Candlemas [Feb. 3rd]. [And the same year Ælfric was consecrated bishop of London at York on St. Juliana's mass-day.] And all the fleet chose Knut for king. Then decreed all the witan [who were in England], ecclesiastical and lay, that they should send after king Æthelred; and they declared that no lord was dearer to them than their own natural lord, if he would rule them more according to law than he did before. Then sent the king his son Edward hither with his messengers and bade them greet all his people, and said that he would be to them a gracious lord and amend each of those things which they all hated, and each of those things should be forgiven which had been done or said to him on condition that they all unanimously without treachery turned back to him. And then they confirmed full friendship, with word and with pledge, on both sides, and declared every Danish king outlawed from England. Then in the spring king Æthelred came home to his own people; and he was gladly received by them all. And, after Swegen was dead, Knut sat with his host at Gainsborough until Easter; and it was agreed between him and the folk in Lindsey that they should horse him and that afterwards they should all fare and harry together. Then came king Æthelred

thither to Lindsey with the full fyrd, before they were ready; and then they harried and burnt and slew all the people whom they might reach. Knut wended out to sea with his fleet, and thus the poor people were deceived through him, and then he wended southward until he came to Sandwich; and there he caused to be put ashore the hostages who had been given to his father and cut off their hands and ears and noses. And besides all these evils, the king ordered the host, which lay in Greenwich, to be paid twenty-one thousand pounds. And in this year, on the eve of St. Michael's-mass, came the great sea flood wide throughout this land and ran so far inland as it never before had done, and drowned many villages and a countless number of people.

[Radio scanning.]

[The year 1114 from the E-text.] In this year the king Henry held his court, at the Nativity, in Windsor; and afterwards this year he held no court oftener.

And at midsummer he fared with a fyrd into Wales, and the Welsh came and made a truce with the king; and he caused castles to be erected therein, and thereafter in September he fared over sea into Normandy.

This year in the latter part of May was seen a wonderful star with a long light, shining many nights. Also in this year was so great an ebb everywhere one day, as no one remembered before and so that men fared riding and walking over the Thames to the east of the bridge in London. This year were very great winds in the month of October; but it was exceedingly severe on the night of the Octaves of St. Martin, and that was everywhere manifest in woods and villages.

Also in this year the king gave the archbishopric in Canterbury to Ralf, who before was bishop in Rochester; and the archbishop in York Thomas died, and Thurstan succeeded thereto, who before was the king's chaplain.

In this same time the king went toward the sea and would over, but bad weather stopped him. In the meanwhile he sent his writ after the abbot Ernulf of Peterborough and bade him that he should come to him in haste because he would speak with him in secret. When he came to him, he forced him on to the bishopric of Rochester, and the archbishops and bishops and the nobility which were in England supported the king; and he long withstood them, but it availed naught. And then the king ordered that the archbishop should lead him to Canterbury and bless him bishop — would he, would he not. This was done in the village which is called Eastbourne; that was on the day [Sept. 15th]. When the monks of Peterborough heard that said, they were so sorry as they never were before, because he was a very good and mild man and did much good within and without, the while he dwelt there. May God Almighty ever abide with him!

Then soon after the king gave the abbacy to a monk of Seez by name John at the archbishop's desire of Canterbury. And soon thereafter the king sent him and the archbishop of Canterbury to Rome after the archbishop's pall and a monk with him, whose name is Warner, and the archdeacon John the archbishop's nephew; and there they well sped. This was done on [Sept. 21st] in the village which is called Rowner; and the same year the king went on shipboard at Portsmouth.

[Radio scanning.]

[Another account of the year 1114 from the H-text.] In this year the king Henry was in Windsor at midwinter and wore there his crown and there gave the bishopric in Worcester to Theobald his clerk. Also he gave the abbacy in Ramsey to Rainald who was monk in Caen. Also he gave the abbacy in York to Richard who was monk in the same monastery. Also he gave the abbacy at Thorney to Robert who was monk at St. Evroul. Also he gave the earldom in Northamptonshire to David who was the queen's brother. Thereafter died Thomas the archbishop in York on the day [Feb. 17th]. Thereafter he gave the abbacy at Cerne to William who was monk at Caen.

At Easter he was at Thorpe near Northampton. Thereafter he gave the archbishopric in Canterbury to Ralf who was bishop in Rochester; and he succeeded thereto on the day [Feb. 24th]. Thereafter died Nigel, the abbot in Burton, on the day [May 3rd]. Thereafter Chichester was burnt and the church together with it on the day [May 5th].

At Pentecost the king was at St. Albans. Hereafter he fared with his fyrd into Wales at midsummer and erected castles therein; and the Welsh kings came to him and became his men and swore oaths of allegiance to him.

Thereafter he came to Winchester and there gave the archbishopric in York to Thurstan his clerk, and the abbacy at St. Edmund's he gave to Albold, who was monk in Bec, on the day [Aug. 16th]. Thereafter he gave the abbacy in Michelney to Ealdulf, who was monk in the same monastery, on the day [of the Exultation of the Cross]. Also he gave the abbacy in Burton to Geoffrey who was

monk in the Old Minster; at the same occasion the archbishop Ralf gave the bishopric in Rochester. . . . [And here the text breaks off.]

[Radio scanning, fading out.]

Well, there you have it. A thousand years of year 14s — well, pretty much, disregarding all the gaps. To be perfectly honest, I can't say this experiment has given me any grand insights about common threads running through English history or even interesting coincidences to muse on here. But there is one interesting thing this particular survey captured that another wouldn't have, and that's the very last item we heard. This entry comes from an item known as the Cottonian Fragment, designated as Manuscript H. This fragment is a single manuscript leaf that preserves the end of the entry for the year 1113 and the beginning of the entry for 1114, which you just heard. So this one single surviving page would only feature in this survey for either the years 13 or 14. Because it is just a fragment, we can't draw very many conclusions about it, but one notable feature is that the color of the ink changes at the start of a few sentences in the 1114 entry, which suggests that this item was being added to and built up throughout that very year, rather than being copied whole from some other pre-existing text.

But this little manuscript tidbit gives me a great excuse to talk about the bogeyman that haunts the dreams of Anglo-Saxonists everywhere: the Cottonian Library fire. If you're a medievalist, this is a story I'm sure you know all too well. And if you're not, you might have encountered it in the history of the text of *Beowulf*.

The story begins with Sir Robert Cotton, born in 1571, one of the great antiquaries and collectors of his day. King Henry VIII had dissolved the English

monasteries just a few decades before Cotton's birth, which began a great dispersal of the manuscripts from monastic libraries into various private collections. Sir Robert is born a bit late to take advantage of the immediate aftermath of this, but even as a very young man he begins acquiring medieval manuscripts from the collections of other Tudor scholars, like John Leland and also John Dee, whose association with the study of magic, spirit communication, and other occult areas has made him a figure in modern horror fiction — H.P. Lovecraft, I know, especially loved to drop a fictitious John Dee citation into his stories. Anyway, Cotton and, after his death, his son Thomas and then his grandson John, amassed an amazing collection of medieval and early modern books and manuscripts. In particular, the Cotton library is notable for its texts written in Anglo-Saxon, or Old English.

This seems like a good enough moment to pause and mention also how this library was organized, which is a fun aspect of its legacy. Cotton organized his collection on a set of bookpresses, each topped by the bust of a historical figure, mostly from Roman history. And as I mentioned last episode, a bookpress in this sense is not the vice-like apparatus you might picture used in the making of books, but is just term for a cabinet for holding manuscripts. So, basically a bookcase. These busts gave names to each press, and the books were catalogued with a shelfmark that indicated the name of the bookcase, which shelf of that bookcase, and then which numbered book on that shelf. So for example, if you were looking for the book cataloged as Nero D iv, you'd go find the press with the bust of Nero. The top shelf would be A, so you'd count down until you go to shelf D, and then count the books on that shelf over to the fourth book, and you'd find what you were looking for: in this case, the gorgeously illuminated Lindisfarne

Gospels. Rather famously, the British Library still catalogues the manuscripts of the Cottonian Library with these designations, even though the shelves and the busts are long since gone. And where did they go to? Ah, that brings us to the next act of the story.

Sir John Cotton, the grandson, arranged for the collection to become the property of the English nation upon his death, and this bequest was confirmed by an Act of Parliament; so the death of Sir John in 1702 marks the first time the British government took charge of a collection of books for the public good and in so doing helped plant the seeds for the foundation of the British Museum and after that the British Library. It took a little while for the government to sort out exactly what to do with this priceless inheritance. The Cottonian library was shuttled around from one deteriorating building to another. It wound up at Exeter House, which the keepers came to decide was in such poor condition that it was not safe to keep the library there. So they moved it — moved it to the portentously named Ashburnham House.

There's an account of what happened in the early morning hours of October 23rd, 1731, from a report made by a parliamentary committee to investigate the incident. This report was compiled by the Reverend William Whiston and published a year later. The narrative of the fire begins thusly:

On Saturday Morning October 23, 1731, about two o' Clock, a great Smoak was perceived by Dr. Bentley, and the rest of the Family at Ashburnham-House, which soon after broke out into a Flame: It began from a wooden Mantle-Tree's taking Fire, which lay across a Stove-Chimney, that was under the Room, where the MSS. of the Royal and Cottonian Libraries were lodged, and was communicated to that Room by the Wainscot, and by Pieces of Timber, that stood

perpendicularly upon each end of the Mantle-Tree. They were in hopes at first to have put a Stop to the Fire by throwing Water upon the Pieces of Timber and Wainscot, where it first broke out, and therefore did not begin to remove the Books so soon as they otherwise would have done. But the Fire prevailing, notwithstanding the Means used to extinguish it, Mr. Casley the Deputy-Librarian took Care in the first Place to remove the famous Alexandrian MS. and the Books under the Head of Augustus in the Cottonian Library, as being esteemed the most valuable amongst the Collection. Several entire Presses with the Books in them were also removed; but the Fire increasing still, and the Engines sent for not coming so soon as could be wished, and several of the Backs of the Presses being already on Fire, they were obliged to be broke open, and the Books, as many as could be, were thrown out of the Windows. Some were carried into the Apartment of the Captain of Westminster School; others into the little Cloisters; whence, after the Fire was extinguished, they were convey'd into the great Boarding House opposite to Ashburnham-House, and upon Monday following, October 25, Leave being obtained, they were removed into the new Building designed for the Dormitory of the West-minster Scholars.

The Right Honorable the Speaker of the House of Commons came down to Ashburnham-House, as soon as he heard of the Fire, to see that due Precaution was taken, that what had escaped the Flames should not be destroyed or purloined; and on Monday following the Right Honourable the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Raymond, Lord Chief Justice of the King's-Bench, and Mr. Speaker, being Trustees for the Cottonian Library, were all three at the Dormitory; and as

great Numbers of the Manuscripts that remained had suffered exceedingly from the Engine-Water, as well as from the Fire, and were in danger of being quite destroyed, if some cure was not speedily provided;... (11–12)

Whiston concluded that of the 968 manuscripts in the Cotton library, 114 were lost entirely and another 98 damaged to such a degree as to be defective. Since the 1700s, these statistics have changed somewhat, as improved conservation methods have actually brought many of the “lost” manuscripts back into varying degrees of recovery, so that today it can only be said that 13 manuscripts are considered utterly destroyed (Prescott). But many of those that can’t be considered utterly destroyed have still been reduced to fragments, such as our fragment of an otherwise unknown version of a later continuation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which was stored at shelfmark Domitian ix. A sidenote: Domitian does not have a shelf letter because it only had one shelf, perhaps because it was originally a shelf mounted over a doorway (James 19). And some of the manuscripts that weren’t recorded by Whiston as damaged to the point of being defective have, in the intervening years, manifested damage that wasn’t immediately obvious. And one of these is Cotton Vitellius A.xv, the composite codex that contains *Beowulf*. It was not recorded as significantly damaged, seemingly only having had its margins scorched. But the heat made the vellum brittle, and the edges of the leaves continued over the years to crumble away until the ends of words were being lost — a process finally halted by some 19th century conservation and mounting of the vellums leaves inside paper frames, which is how the manuscript is preserved today (Prescott).

Anyway, just the idea that we know *Beowulf* only because a single manuscript copy survived preserved in Cotton’s collection, just invites us to wonder over what other

unique medieval texts might have not have been as lucky as Vitellius A.xv. And the fact that we can never really know what we lost is kind of an eternal wound in the heart of Anglo-Saxonists and medievalists generally. It's maybe not quite as devastating a heartbreak as the burning of the Great Library of Alexandria, but the fact that this was, relatively speaking, a modern disaster — that these texts had made it so far only to be lost in basically a stupid accident — it does twist the knife in a particularly nasty way.

And that's the story of the Cottonian Library Fire of 1731. It continues into a just-as-fascinating story about the conservation of the Cottonian Library, but I'll leave that for others to discuss. If you're interested in the second half of this story, though, I highly recommend a long article by Andrew Prescott from 1997, entitled, “‘Their Present Miserable State of Cremation’: the Restoration of the Cotton Library,” which you can find online. I'll put a link in the post for this episode on *medievaldeathtrip.com*, or you can find it by Googling “Their Present Miserable State of Cremation.”

And that brings us to the end of this episode. Before we go, though, I promised a new riddle to kick off a new year. And here it is: “I tell again life's wondrous story old; / Not born, nor did my mother me enfold, / And then, though born, no eye could me behold.” Once again, that's “I tell again life's wondrous story old; / Not born, nor did my mother me enfold, / And then, though born, no eye could me behold.”

I'll be back in two weeks with the answer and another episode of *Medieval Death Trip* — we'll have a more straightforward story next time, I promise. Until then, you can visit the website at *medievaldeathtrip.com*, you can follow us on Twitter @mdtpodcast, and you can send me email with questions, corrections, or comments at *patrick@medievaldeathtrip.com*. Before I go, I also want to thank those of you who have

reviewed the show on iTunes, most recently the users “square deal” and “un talented.” Your reviews are greatly appreciated and heartwarming. They assuage at least some of that uncurable heartache wrought by remembering the Cottonian fire. I’d also like to thank Heather Argyle and Sean for their encouraging comments left on the website. And I look forward to bringing a couple dozen new episodes to you all this year. But that’s going to be it for now. Take care, and thanks for listening!

[Closing music.]

*Episode 7: Concerning Some Divine Dentistry***Release date:** 9 Feb. 2015**Length:** 34:24**Site URL:** <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/mdt-episode-07-concerning-some-divine-dentistry/>**File URL:** <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/podcastfiles/mdt-episode-007.mp3>**Transcript:***[Theme music.]*

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Monday, February 9th, 2015: “Episode 7: Concerning Some Divine Dentistry.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m your host, Patrick Lane, and I’m now about three weeks into a lingering cough. This is par for the course — I can usually count on developing some kind of long-lasting respiratory issue every winter, and if anything, this bout has been milder than in years past. But again I apologize for any continued raspiness this week. But being sick has had me thinking about how people dealt with painful but not necessarily mortal illness in the days before modern medicine. Well, of course, one way they dealt with it was they had pre-modern medicine, in two branches. One of these was scholarly medicine passed down in manuscripts from classical physicians like Hippocrates or Galen — and from around the 12th century forward, from Arabic treatises as well. And the other branch was folk medicine. Now, the physicians did have a certain degree of legitimate expertise when it came to anatomy and the treatment of mechanical injuries like dislocations, broken bones, battlefield wounds. Still primitive and frequently

misguided by modern medical standards, but they actually did have some understanding of how the body is put together and how its parts interact. But when it comes to treating infectious disease or chronic pain, the learned doctors are basically prescribing the same herbal remedies and even preserving the same kind of useful charms and various forms of sympathetic magic which are the principle modalities of the folk traditions. Certainly, then as now, some herbal treatments were based on what amounts to essentially empirical knowledge — eating this plant has a laxative effect, or this one numbs or cools tissue, that sort of thing. But you're also just as likely to see herbal prescriptions whose rationale has nothing to do with any physical properties of the substance but are entirely based on symbolic associations. Causality is very easily supplanted by analogy. So it's here that medicine, both in its elite and popular forms, remains thoroughly mixed up with magic, especially for common ailments. If you lose a hand or fracture your skull, a medieval surgeon might actually be able to employ treatments that will save your life (provided you survive the inevitable post-surgical infection). But if you have back pain or arthritis or a urinary tract infection, the physician (if you were of high enough status to have access to one) would probably be mixing up pretty much the same poultice or broth and recommending basically the same litany of prayers that your mother-in-law or maybe the parish priest might prescribe to you.

So why not embrace magic fully and seek out a miracle cure from a saint's shrine? Our stereotypical image of a miracle cure is of someone in extreme distress, someone whom medicine — be it medieval or modern — cannot help. And, sure, these are the cures especially likely to be recorded and shared in hagiography, because they're the most impressive. They provide the best P.R. But people were turning to the saints for

help with all sorts of problems — I say “were,” but, of course, people still do in some traditions. Try Googling “prayer against acne” and see the range of results you get. And likewise, even when aspirin is readily available (and even when it’s not proscribed by a more radical religious code against modern medicine), some people are still just as likely to attempt to pray away a headache as to pop a pill. Far, far fewer people now than eight hundred or a thousand years ago, but still enough that you probably pass several of them in the street every day, if you don’t happen to be one yourself. So people turn to the divine not just for cures for leprosy or paralysis or blindness or grotesque swellings of the body, as we’ve seen here, but for what we might think of as over-the-counter treatments, too.

Anyway, today I thought we’d look at a set of three cures for toothache attained at the shrine of William of Norwich and recorded in *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* by the monk Thomas of Monmouth. That’s the same text from which I took our selection for Episode 1 of *Medieval Death Trip*, so you can hear more about it there. But for those of you just now joining us, William of Norwich is a rather troublesome figure, as he is one of the medieval prototypes of a child saint allegedly ritually murdered by Jews. So his legend, as recounted by Thomas, is just filled with antisemitic propaganda. As with our first selection, today’s tales don’t really feature this antisemitism, but I don’t want us to forget about it, either. Now, this actually going to be a loosely connected two-part episode. We won’t be looking at any more toothaches next time, but we are going to continue with some very strange episodes from the posthumous miracles of William and the peculiarly possessive relationship our author Thomas has with his favorite saint. To that end, today’s text opens with a paragraph about a conflict between Thomas and the

prior of Norwich, which leads into the first toothache, but otherwise won't seem to have much to do with anything else this week. However, this incident will come back in our next episode, so file that conflict between Thomas and the prior away for future reference.

Once again be reading from the 1896 translation of *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* by Jessop and James.

[Here is performed an excerpt from Thomas of Monmouth that begins with a brief account of Thomas getting in trouble with his Prior for covering William's tomb with a carpet and lighting a large candle at its head, which the Prior condemns for having been done without permission. But at this same time, Thomas reports, the saint accomplished a miracle cure for the sheriff, named Gaufridus, who was suffering from a terrible toothache. Gaufridus takes some bits of the cement of the tomb, rubs them on his teeth, and is immediately relieved of his pain. Thomas then recounts how a similar cure was obtained by a monk of Norwich (127–129).]

Now I'm going to skip ahead to an incident from a couple of decades later, which is actually the very final episode recorded in *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*.

[Here is performed a further extract from Thomas, in which a different Gaufrid was also cured of a toothache. This Gaufrid lived in Canterbury, and after having his bad teeth extracted, suffered a terrible swelling of the head and face that

became so bad it interfered with his breathing. At night, he has a vision of Saint Thomas Beckett, who advises him to make a candle in the name of William of Norwich in order to receive healing and thence to visit the saint's shrine in thanks. Gaufrid receives his cure, and while travelling to Norwich, he is joined on the road by two companions dressed all in white. They travel awhile, and miraculously arrive at Bury-St. Edmunds far more quickly than should be humanly possible. The two companions reveal that they have really been Thomas Beckett and the sainted King Edmund and then depart, and Gaufrid is left marveling; he then completes his pilgrimage to Norwich where he relates to Thomas himself what he had experienced. Thomas concludes his account by describing his efforts to confirm the truth of this and to prove that the pilgrim had completed his journey with supernatural speed (289–294).]

So, let's deal with the last bit of the last episode — the miraculous journey — and then we'll get back to the toothaches. First, to clarify the nature of the miracle: the distance from Canterbury to Norwich is about 160 miles overland. Speed of travel in the 12th century depended on a lot of variables, and estimates range from 30 to 60 miles a day, depending on the size of the party traveling and the urgency of the journey (Labarge 156–157). The long and short of it is that Gaufrid's journey probably should have been a three- to five-day affair, so accomplishing it in one day is pretty much supernatural. The only observation I'll add is that this kind of anecdote of impossible time compression (and the related phenomenon of psychological lost time) continues to this day in stories of UFO abduction, and you can trace some interesting throughlines from medieval

accounts of saintly miracles to fairy encounters then to spirit encounters in the 19th century up to UFO mythology in the 20th. UFO enthusiasts like to point to stories of fairies and little people as likely medieval representations of encounters with extraterrestrial or extradimensional beings (and I have a couple of those kind of accounts slotted in for future episodes of this podcast), but when you do see the same motifs plugged into hagiography, like this, that's where the alien explanation no longer fits as neatly. But that's a thread I think I'll tuck away to pick up in a later episode.

Now, to those toothaches. The toothache holds a special place in the ranks of private suffering. Today, I think the only real dread a toothache conjures is the fundamental fear of the dentist's drill (which, given the effectiveness of oral anesthetics these days, is almost entirely a kind of aesthetic, neurotic fear — a fear of a sound more than anything), and then, I'm sure, there's a sideline, perhaps, in the dream-fear of losing a tooth, which should also be a rather attenuated concern in our age of crowns, bridgework, and implants — at least, for those who can afford them. But imagine not being able to call up the dentist, where your only options are hoping that the pain will go away (which, if it's an abscess it very well might) or having the painful tooth extracted without the benefit of novocaine or even stainless steel tools. And if the pain is due to cavities exposing the nerve, extraction is close to the only option you would have, though there were some methods for filling cavities. I called toothache a form of private suffering, and that's because it's an intimate kind of pain. It's in your head, and it often doesn't have any obvious outward sign (though, I suppose, sometimes your entire head swells up like a balloon, if Gaufrid's story is accurate). I remember first really being forced to consider the torment of having an untreatable toothache when I read Arthur

Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon* as an undergrad, in which the protagonist, imprisoned during the Stalinist purges, develops an abscessed tooth which comes to cause him so much pain that he is practically incapacitated. And this is someone deprived of treatment because of incarceration, but it made me think about everyone who suffered this kind of pain because treatment didn't really exist — in other words, the vast majority of everyone who's had a toothache for the run of human history. I guess this was something of a revelation to me, because until then I'd thought of toothaches almost as a kind of comedy ailment. It's a cartoon character pain, with a big white bandage looped around the face and jaw like you might see on Jacob Marley's ghost. It had always seemed at worst a kind of nuisance pain to me, so it was eye-opening to suddenly think of it as a kind of inescapable horror, instead.

But I guess it's not entirely fair to say treatment didn't exist, because here's one example. Let's look at the Anglo-Saxon Leech Book — *leech* in this case referring to a healer, rather than the bloodsucking invertebrate; and, as a sidenote, those two words are probably, the evidence suggests, etymologically distinct, though the legend that the one comes from the other is certainly popular. Anyway, the Leech Book is the name for a unique manuscript of medical treatments in Old English, probably copied out in the mid-10th century. But despite a two-century gap between this Anglo-Saxon text and our 12th century hagiography, I think we can feel pretty confident that these kinds of remedies hadn't evolved much in that time. So here's what the Leech Book recommends for a few assorted causes of tooth pain. As you listen to these, note the repetition and sort of minor variation — it almost feels like flipping through index cards of collected treatments. That's sort of how the manuscript is structured. This is from the Oswald Cockayne's

1865 translation of Book I, Chapter 6. And one other note: this translation refers tooth “wark” — *wark* is an Old English word meaning pain or ache, so “tooth wark” equals “toothache.” Wark survives in some English dialects, but it is largely obsolete, though its cognates are alive and well in Scandinavian languages. Okay, enough. Here are treatments for toothache from the Anglo-Saxon Leech Book:

3. For tooth wark, if a worm eat the tooth, take an old holly leaf and one of the lower umbels of hartwort, and the upward part of sage, boil two doles in water, pour into a bowl and yawn over it, then the worms shall fall into the bowl. If a worm eat the teeth, take holly rind over a year old, and root of carline thistle, boil in so hot water, hold in the mouth as hot as thou hottest may. For tooth worms, take acorn meal and henbane seed and wax, of all equally much, mingle these together, work into a wax candle, and burn it, let it reek into the mouth, put a black cloth under, then will the worms fall on it.

[...]

5. For tooth wark, boil in wine or in vinegar the netherward part of ravens foot, sup as thou hottest may. For tooth wark, bray together to dust rind of nut tree and thorn rind, dry then in a pan, cut the teeth on the outside [that is, the gums], shed on frequently.

[...]

7. For the upper tooth ache, take leaves of withewind, wring them on the nose. For the nether tooth ache, slit with the tenaculum, till they bleed.

8. Again, take elms rind, bum to ashes, mingle the ashes with water and strain, hold the water long in the mouth. Again, take yarrow, chew it much. (50–53)

And just for fun (and because it's the medieval language I'm most practiced and least embarrassed to read aloud), here's the Old English text of cure number five, the one for upper and nether tooth ache. Plus, it's kind of a fun one because I think it has a somewhat unusually high quotient of moderately recognizable words in it that have carried over into modern English. Alright: "Wiþ þam uferan toþece, genim wiþowindan leaf awring on þa nosu. With þam niþeran toþece slit mid þe foþorne oþ þæt hie bleden."

Ah, I love that. Now, a couple of other notes on these cures. The one for "tooth worm" that uses burned up henbane tracks back to an ancient Roman cure, if not a much earlier one. According to a great 2004 article online from the *British Dental Journal* (an article that's available online), "Dental Treatment in Medieval England" by T. Anderson, the way this cure probably worked — bearing in mind that "tooth worms" don't really exist (well, I supposed outside of certain extraordinary circumstances — but worms are a common scapegoat for any and all localized pain in ancient and medieval Europe) — anyway, this cure "worked," because the burnt seeds of henbane that would come out of the candle — or out of the mouthwash, depending on how it was used — the seeds resembled little dead worms. So the cure actually creates out of itself the apparent evidence of it drawing out some foreign nastiness. It's the same method by which ear

candling has been shown to operate — that the candle itself makes the wax that is then claimed to have been sucked out of the ear canal. And notice how the remedy specifically calls for placing a black cloth under the mouth, so that you'd really be able to see the so-called worms falling out. This is a cure with some showmanship built into it, a trait common to quackery of all kinds, even sincere and well-meaning quackery.

And you might be lucky if the treatment is merely ineffective hocus-pocus — there was plenty of chance that the cure could hurt you worse. Take the story Gaufrid, for example. His toothache actually develops after he's had a seemingly successful extraction of three other teeth. In an appendix to his article, Anderson actually discusses the tale of Gaufrid through the lens of modern dental knowledge. He concludes:

The detailed description appears to represent a genuine case of post-operative infection. The pain and swelling came on some time after the extraction of his teeth. The fact that it occurred while he was eating a large supper, was, in the hagiographic literature, attributed to his gluttony. The infection ('severe attack of pain and swelling') was associated with massive abscess formation ('whole head swelled so much...his skin stretched like a bladder...'). The pain was relieved by the bursting of the abscess ('burst as if pricked with an awl, and a great deal of discharge came out'), possibly related to the heating and blistering of the skin. The abscess 'subsided with extraordinary quickness...the pain departed'. Quite possibly, Gaufrid did visit the shrine of St Thomas and receiving no remission of pain he decided to return home to

Norwich and pray to St William. After he had made the decision to journey to Norwich the abscess burst and of course this was attributed to saintly intervention.

Now, Anderson has a minor error in his account there just about where Gaufrid lived — he lived in Canterbury, not Norwich — but otherwise it's a nice reading through the medieval hagiographer's prose to a more likely medical reality lying beneath it. He does have a little bit of a stretch, I think, in attributing the placement of the candle around the head as a cause of blistering that might burst the abscess — I, for one, perfectly content to chalk the timing up to pure coincidence, or maybe even just due to the extended movement of the head and neck. I think modern analysts do sometimes succumb to a temptation to overexplain colorful details in accounts like this. Ironically, sometimes modern, empirical interpreters seem to see more meaning and causality in little details than even a medieval monk, who would normally be prepared to see God's providence operating in them all. I actually think the most curious aspect of Gaufrid's story is the apparent impotence of the nationally renowned saint Thomas Beckett, the murdered Archbishop of Canterbury, who is unable to provide a cure and has to direct Gaufrid to William of Norwich. But we shouldn't be surprised, I suppose, that our monk, Thomas of Monmouth, might tell a story that suggests his Saint William is actually even more capable and worthy of pilgrimages than the great martyr of Canterbury Cathedral.

And I think we'll leave it there. But first, there's some unresolved business from last episode: our riddle. The riddle was: "I tell again life's wondrous story old; / Not born, nor did my mother me enfold, / And then, though born, no eye could me behold" (Symphosius, Riddle 14). This is a riddle from late antiquity, one of the one hundred

riddles of Symphosius, as translated into English verse by Elizabeth Hickman du Bois.

And the answer to this enigma of the creature born and yet not born is: “*Pullus in ovo*, or, a chicken in the egg.”

And now our new riddle. This one takes the form of a metaphor that requires decoding — one of my favorite kinds of riddles. The riddle is: “Two beams on which the chickens sit, while a cock stands talking among them.” One more time: “Two beams on which the chickens sit, while a cock stands talking among them.”

There’s been some interesting activity on Twitter — you can find us there @mdtpodcast. Despite thinking of myself as a technophile and early adopter and occasional actual IT support person for departments I’ve worked for, I’m still struggling a little bit to grok Twitter. I use my personal Twitter account almost exclusively for consumption — I just read posts from the people I follow, and even that just barely since it seems that there’s so many posts just streaming constantly — so I’m still trying to readjust to the idea of actually being a Twitter content provider. So I’m going to try to be better with replies and engagement and generally being at least a little bit more of an active rather than passive Twitter user through the mdtpodcast account. But I wanted to thank those of you who have been sharing things with @mdtpodcast — you’re certainly giving me good reasons to strive to be more engaged.

In addition to Twitter, you can visit our website, *medievaldeathtrip.com*, to get the sources for each episode or to leave comments, and you can also e-mail me with feedback, questions, or corrections at *patrick@medievaldeathtrip.com*. I’ll be back in two weeks with more of Thomas of Monmouth’s adventures as the special curator of the cult

of St. William, as well as a demonic pig! I hope you'll join me then. Happy upcoming Valentine's Day, take care, and thanks for listening!

[Closing music.]

Episode 8: Concerning a Devil Pig, a Death Prophecy, and St. William's Candles

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Transcript:

[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Monday, February 23, 2015: “Episode 8: Concerning a Devil Pig, a Death Prophecy, and St. William’s Candles.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m your host, Patrick Lane, and this episode we’ll be continuing with more from *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* by the Norwich monk, Thomas of Monmouth. If you are new to the podcast, I recommend checking out the previous episode, Episode 7, and also Episode 1 if you’re interested in more background on this book. And a quick formatting to note to assuage expectations: this episode is rather front-loaded with commentary, so it will take a little longer than usual to get to the text, but then I’ll dismiss class early, so to speak.

So, last time, our text opened with a paragraph that wasn’t about the curing of toothaches — which was the ostensible topic of that episode — but which I promised would become relevant to this episode’s text. I’m not going to reread that whole paragraph now, but to refresh our memories, the gist was that Thomas, our author, records a scene in which he gets into trouble with the prior of the monastery, a man

named Elias. Thomas had decided to set up a somewhat elaborate display around William's sepulchre, laying out a carpet and burning at its head a "great wax taper" (a *cereus grandis*). When Prior Elias discovers this, he angrily demands that Thomas blow out the candle and put all this stuff away. Thomas plays this episode off diplomatically — or manipulatively, depending on your point of view — claiming that many in the convent were upset with the Prior's command, but that he, Thomas, accepted it as a just reprimand for his presumptuous temerity in making a special outlay without permission. But at the same time that he says this, he drops a number of none-to-subtle hints that the Prior was also dishonoring the saint by issuing this command.

Now, we might ask what the big deal is with a bit of ornamentation and a few candles. There are two answers. One, which we should certainly still be able to relate to, is the basic phenomenon of middle managers asserting their right to be in charge — that is, even if this were a trifling gesture, the fact that Thomas took it on his own initiative to do it rather than going through the proper channels is the kind of affront to the institutional hierarchy that just cannot be ignored. And I suspect that this is probably a large part of what's going on in this conflict. However, there is one other answer, which is that candles in this case are not the trivial housewares that we tend to think of them being, but are rather high-status items.

Of course, I say candles today are trivial housewares, but even that's only a half-truth. Candles that you actually burn for light — the kind that you might put into a tornado or earthquake preparedness kit — those are cheap and commonplace housewares, no question. But, on the other hand, I never cease to suffer sticker shock when I go out to Bed Bath & Beyond to get a new scented candle to help make my living room smell nice.

Twenty-five bucks for some wax in a jar just staggers me — but, that said, I've also learned that you pay for what you get, and the bargain bin candles I've tried seem to burn up twice as fast and either put out either no smell or a really cloying, artificial jelly bean-type smell. So I've come to accept the value proposition of a more expensive, higher quality candle as a reasonable fact of life. But I still slightly resent it, even with a 20% off coupon.

Anyway, the candles Thomas is talking about are certainly more on the Yankee Candle end of the spectrum than the cheap white votives we might initially think of. For one thing, certain liturgical rules required that only beeswax candles be burned in the church. That's partly — indeed, probably largely — because they burned odorlessly, unlike the alternative, candles made from tallow, or rendered animal fat (Blick 32). Tallow candles, especially if the tallow hasn't been very carefully strained and cleaned of impurities, can produce a smell that I've seen described as ranging from burnt barbecue (which doesn't actually sound too bad) to burning garbage (which is not a smell you want wafting around your shrine)(Illies). The other reason for beeswax relates to a bit of medieval animal lore, which believed that bees die in the act of producing wax, which allegorically links them to Christ's self-sacrifice (Blick 32). Sarah Blick, a medieval art historian at Kenyon College, has published some recent work on candles and related devotional objects, especially as used by pilgrims at saints' shrines, and she provides a number of examples of the extravagance of some of these candle offerings. One custom — which actually makes an appearance in Episode 2 of this podcast — is that of measurement, where a sick person would measure the length of an injured limb or even the length of their entire body and have a candle made with a wick of that length (34).

Now, for longer lengths, rather than making five-foot high pillar candles, you would often get coiled tapers, from which you would cut usable lengths, a bit like cutting wire off a spool. But measurement also sometimes took the form of making a candle of the same weight as the supplicant, which must have made for some pretty massive candles. The other interesting thing that I was reminded of in reading Blick's articles is that medieval candles are actually a rather difficult thing to study. Archaeologically speaking, we don't exactly have a lot of surviving examples wax candles from seven or eight centuries ago — unlike stone foundations or shards of pottery or metal coins, wax candles tend not to last. In fact, it's kind of mind-blowing to learn that we even do have a few surviving examples.¹⁹ But for the most part, we instead have to go by descriptions of candles in literature and church records, and these tend not to be particularly vivid, and also we can go by representations of candles in stained glass windows, in illuminated manuscripts, and in statuary. Anyone who's spent much time with the amazing artwork in manuscripts knows that medieval illustrators had a very fluid conception of scale, especially when it came to depicting architecture and background details, so these depictions of candles are a bit tricky, to say the least. For the late medieval period we have frescoes with more realistic and detail-oriented art styles, but we still have to make a lot of inferences to get even a sketchy picture of this thing that would have been such a commonplace feature of medieval life. But so it goes with so many aspects of medieval material culture.

But all of this is to say that the candles being discussed by Thomas of Monmouth are more like bottles of fine wine that you might give as an anniversary present than they

¹⁹ See, for example, three early medieval beeswax candles (6–7th cent.) in the collection of the Landesmuseum Württemberg in Stuttgart.

are like two-liters of soda that you might bring to a party. And just for a bit of perspective, the cost today of a 3-inch diameter, 3-foot tall paschal candle for use during Easter, is over \$200,²⁰ and that's with modern production methods; so if you adjust that to a medieval economy, you're talking a major expenditure. So when Thomas decides to light his candle without getting permission, it's a bit like popping open a bottle of Dom Perignon at the office party without checking with the boss first. So that also helps explain Prior Elias's anger.

Anyway, let's get on to our text. There is one final element to bear in mind during this reading, and that is that Thomas, our author, has, at the time of these events, taken on the role in the monastery of being the particular sacrist of William's shrine — and William had only died about thirty years before the time that Thomas is writing this legend, and as such isn't firmly established in his sainthood. So Thomas is deeply and personally invested in promoting William of Norwich, and he wouldn't be too far wrong in believing that his efforts are individually vital for preventing William from slipping into obscurity as so many local saints had done before. This lends his vita of the saint a kind of desperate earnestness and a kind of puppy-dog enthusiasm, where you see him trying just a touch too hard to convince you of how great William is and how obvious the manifestations of his sanctity and power are. And I don't think that that's purely modern, secular skepticism that makes this text read that way, where we might judge religious zeal more harshly than a medieval audience would — you can see a certain resistance to Thomas' passion even from his own fellow monks at points in the narrative. You can easily picture him as that coworker who's always grabbing your elbow to harangue you

²⁰ Prices based on the catalogue of *catholicsupply.com*.

in breathless whispers about the self-help guru who has totally turned their life around or the radical diet that's given them a superhuman immune system or whatever. I think Thomas is actually a pretty fascinating narrator, as I've said before — his prose bristles with vivid little details that are so often lacking in other examples of medieval history writing — but he is not someone I would want to have to sit next to on a train.

Today's passage picks up right after a short catalogue of miracle cures which included the first two toothache cures from last episode, and so these are what Thomas is referring to right at the start of this passage, when he talks about the proofs of St. William's power that fueled his growing cult. As before, today's reading comes from Jessop and James's 1896 translation.

[Here is performed the continuing story of William's candles, as told by Thomas of Monmouth. He begins by explaining that the saint was angered by Prior Elias's command that the candle and carpet Thomas had previously set up at the tomb be taken down and that this was revealed by a miracle which occurred. A monk named Richard of Lynn falls ill with a fever and goes to the saint's tomb to pray for healing. As he tries to sleep here, a malevolent black pig charges into the church and frightens him before being chased out again by the other monks. That night, Richard has a dream vision in which William appears to him. William promises Richard the healing he desires if he will donate to William some candles that the monk has secretly in his private possessions. Richard tries to argue that he has already promised these candles to his sister-in-law, and the saint upbraids him for loving her more than he loves the saint. He then instructs the monk to inform

the Prior of William's displeasure at being deprived of the earlier candle and carpet and promises punished if these are not restored. He also informs Richard that he will suffer for his disobedience even if he makes amends. Richard reports all this to the convent, who are much amazed, and to the Prior, who finally agrees to let Thomas again decorate the shrine. A short time after this, Richard is again afflicted by pain and chills and is brought near to death. Again, William appears to him in a dream and chastises him for still not giving up the candles he possessed and foretells Richard's death on the following day. Upon awakening, Richard makes confession and dies. Thomas concludes the story by showing how William got his candles in the end and how after these events his cult grew even more renowned (136–145).]

So, doesn't that story just make you feel all warm and fuzzy about little William, the innocent child saint of Norwich? No? Why not? Could it be because he basically condemns a suffering man to death just because the man refuses to pay up? Because he's essentially running a kind of supernatural protection racket? I find my students tend to be startled and surprised by stories like this, and I've always chalked that up to their coming from largely suburban, moderate Christian religious backgrounds and being raised with the idea that there's a clear and sharp division between the Old Testament's vengeful God and the New Testament's loving God. But as I've been looking for data on a historical trend away from a punitive God to a wholly benevolent one, what I've found has challenged my sense that my students, for the most part, don't believe in an angry, jealous God. A 2010 study by researchers at Baylor found that among Americans, 31%

believe in a judgmental God who dispenses both reward and punishment, while only 24% believed in a benevolent God who intervenes only for good.²¹ And of the remaining 45% percent, atheists were only 5% and the other 40% believed in a God who does not directly act in the world. I suppose given those figures, it's plausible that via self-selection the 30% who believe in a vengeful God aren't making up a similar proportion of people in state university classrooms, but I still suspect that it's a higher percentage than I've recognized. But even so, I do think belief in divine punishment today doesn't usually encompass the kind of gruesome and personal assaults that are recorded in a large number of medieval saint's lives — indeed, there is essentially a parallel category of divine action that runs alongside miracle cures, and that's miracle injuries. One person comes to the shrine and prays to have withered arm made whole, and — boom — she's cured. Another comes, and makes a false oath before the shrine, and — boom — their eyes fall out of their head. I expect there are a sizable proportion of Americans who accept the proposition that God visits natural disasters on godless cities and sends epidemics through sinful populations — punishment that's operating at at least one level of abstraction — but I expect you would find far fewer who readily embrace the idea that because Jimbo stole money from the collection plate, God killed him by crashing his car into a tree. But I may be wrong about that. I'd be curious to hear your perceptions.

Certainly, though, in medieval saints' lives, the idea that offending the sacred in some way will provoke direct and personal retaliation from either an offended saint or an

²¹ Correction: 2010 is the release date of a book, *America's Four Gods*, by two of the principle investigators for the 2006 Baylor Religion Survey which presents these findings; but I'll cite the original study here, as it is freely available from Baylor. These statistics (slightly rounded off) come from The Baylor Institute for the Study of Religion's "American Piety in the 21st Century: Selected Findings from *The Baylor Religion Survey*, September 2006" (27).

offended God is well entrenched and probably quite ancient. There is something very reminiscent of mortals dealing with Greco-Roman gods and demigods in the way so many supplicants interact with the spirits of saints — especially in the jealousy that the saint will manifest, the demands for absolute devotion and obedience. The saints often exude a kind of narcissism which doesn't seem particularly saintly, but that kind of makes sense when you think about the conflicting roles they have to perform in these hagiographies. Because the purpose of a saint's life — especially one like this one, whose saint is still an up-and-comer and is a potential object of pilgrimage — the purpose of these lives is to be promotional propaganda to trumpet the power of the saint. So however much the saint in life may have embodied Christian humility, once they're dead and securely among the blessed, they become not only spokespeople for but in fact manifestations of divine power, and this power must be presented in fearful majesty. So they are obligated — as characters in hagiography, at least — to be rhetorically imperious and even sort of boastful of their own power and their ability to reward and to punish (a power always delegated to them through God, of course).

We certainly see that in Thomas's depiction of William here. And it's even more striking here, I think, because it's so hard to associate this confident, domineering spirit-William with the twelve-year-old child that died. There's very little in the style or rhetoric of the spoken dialogue that suggests a child, except, perhaps, for the line, "I was born on the day called Candlemas Day, and candles I love," which does have a touch of childish reasoning about it. It also doesn't help that Jessop and James's translation renders the speech with *thees* and *thous* and *hasts* and a general King James Bible register, which is a stylistic choice not required by the original Latin but is common in

these 19th-century translations. Anyway, whatever distinctive personality William might have had as a child saint is washed away in these scenes, and he becomes indistinguishable from almost any other saint appearing in a dream vision at a shrine. It's no wonder, then, that Thomas has to omit one of the other common tropes of such a vision — which is the visual element. You can usually rely on the saint appearing as a figure clad in white or shining garments. Thomas gives us no details about William's appearance in this pair of visions, other than mentioning once that he has an angry expression. I expect that's because he's to some degree aware of the cognitive dissonance that this would create in an audience trying to maintain an image of the child and fit the dreadful words being spoken to it. That said, there is also the theological question of whether the soul of a child saint would appear as a child, or would appear in its perfect heavenly form as an adult, which is an interesting question we might explore more at another time, though I would just quickly note that earlier in this book Thomas has his own vision of William, and he sees him then as a child. So there's that.

Before we go — and I promised shorter post-text commentary, and I'm starting to think I've broken that promise — I do want to talk about the demonic pig. When I spoke earlier about Thomas sometimes seeming a bit desperate to drum up supernatural or miraculous incidents for his narrative, this would be a case in point. Basically, all that happens is a pig gets into the church, and the monks have to scramble around to get it out. In another context, it would part of a screwball or even a romantic comedy.

[King of the Hill clip.]

PEGGY HILL: Oh! What the hey?

HANK HILL: It's a little pig. In the house? Ah, this is crazy! It's fun, like in that movie! Let's chase it together. I'll grab it and you snatch the bow. It'll be romantic. Come on, it's pig chasing!

BOBBY HILL: Mom? Dad? There's a pig in the house.

[End of clip.]

So, treating this pig incursion as a manifestation of diabolical intervention is pretty weak sauce. It doesn't really even seem to factor into the monk Richard's failure to follow through on William's commands. The devil pig doesn't actually lead him astray or distract him from getting the candles or anything particularly relevant. But, in this case, I'm grateful for Thomas's lack of editorial restraint, because this is exactly the kind of scene that I read these texts for. And because it reminds me of one of my favorite season 2 *King of the Hill* episodes, which we just heard a snippet from.

So last episode's riddle was, though I didn't let on at the time, topical for that episode. It was another of the *Clareti Enigmata*, as translated by Frederic Peachy, and it went like this: "Two beams on which the chickens sit, while a cock stands talking among them" (Riddle 47). Having just heard a discussion on medieval dentistry, I hope the answer might have popped out for a few of you. The answer is: The chickens on the beams are two rows of teeth — white teeth — and the rooster is the tongue of the person speaking.

Our new riddle will be something a bit different and longer than the almost aphoristic riddles we've mainly been doing so far. Here it goes:

But what is the wonder
that fare[s] throughout the world,

fiercely goe[s],
 beat[s] the foundations,
 waken[s] drops of sorrow,
 often struggle[s] hither;
 neither star nor stone,
 nor the lofty gem,
 water or wild beast,
 may aught escape it:
 but into its power goe[s]
 hard and soft,
 much meat;
 for its food
 every year shall go,
 of those that till the ground,
 of those that fly the air,
 of those that swim the water,
 thrice thirteen
 thousand in number?²²

One more time: [riddle repeated.]

And I'll leave you to ponder that one — and I'll be back with the answer and a new episode in two weeks. If you're bored in the meantime, you can follow us on Twitter

²² I've modernized the verbs of this translation to make it a bit easier to perform orally and comprehend aurally. Citation information accompanies the answer to this riddle in the next episode.

@mdtpodcast or visit our website, *medievaldeathtrip.com*, where you can get more information about the show and leave comments, and you can send me feedback, corrections, and questions by emailing *patrick@medievaldeathtrip.com*. That's it for this episode. Talk to you next time, and thanks for listening!

[Clip from King of the Hill episode, "I Remember Mono." Sound of pig-chasing.]

PEGGY HILL: Mother, be careful! The woman in that movie was thirty years younger than you!

LUANNE PLATTER: Get out of here! This is my room, you pig!"

PEGGY'S MOTHER: A pig in the house! It's crazy! It's fun! Come on, Bobby!

PEGGY HILL: Mother, do not lift the pig. Keep the pig on the ground.

LUANNE PLATTER: Am I supposed to kill this pig?

[End of clip.]

[Closing music.]

Episode 9: Concerning the Wretched Fate of a Grammar Teacher

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Transcript:

[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Friday, March 13th, 2015: “Episode 9: Concerning the Wretched Fate of a Grammar Teacher.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m your host, Patrick Lane, and I should apologize for the somewhat late release of today’s episode. Midterm grading hit me hard this weekend and this week — and, indeed, it’s still not quite over — and so I didn’t have quite as much time as I thought I would to get the recording done. But my grading woes put me right in sync with our text for today. For this episode and the next we’re going to do something a little bit different from what we usually do here. As you just heard seconds ago, the tagline for this podcast promises to “explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts.” In our episodes so far, we’ve mainly focused on the weirdness, and I think it’s about time to bring in a bit of the wit. Rest assured, though, even the wit is marbled with weirdness, the kind that comes in part from the cultural gulf between medieval rhetorical commonplaces and our own, but also from the deliberate playfulness of our author for today.

One of the reasons I put “wit” alongside “weirdness” in this show’s tagline goes back to the principles I laid out in the Prologue episode. I don’t want this show to be just an exercise in gawping at how bizarre the middle ages can seem to a 21st-century person; though I also don’t want to deny that this difference — this cultural *frisson*, if you will — that it can be fun and engaging. But I wanted to balance the weird with at least some light seasoning of medieval texts that are fun and interesting because the author is actually trying to be fun and interesting. There’s a wealth of delightful imagery and off-kilter allegory and sharp-tongued satire outside of the canonical literary texts of the middle ages — we know that Chaucer loves a dirty joke or an offbeat allegory, but he’s not the only one. And I want to bring some of those other voices in alongside our more categorically “Death Trippy” bits of startling or gruesome history-writing.

So, today’s text comes from the *Laborintus* of Eberhard the German. Now, we don’t know much about Eberhard the German — and, indeed, there’s a touch of ambiguity about whether or not he might be the same as some other known Eberhards or Everards out there.²³ But what we can ascertain is that he lived and wrote in the mid-13th century. He was probably of German extraction, studied in Paris and Orleans (or [affecting French accent] *Paris* and *Orleans*, I suppose), and went on to teach as a *rector scholarium*, or schoolmaster, in Bremen (2). He is mainly known for the *Laborintus*, which is a kind of textbook of rhetoric written in Latin verse. It’s in the same genre as the much more famous *Poetria Nova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, which is a text that any of you who have taken an in-depth Chaucer class might well have encountered at some point.

²³ In his Latin edition of the text of the *Laborintus*, Edmond Faral notes that Eberhard the German (Evrard l’Allemand) has been confused by earlier scholars with Eberhard of Béthune (Evrard de Béthune), another 13th-century author of verse grammatical treatises (38). This error persists to this day on Wikipedia, which credits Eberhard of Béthune with the *Laborintus*.

These are medieval how-to books for writing Latin poetry and other forms of ornamented discourse. Interestingly, the *Laborintus* appears to be written for more advanced scholars or even fellow teachers or prospective teachers rather than for students of rhetoric, which is who most of the other handbooks rhetoric are designed for. This is relevant to today's reading, because today we'll be hearing the opening section of the Eberhard's Labyrinth, which is about the ill-starred fate that awaits the child doomed from birth to be a teacher of Latin grammar — which is not a message you would necessarily expect a teacher to direct towards their students, though I suppose I've known some unabashedly self-pitying teachers in my time, and I've probably been one myself, on occasion. But this is the kind of lament a frustrated schoolteacher might dump on an apprentice more than on their classroom.

Before we get to Eberhard's text, let's talk a little bit about medieval schoolteachers circa the 13th century. First, I'm sure it goes without saying that formal education was pretty much reserved for the wealthy and the elite, with just a few exceptions here and there. Most of the education ordinary people needed and received wasn't done in a classroom setting, of course. All children would be educated by their communities to some degree. They would learn the oral vernacular culture of their society, from proverbs and precepts to fables and epics, as well as histories from local and family memory up to national and biblical narratives. And presumably they'd pick up social and trade skills from firsthand experience and practice. Most of the lore that an ordinary person needed was *folklore*, and you picked it up from the folk you knew in the ordinary work of day-to-day living. The classroom, as we would recognize it, was a much more rarefied space.

And what was taught in these classrooms was rather rarefied material. They earned the label *grammar schools* for a very good reason: they really did have one primary purpose, and that was the learning of Latin. That was why you would go to one of these schools, and the reason to learn Latin was to pursue a clerical career — which generally meant becoming a member of the clergy, even though your actual career might be what we would call “white collar” work rather than pastoral, priestly work. But these schools were set up for essentially vocational training. And that these classrooms accomplished some larger general education goals by providing an introduction to the branches of the liberal arts was almost incidental. But even these were mostly for more advanced students. As we’ll hear from Eberhard, one of the grammar master’s burdens is that he doesn’t get to teach the fun stuff, but is stuck going over again and again the rudimentary texts which are easily comprehended by beginners. Two of these introductory textbooks stand out and get name-checked by Eberhard in today’s selection (though it’s also worth noting that the students and probably even many of the teachers, wouldn’t have these in front of them as books — a lot of the learning would have been through recitation and repetition rather than working from a codex). But the first of these is the grammar of Donatus, a 4th-century grammarian. Donatus provides a kind of primer in Latin, with a focus on speaking the language correctly and avoiding faults. His book, used (rather mind-boggling) for nearly a thousand years as a basic Latin-learning text, got the nickname, “the fount of tears” (an epithet that Eberhard alludes to in today’s passage), for the suffering it caused generation after generation of students.²⁴ And, of course,

²⁴ Correction: My memory that Eberhard was using an established epithet for Donatus appears to have been faulty, as upon further examination, the description of Donatus as “*lacrimarum fonte*” (l. 69) in fact appears to originate with Eberhard.

Donatus is itself a Latin text. It is not a bilingual textbook, though presumably the grammar teacher would be translating for his students until they grew more confident. Language-learning pedagogy at this time was not particularly enlightened, and no doubt it worked at least partly on a principle of immersion. It reminds me of a detail from *Horatio Hornblower*, where Horatio apparently teaches himself Spanish by means of a dictionary and a copy of *Don Quixote*. That image — that concept — has stuck with me as a kind of romanticized ideal of language learning. But it's not a terribly effective strategy. There's a degree to which a lot of dead languages (especially a lot of medieval vernaculars) are still taught today in ways that aren't all that different from Horatio's approach. One of the Old Norse textbooks that I used basically consisted of a section that was a grammar, outlining all the declensions and conjugations, and then a glossary of words, and then a selection of passages for translation. And that was how you were meant to pick up the language and learn how to use it. There are more and more textbooks now that try to use a more conversational and progressive approach, but it's still not uncommon to find what is essentially medieval pedagogy alive and well in those classes offered once every four years on the fringes of your foreign language department.

Anyway, the other starting text, the text that provided the seeds for many student lessons and many student compositions, was the *Distichs of Cato*, the Roman philosopher.²⁵ The *Distichs* are a collection of two-line verse aphorisms, easy to memorize and easy to drop into persuasive oratory. They're little nuggets of wisdom, like: "Spread not vain talk lest thou be thought its spring; / Silence ne'er harms but

²⁵ Though, in fact, the actual authorship of the *Distichs* is lost to history, and the attachment of Cato's name to the collection is just an example of the ancient and medieval practice of attributing anonymous aphorisms to paradigmatic authorities (*Distichs of Cato* 1–2).

speech may trouble bring” (19), or “Change not known friends for those thou dost not know; / Tried friends are sure, untried may not be so” (21). You can hear echoes of this grammar school Cato-catechism in Polonius’s “Neither a borrower nor a lender be” speech in *Hamlet*.

So this is the matter that Eberhard has to teach to his students, day after day, year after year. Parts of speech and slogans off of motivational posters, essentially. He is not a prestigious university scholar who gets to debate lofty questions of theology or introduce university students to theories of musical or celestial harmony. He’s trying to teach this dry, dry stuff to hormone-addled adolescents. It’s not too surprising that he feels a bit sorry for himself, even while fundamentally believing in the essential virtue of his vocation.

Next episode, we’ll talk a little bit more about the administration of the grammar school, but for now let’s hear Eberhard explain to us how grammar teachers come into the world. This translation of the *Laborintus* is from an unpublished 1930 Master’s Thesis by Evelyn Carson (or maybe that’s Evelyn [long-*e*] Carson), who was a student at Cornell. This dissertation/thesis is not readily available except through academic interlibrary loan, unless, I suppose, you’re at Cornell. It renders Eberhard’s Latin verse into rather nice English prose.

Oh, and a quick cautionary note. In the text that follows, I’ve included a single fleeting occurrence of a somewhat rude word — a word you can now hear with some frequency on basic cable in America, but not yet on network television. So if your sensibilities are calibrated to a high degree of delicacy, then I apologize for any damage that might be done to them. But I think we’ll all be okay.

[Here is performed the Prologue and Part 1 of Eberhard's *Laborintus*. In this text, Eberhard opens with an evocation of the Muses, and then proceed to describe Mother Nature at work fashioning the body of a new baby. This baby is destined to become a schoolmaster, and Mother Nature voices a lament for this child. She describes the grim fate that awaits the child, who will lead a life of hardship without profit. She then gives the child's mother the things that the child will need for his studies, and Eberhard points out that these do not include the works of theology, astronomy, geometry, music, mathematics, or even rhetoric. Missing, too, are the works of Aristotle or many other ancient philosophers, doctors, and lawyers. Instead, his materials are to be the grammatical works of Donatus ("abundant source of tears") and the schoolroom-friendly Distichs of Cato. Fortune herself then addresses the child and explains how there is no good fated for him, and how in her fickleness she will elevate the bad and undeserving and bring low the good and virtuous (5–10).

So, Eberhard cuts this section off a bit abruptly, I think — he doesn't quite complete his thought here, which is that the implication of Fate's speech is that she controls all destinies, and she's telling him that he in particular — he's screwed. Worse people are going to be exalted above him, and he is going to lose what favor he might attain, despite his merits. Obviously, there's a certain note of bitterness here, to say the least. Eberhard tells us elsewhere in the *Laborintus* that he studied at Paris and at Orleans, and yet he has not attained a position as a prestigious university scholar. Instead, he's stuck in a

comparatively low status job as a grammar schoolmaster. But at the same time, he goes on a bit later to defend the nobility of the study of grammar, which, after all, is the bedrock skill on which all the rest of the medieval liberal arts are based. We'll hear some of that in our next episode, which takes us through section 2 of the Labyrinth, in which the allegorical description of the rearing of a grammar teacher continues as Grammar herself, personified, passes her gifts on to Eberhard. Then the section wraps up with a pretty fascinating digression into practical advice about how to deal with common classroom problems, including the different kinds of problem students the teacher is likely to encounter. But that's a teaser for next time!

I do want to touch on another quick point, though, before we wrap up. So that little bit of description there at the end of the text describing a certain class of weak men with weak pulses and richly colored waste products... well, our translator, Evelyn Carson, in fact chooses not to translate that phrase, with an almost quaint prudishness. You find this use of untranslated references to sex or other taboo functions more often among 19th-century translators, who maintain their moral duty by leaving such vulgar things masked behind the shroud of Latin, where only the educated and mature could access it. It's slightly stranger to me to find this still going on in something from 1930, but I guess on balance it's not all that surprising. The dissertation text actually reads: "Those men flourish whom the beating of a weak pulse enriches *urinae sedimen sterculeusque color.*" The Latin phrase literally translates as "the color of the sediment of the urine and the poo." I dropped the sediment bit just for flow in my translation. Presumably, this is a reference to the medical theory of the four humours, which were believed to influence not only health but personality. And Imbalances in the humours could also be diagnosed

through the examination of the color and smell of one's urine and excrement. That said, my rather quick survey of some of the medieval medical texts I have at hand²⁶ shows that they are all over the place in terms of assigning meanings to dark and light urine, so I haven't found any consistent medical lore that sheds any particular light on the connection Eberhard is noting between a weak pulse and dark-colored waste. But there are great examples of urine color wheels from medieval manuscripts, which were meant to be used as diagnostic tools. You can find them by searching for "medieval uroscopy" or "uromancy" or "urinomancy" — the latter two terms encompassing not only medical diagnosis, but forms of prognosis that slide straight on over into straight-up fortune-telling territory. Uroscopy is one of those interesting elements of ancient medicine that initially seems kind of silly and misguided — and certainly the amount of information some ancient physicians thought you could derive just from inspecting a patient's urine was unrealistic, to say the least — but the basic principles of this practice are, of course, validated by and continued within modern medicine. You can learn significant things about a patient's health by examining the color and odor of their urine, even without resorting to chemical lab tests (and ancient doctors did have one tool of chemical analysis — their own tastebuds, which were indeed employed to test the quality of urine and other things). Oh, and before you ask, I did look to see if I could find any examples of medieval charts of poo color, and I could not. But I can report back that you'll want to have a strong stomach, indeed, if you're going to image search the phrase "stool or fecal color."

²⁶ These include the aforementioned *Anglo-Saxon Leech Book*, as well as the works of Galen and the *Seven Books of Paulus Aegineta*.

I don't know if a digression on urine and poo is a distraction from the trials of an infant grammar teacher, or if, on the other hand, it's actually entirely appropriate. Next time, our baby grammarian is going to be growing up a bit, so hopefully we can have a more mature discussion about bratty students.

We had a long riddle last time. It came from the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dialogue of Salomon and Saturn II*, in which the character Saturn asks wise Salomon a number of questions about the nature of the universe and of religion, some of which take on a very riddle-like form. So here's the riddle — or question — as posed by Saturn, from an 1848 translation by John M. Kemble, which I had to slightly modernized just to make it a bit more readable.

But what is the wonder
 that fare[s] throughout the world,
 fiercely goe[s]
 beat[s] the foundations,
 waken[s] drops of sorrow,
 often struggle[s] hither;
 neither star nor stone,
 nor the lofty gem,
 water or wild beast,
 may aught escape it:
 but into its power goe[s]
 hard and soft,
 much meat;

for its food
 every year shall go,
 of those that till the ground,
 of those that fly the air,
 of those that swim the water,
 thrice thirteen
 thousand in number? (ll. 563–582)

So what's the answer? Well, Salomon gives us an answer, in a few more lines of verse:

Age is on earth
 powerful over every thing,
 with its capturing
 chain of war,
 with its vast fetter
 wide it reach[es];
 with its long line
 it halter[s] all it will;
 the tree it crushe[s],
 and break[s] with its twigs;
 in the stony nest it stir[s]
 the prow on its journey,
 and fell[s] it on the ground;
 besides that it eat[s]
 the wild bird;

it subdues the wolf in fight,
 it abide[s] longer than the stones,
 it overtops the mountain path,
 it consume[s] iron with rust,
 it do[es] us so too. (ll. 583–602)

So that's your answer: age.

The rather obscure reference to “thrice thirteen thousand” in the question half of this riddle is apparently a reference to the number of years before Doomsday, though apparently it's not meant to be actual specific value but is a kind of poetic hyperbole that really just means lots and lots, and plays on an aesthetic affection for multiples of threes (Wright 257). So it would be like us saying “a hundred million billion,” with our affection for big numbers ending in *-illions*. It's not meant to be a real number; it's just a gesture towards a vast count. This is according to Charles D. Wright, whom I had the good fortune to take a class from at the University of Illinois, so I trust his interpretation implicitly.

The language and imagery of this riddle and its answer may ring a few bells for some of you. If it sounds familiar, maybe you're remembering this:

[Clip from The Hobbit (1977).]

GOLLUM: This thing all things devours: / Birds, beasts, trees,
 flowers; / Gnaws iron, bites steel; / Grinds hard stones to meal;
 /Slays king, ruins town, /And beats high mountain down.
 BILBO: Hmm. Well, interesting. Yes, now, let me see...
 GOLLUM: What does it answer? What does it answer?!

BILBO: Just a moment now!

GOLLUM: My precious, will it taste delicious? Yes, it will.

BILBO: Give me some time!

GOLLUM: What does it say?

BILBO: I said time, time! Whatever is the matter?

GOLLUM: It guessed. Time is the answer.

[End of clip.]

So, that was one of Gollum's riddles to Bilbo Baggins, as performed by Brother Theodore and Orson Bean in the lovely 1977 Rankin-Bass animated adaptation of *The Hobbit*. Tolkien being a scholar and translator of Anglo-Saxon literature, the resemblances are almost certainly not coincidental.

And now it's time to introduce our new riddle. This is a short one, and I'll go ahead and give you a hint that the answer is thematically relevant to Eberhard. Here it is: "Flat is my top, not flat my base at all, / Both ways I'm turned, nor do my tasks appall, / What one end does the other can recall." One more time: "Flat is my top, not flat my base at all, / Both ways I'm turned, nor do my tasks appall, / What one end does the other can recall."

I'll be back with the answer and the strange allegory of the milk of Grammar in not quite two weeks, because of our late release this episode. We will be back on schedule — I hope! — with Episode 10 on Monday, March 23rd. Oh, you know, we're going to just miss the equinox. Hmm.... If I'd realized that earlier I might have done a different theme. Oh well, we'll just have to wait six months and come back to that one. Something to look forward to.

You can follow us on Twitter @mdtpodcast or visit our website, *medievaldeathtrip.com*, where you can get more information about the show and leave comments, and you can send me feedback, corrections, and questions by emailing me at *patrick@medievaldeathtrip.com*. That's all for now. And it occurs to me, having started this episode talking about the show's tagline, that it might be painfully obvious that I'm in need of a snappy sign-off line. Something distinctive, but not insufferable. If you have any suggestions, tweet them at me. And until I find something better to say, I can at least say with sincerity: Thanks for listening!

Episode 10: Concerning the Milk of Grammar

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[Theme music.]

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Monday, March 23, 2015: “Episode 10: Concerning the Milk of Grammar.”

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m your host, Patrick Lane. Today we continue with Eberhard the German and his rhetorical handbook in Latin verse, the *Laborintus*. When we last left our nascent grammar teacher, he was a newborn child, hearing from the lips of the goddess Fortune that he is doomed to a life of tribulation without fame or esteem. Now, we’ll carry right on into the next section of the *Laborintus*, in which he receives the knowledge that it will then be his duty to pass on to his students. This is all still happening in the form of an allegory, so we are about to encounter Philosophy personified as a goddess, along with her seven daughters, the seven liberal arts. I thought we’d start by briefly reviewing what these are and how Grammar fits into them.

Traditionally, the seven liberal arts are organized into one group of three, the trivium, which consists of Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic, and one group of four, the quadrivium, which consists of Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, and Music. You might

observe that this scheme leaves out a lot of modern academic subjects that don't seem to be included. Sometimes, of course, this is because the subject just didn't exist yet — there's no psychology or sociology, because there was no notion of those as discrete disciplines — though you do see that they emerge, in a fashion, through discussions of ethics or character or history. And, indeed, many subjects are included, albeit rather covertly, under the umbrella of one of the seven arts. So history and literature, for example, being the content of so many important texts, in fact make up the actual matter of the study of grammar and rhetoric. This is also the case for some of the natural sciences, to a degree, especially in terms of the classification of animals into different categories or the naming of parts of the body, both of which lend themselves to composition exercises and ways of learning the techniques of division and classification. Others subjects are omitted from the liberal arts because they are simply conceived of as having a fundamentally different status in the hierarchy of learning. So, philosophy is not perceived as a separate subject, but as essentially the product of studying all seven of the liberal arts (allegorically, this relationship is framed rather the other way round, with Philosophy being the mother of arts, but either way the idea of Philosophy as the totality of the arts is there). The subjects of advanced university degrees — namely medicine, law, theology — also spring to mind. These are set apart as a matter of definition.

The liberal arts take their name in the context of ancient Rome as being those subjects which a free person ought to be skilled in, the things a citizen of the Rome should be able to do. This is partly why the trivium is usually elevated above the quadrivium — skills in expression and argumentation are especially vital in a society where citizens are expected to act for themselves in public debate and civil courts. The

quadrivium, which seems to stand as a form of the hard sciences to balance with the language-centric humanities of the trivium, is really unified more by a general theme of natural harmonies and relationships, which in the abstract is based on the underlying mathematical nature of music and geometry and astronomical (and, indeed, even astrological) calculations, but the harmony theme also has a political inflection that you can read into it. As Rome grows more and more imperial and less and less republican, and later still as Europe becomes more and more feudal, law becomes a specialty subject rather than just being the principles of persuasive oratory that would have been useful to a Roman citizen, and theology is elevated to the position of queen of all sciences.²⁷ Thomas Aquinas highlights a new definition of liberal arts that is better suited to a society where the concept of a free citizen is no longer quite so applicable. He says, “only those arts which are directed to knowing are called free [or liberal] arts, whereas those which are directed to some useful end attained by action are called mechanical or servile arts” (I.3.59). Which is to say, the “liberal” arts are those that are liberated from — not dependent on — the worlds of commerce, production, labor, etc. They have value in and of themselves, not just for the actions they inform. Thus law and medicine, as well as engineering or agriculture or economics, are essentially classed as servile, being skills learned expressly for application rather than knowledge learned (and knowledge produced) for its own sake. It seems to me that this notion still stigmatizes the liberal arts among some people today who see them as useless ivory tower navel-gazing instead of practical career skills. And this persists even while teachers of liberal arts subjects and

²⁷ This evolution of Roman rhetorical training into its medieval form is traced variously by James Murphy in his *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (359–363), Ruth Morse in *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages* (18–20), and Rita Copeland in *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages* (38–42).

administrators of liberal arts colleges try to reassert the old Roman ideals of creating engaged and capable citizens.

But what does Eberhard want for his students? Being the first stop on the ladder of formal 13th-century education, he doesn't have to worry so much about these higher pedagogical questions. Indeed, his pedagogical politics here can be simply summarized as, "Hey everybody, the study of grammar is really important, and without it you can't proceed to any of the other arts." Eberhard is rather at pains to remind us that Grammar is the eldest sister of the seven arts. She is prestigious. She is essential to all learning. And the humble schoolmaster who is responsible for passing the knowledge of her on is an important person and too little appreciated by those who benefit from his labor. One can imagine some of his complaints rather neatly fitting into the mouths perhaps not so much of elementary school teachers today — though there's certainly a parallel there — but even moreso into those of dedicated college composition instructors, who are tasked with teaching foundational critical thinking skills and writing and argumentation skills that are meant to underlie all the higher level coursework students go on to do, and yet whose ranks are made up of undertrained graduate students and unempowered adjuncts, who don't necessarily get a lot of support administratively from above, and from below face students who resent being required to take their class. No doubt there are basic math and algebra teachers who feel exactly the same way, but I suspect their discipline does not provide them with quite as many platforms for vocalizing their discontent as a writing teacher has.

And with that note of lamentation, let's go ahead and get into our text. As before, I'll be reading from Evelyn Carson's 1930 translation of the *Laborintus*.

[Here is performed Part 2 of Eberhard's *Laborintus*. The child described in Part 1 is shown maturing and gaining the ability to reason. As this happens, Philosophy summons her seven daughters and commands the eldest, Grammar, to nurse the child and thereby impart her milk of knowledge. Philosophy then lists the principles of grammar that must be instilled in the child, from the sounds of the letters all the way to the figures of speech. She points out how knowledge of all the other arts and sciences is made accessible only through a sound understanding of grammar first, and that this proves the importance of this seemingly humble field. The child nurses and takes in knowledge, while Grammar herself addresses him. She begins offering advice for how to be a good teacher and how to shape one's methods and manner for different types of students. She concludes with practical business advice for the future schoolmaster concerning how best to be sure to get payment from the parents of the pupils (11–16).]

I love this little glimpse we get at what the medieval classroom might have been like, here at the end of this passage. The next section of the *Laborintus* starts with a short speech by Poesy, or Poesis, the goddess of poetic composition, but then quickly moves to fairly typical instructional matter for Latin composition, such as using zeugma to begin a sentence or inserting variety through the use of amplification and abbreviation of one's source material, etc. It is not until the penultimate section of the *Laborintus* that Eberhard returns to his opening theme of the hard life of the grammar school teacher and gives us a few more portraits of problem students and the unrewarded toil of the teacher — a

passage which I'm certainly going to feature as a future episode, though not just now. We'll shift to a different text for next time.

The thing I find most striking about Eberhard's advice to teachers (speaking, as he does, through the goddess, of course), is how applicable it remains today — minus the bits about corporal punishment. I expect many teachers in many different disciplines at many different grade levels would recognize Eberhard's basic precepts for fanning the flames of learning. Last episode, I rather focused on the alienating aspects of the medieval grammar school classroom, of learning a foreign language by means of what were ancient textbooks even in the middle ages and learning for the preparation of future clergy. I maybe overstated the case a bit, last time. I've been reading Nicholas Orme's rather recent book, *Medieval Schools: From Roman Britain to Renaissance England*, and in that he challenges some of the stereotypes we have of medieval education.²⁸ For one thing, there was probably more functional literacy among the non-clerical classes than we might expect, and there was instruction of children, boys and girls, in reading and writing, both in Latin and their native languages, for those who had no intention of pursuing a clerical career. We have tended to project the goals of medieval university education back onto the grammar schools, and that's partly because we have a much clearer picture of what was happening in the universities than we do of what was happening in your typical town grammar school. They just don't make it into the historical record in substantial ways, and so it's quite difficult to reconstruct a good picture of them before about the 15th century.

²⁸ While I've drawn many of the specific details about schoolmaster life and school administration from Orme's book, some of the larger discussion of misconceptions and medieval literacy is based on Orme's article, "What Did Medieval Schools Do For Us?" which provides an encapsulated version of the book's broader claims.

So what is this job that Eberhard is preparing his reader for? Probably the best comparison we can make is to the one-room schoolhouse of the American frontier or its equivalent in rural Europe. For every characteristic I'm about to list, you can find notable exceptions, but as a working generalization, we can say that these schools would have a single master, who might have a couple of assistant teachers (Orme, *Medieval Schools* 165–166). In some cases, the master was paid a salary, especially if the school was affiliated with a cathedral or monastery or endowed by a local bigwig, but typically the main source of income was from fees charged to the students, as well as charges for boarding some of the students, as the master often would do in his own house (176–177). For the most part, students of all ages were being instructed together, with the youngest entering school around the age of seven and the eldest generally being in their mid-teens, though it's certainly possible for some adults to be enrolled as well in the local school (129–130). Numbers of students vary, with small schools maybe only having a dozen at a time, though some town schools — even in towns that weren't particularly huge — claimed nearly a hundred students in their school, which suggests a rather different environment than our traditional picture of the one-room schoolhouse, though nonetheless the architectural evidence still suggests the use of large single halls for these schools (141–142). Generally, the master would sit enthroned, as it were, at the head of the classroom, and would call students up in front of him to be examined — and, when necessary, to be punished (139).

We have to talk about corporal punishment. It is striking — though not surprising, I suppose — that it features prominently in the discourse about schools and schoolboy experiences from the middle ages. When schoolmasters are featured in visual art, their

iconography consists of one of two poses. One is posing with the fingers of one hand raised — a teaching gesture. The other is posing with a birch or bundle of switches in hand (163). Given that corporal punishment was widespread and accepted throughout medieval society — for adults as much as for children — one imagines that school beatings must have been especially spectacular for them to come to define the popular image of schooling so completely. Eberhard gives us lessons on Donatus as the fount of tears for schoolchildren, but it seems like nearly everyone else in the culture is pointing at the schoolmaster's rod as the true torment of their schooldays.

There's a very short piece on the attitude of medieval teachers to corporal punishment by Ben Parsons which came out about a year ago in the *Education Journal*, in which he notes that even though the importance of discipline was so ingrained in the profession that in the year 1500 masters at Cambridge were given rods at their graduation “like knights receiving their swords,” texts on teaching emphasized being “governed by reason” when administering beatings (10). One suspects this is one of those cases where such moderation is stressed in the guidebooks precisely because there was genuine problem out in the real world of masters losing control and beating students out of anger or spite. And, certainly, I think this accords with most of our impressions of human nature and how punitive powers frequently get employed.

And Eberhard offers us another example of someone who by no means objects to corporal punishment, but who tries to confine it to a rather narrow function within a larger approach to discipline, and who emphasizes that the most important part of the discipline is the words of admonition and not the pain of the switch. It's no “To Sir, With Love,” but it does help to shake up the almost Dickensianly brutal image of the

schoolmaster as a kind of prison warden that we might have. It's also easy to picture these teachers — who when they enter the historical record are often there trying to collect on fees owed to them by delinquent students or their parents (Orme, *Medieval Schools* 184–186) — it's easy to picture them as mercenary money-grubbers, or as entrepreneurs out to milk an income from the local ambitious classes or the aristocratic second sons of the district, teaching almost mindlessly from old Roman handbooks. The latter point is rather refuted by the number of grammatical and rhetorical treatises that these teachers are writing in the middle ages. They have to pay obeisance to Donatus and Priscian and Cicero, sure, but they are actually rearticulating and even redefining their subject for their own age and their own students (182–183). It's not just rote recapitulation of Roman education. And Eberhard, reminding his reader that it is the teacher's task “to stir up this fire of glowing desire” for learning — he reminds us that these teachers could have as strong a sense of their vocation as modern teachers do.

And I find there's even something like a progressive lesson in his comment that “Poesy,” or Poesis is useful in teaching both the *durus* (the dull or the thick) and the *ingeniosus* (the ingenious or naturally talented).²⁹ In her little speech that comes right after today's selection, Poesis, as Grammar's companion, emphasizes how “My subject matter includes all that the circumference of earth embraces” (17). And this notion that the study of poetry includes not just reading the great classical poets, whose work indeed covered every topic from myth and history to nature and theories of the composition of the universe — that this study also included the writing of poetry right alongside the reading of it. Often such writing was in direct imitation of an esteemed author, but it

²⁹ Latin text is from the edition by Faral (1924).

could also turn to the student's own themes. I'm in the English Department myself as a creative writer, and I know I and many of my colleagues make a very conscious effort to incorporate creative writing exercises even into the literature classes that we teach, not just as a fun lark but as a meaningful way to engage with and apprehend literary works of unfamiliar time periods or even just unfamiliar genres and styles — and most late 20th-century poetry is essentially a foreign genre to the average student, to say nothing of Chaucer or Langland. This use of creative exercises is certainly not novel, but I think there is still something a touch radical about attempting a serious integration of creative work alongside critical work in a literature classroom — and it's a practice that still meets some resistance in part, no doubt, because of the challenge of grading creative work without that being too obviously subjective. But it rather warms my heart to see Eberhard, speaking from what we might think of as a profoundly conservative pedagogical system — but to see him praising the academic usefulness of both the reading and the writing of artistic texts, of poetry in its broadest definition.

To change focus a little bit, it is also interesting to me that Eberhard portrays his birth into grammar knowledge as this essentially passive nursing. Of course, this is the conceit of writing an allegory, but the way the allegory rather seamlessly shifts into a real-world discussion of managing a classroom... this blurs the conceit a bit. And so we're left with this notion, at least, that Eberhard comes by his own grammar-knowledge and authority by some special dispensation and not because he has been put through this same grammar school wringer that he is now cranking the handle of himself.

To speak from personal experience, I think that there is a kind of phenomenon of a teacher forgetting their own studenthood. It's not a universal phenomenon, by any

means, and certainly I know many teachers who are so full of anecdotes of their own formative classroom experiences that I have to wonder if I'm not the total outlier. But I struggle to call to mind what it was like to be a student — to be an undergraduate, to say nothing of being a gradeschooler. I remember aspects of life — friends, teacher's personalities — but I can barely recall what the *work* of education was. So, I suppose a simpler way to say that is that I remember school, of course, but I can't truly *remember* learning. It's as though the possession of knowledge overwrites the ability to recall what the absence of that knowledge was like. Sort of like once you become literate, you can no longer see writing as the unfamiliar squiggles it once was to you — and anyone who's learned a language with a non-Roman alphabet probably has probably had a more recent sense of this experience. I certainly recall getting my ancient Greek textbooks in the week before classes and just seeing these pages covered in what might as well have been abstract art. But within a couple of weeks, I knew the letters and I could perceive them as letters and my brain parsed them as letters forming words signifying sounds, and I could never seem them as abstract art again.

And so we forget our ignorance, just as after a big meal a full person struggles to recollect just what it felt like to be hungry, though it has only been minutes since that is precisely what they were feeling. The problem as far as teaching goes, of course, is that as one loses sight of what the student's experience is, one begins to lose empathy with the student and becomes incapable of seeing the class and the work from the student's perspective. And that's something I certainly have to constantly remind myself of. So I thought we might end with a bit of student perspective — or, at least, an attempt at it. I learned about the text I'm about to read through Nicholas Orme, who quotes the very

passage I'm about to quote, but I've gone and gotten the whole source book, and I can tell already that it will furnish me with a few future episodes of this podcast. The book is called *A Fifteenth Century Schoolbook*, as edited by William Nelson in 1956, and it comes from a British Museum manuscript, Arundel 249. This manuscript contains almost 400 short passages in Tudor English with matching Latin translations to be used as schoolroom exercises, compiled by a teacher of grammar at Magdalen School in Oxford. As such, these were probably composed by the teacher, though many of them are written from the point of view of a student and reflect the conditions of student life. And for all we know, some of these may be (or may be adapted from) actual student compositions collected by the teacher, and I like to at least just imagine that that's the case. And I thought I would share this one with you; it's very first item in Nelson's edition, though it's actually from the middle of the original manuscript. This text is from about two hundred years after Eberhard's day, but I think it still reflects some of the salient features of medieval grammar school life and the student's perception of that life. At a few points in the reading I'll provide some glosses as needed for unfamiliar words or archaic syntax. I'll flag those with the phrase, "that is." So hear those as verbal footnotes. Here it goes:

[Sound of a pen scratching on paper.]

The worlde waxeth worse every day, and all is turnede
 upside down, contrary to th'olde guyse. for all that was to me a
 pleasure when I was a childe, from iij [3] yere olde to x [10] (for
 now I go upon the xij [twelfth] yere), while I was undre my father
 and mothers keypyng, be tornyde now to tormentes and payne. For
 than I was wont to lye styll abedde tyll it was forth dais [that is,

until it was late in the day], delitynge myselfe in slepe and ease. The sone sent in his beamys at the wyndowes that gave me lyght instede of a Candle. O, what a sporte it was every mornynge when the son was uppe to take my lusty pleasur betwixte the shetes, to beholde the rofe, the beamys, and the rafters of my chambre, and loke on the clothes [that is, the draperies] that the chambre was hangede with! Ther durste no mann but he were made [mad] awake me oute of my slepe upon his owne hede while me list to slepe. at my wyll I arose with intreatese, and whan th'appetite of rest went his way by his owne accorde, than I awoke and callede whom me list to lay my gere redy to me. My brekefaste was brought to my beddys side as ofte as me liste to call therfor, and so many tymes I was first fedde [ere] I were cledde. So I hade many pleasurs mo besides thes, wherof sum be forgotten, sum I do remembre well, but I have no leysure to reherce them nowe.

But nowe the worlde rennyth upon another whele. for nowe at fyve of the clocke by the monelyght I most go to my booke and lete slepe and slouthe alon. and yff oure maister hape to awake us, he bryngeth a rode [in]stede of a candle. Now I leve pleasurs that I hade sumtyme. here is nought els preferryde but [ad]monyshynge and strypys. brekfastes that were sumtyme brought at my bidyngge is dryven oute of contrey and never shall cum agayne. I wolde tell more of my mysfortunes, but thoughe I have leysure to say, yet I

have no pleasure, for the reherse of them makyth my mynde more
 hevy. I sech all the ways I can to lyve ons at myn ease, that I
 myght rise and go to bedde when me liste oute of the fere of
 betynge. (1-2)

And here's one more quick item that rather reinforces Eberhard's position on grammar — here, the hypothetical student remarks that his father wants him advanced out of the study of grammar and on to the study of sophistry, or Logic or Dialectic — which is to say *argument*, a practical, professional skill. And then we get the teacher's response. So:

My father sent yesterday his servunt to my maistre for to laboure
 for me yf he coude brynge aboute be eny meanys to have me from
 hens to sophistre, but my maister saide utterly that he wolde not
 suffre it, for he shewde that ther coude be no greater hurt to
 scolars than to take them to tymely from grammer, but than it was
 tyme when thei hade redde all poetes and then they shulde be redy
 to all maner of studye. (19)

It's too bad that citing medieval texts is not likely to do much of anything to sway those who hold that the study of the humanities is a money-losing proposition at best and a waste of time or outright ideological indoctrination at worst, but so it goes, I guess.

Time to wrap things up. As I mentioned last time, our riddle was related to our text. The riddle was: "Flat is my top, not flat my base at all, / Both ways I'm turned, nor do my tasks appall, / What one end does the other can recall" (Riddle 1). This was

another late classical riddle from Symphosius, as translated by Elizabeth Hickman du Bois, and the answer is, *graphium*, or the stylus. If you said “pencil,” you were very close, though of course pencils were a Renaissance invention and erasers weren’t added to the ends of them until the mid-1800s. But the stylus was used in a very similar way. Before paper was cheap and plentiful, students would write lessons on tablets coated in wax, using the sharp end of a stylus to inscribe the wax. The other end of the stylus was blunt, and could be used to smooth the wax back out, effectively erasing (or “recalling,” as in “taking back”) the written text. One thing I dream of doing in a medieval lit class, as a experiential lesson in medieval pedagogy, is to get a couple dozen of those tablets that you used to be able to get as party favors and such, which had a sheet of greyish plastic that would lie on top of a bed of black wax, that you could then write or draw on with a plastic stylus and then erase simply by lifting the sheet up. It used to be, in my 80s childhood, that those tablets were fixtures of your cheap drugstore toy aisle, but that seems to no longer be the case, and my online searches just haven’t turned up a good way to buy a case of them. Maybe one summer when I’m feeling especially crafty I’ll just make my own set of more authentic wax tablets — I can’t imagine it would be that hard to do. But I do think it would be interesting for students to try to take notes or even compose on these rather small and awkward devices while trying taking in recitations or declamations from the teacher.

Anyway, how about a new riddle? This one involves a bit of playground vulgarity for Catholic schoolkids, which means having some knowledge of Catholicism will help with the answer. Here it is: “What time of the year may maidens most with their honesty fyest [that is, fart] in the church?” Once more: “What time of the year may maidens most

with their honesty *fyest* in the church?” where *fyest* means to softly fart, or so the OED informs me.

I'll have the answer for you in two weeks. Until then, you can follow us on Twitter @mdtpodcast or leave comments, corrections, or questions at our website, *medievaldeathtrip.com*, where you can also get references and other information for each episode. And you can contact me directly by e-mailing *patrick@medievaldeathtrip.com*.

It's also been a while since I checked in with the iTunes store reviews, and I would like to offer my belated thanks to “villainsgoleft” and to “leonardsmalls” for their lovely reviews. Those are greatly appreciated — and it's doubly appreciated that they come from people whose usernames are such great deep-cut pop culture references. You know, it's been ten episodes now, and I've made basically no real effort to publicize this show. I've basically put all of my eggs in one keyword basket, which is to say that if you search for the word the “medieval” in the iTunes store or in other podcast indexes, this show appears in the relatively short list of relevant results. And I'm guessing that is how the vast majority of you who are listening found it. So I appreciate it all the more when nice reviews are posted or when I see folks like Laura Deal and False Florimell and several others tweeting to their Twitter followers about the show. Now that I've actually built up a bit of a back catalogue of episodes, I think I should try to do a bit more informal marketing myself, but you guys are enabling my laziness, because you are such a great audience already, and I thank you for that!

I'll be back with more mediievally goodness on April 6th. For listeners in the Northern Hemisphere, enjoy the Spring weather; Southern Hemisphere, I don't know...

get your jackets out, I guess. And to all my Equatorial listeners — carry on as usual. So until next time, thanks for listening!

*Episode 11: How a Blood Libel Takes Root***Release date:** 17 Apr. 2015**Length:** 52:13**Site URL:** <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/mdt-episode-11-how-a-blood-libel-takes-root/>**File URL:** <http://www.medievaldeathtrip.com/podcastfiles/mdt-episode-011.mp3>**Transcript:***[Theme music.]*

This is *Medieval Death Trip* for Sunday, April 12, 2015: “Episode 11: How a Blood Libel Takes Root.” A word of forewarning: this episode does contain some graphic description of the murder of a child. If that’s not something you’re up for, then you may, as Chaucer suggests, “Turne over the leef and chese another tale” — or skip on to a different episode.

[Theme music continues.]

Hello, and welcome to *Medieval Death Trip*, the podcast where we explore the wit and weirdness of medieval texts. I’m your host, Patrick Lane, wishing you a happy April, “with his shoures soote;” though here in Missouri we haven’t had much in the way of “swich licour / Of which vertu engendred is the flour” — in fact, I’ve got couple pots of “tendre croppes” stuck inside on my windowsill because we still had below-freezing evenings even just a few days ago. It looks like this week we might be coming into Chaucer’s April and getting away from the Wanderer’s ice-rimed walls and “*hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð / wintres woma.*”³⁰ Oh, and I should acknowledge that this

³⁰ The first Chaucer quotation is, of course, the famous line from *The Miller’s Prologue* (l. 3177), and the description of April comes from the first seven lines of the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*. The quotation from *The Wanderer* is from lines 102a–103a (from the edition of Krapp and Dobie), and translates to “the falling snowstorm binds the earth, / winter’s howling.”

episode is arriving a bit late, and I apologize for that, but I'll also just stipulate that as we move into the end of the academic semester, the release schedule might get a little erratic, but there will be new episodes. But on to today's topic.

At the risk of overusing a single source, the fact that this episode lands shortly after Easter — or would have, if the recording hadn't been delayed — that seems like a relevant occasion to look at the actual murder of William of Norwich, as depicted in *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* by Thomas of Monmouth, which we've looked at a couple of times before already. The murder happened at Easter, which itself helped fuel some of the reactions to it, so there is a timeliness there — though I wouldn't want anyone to think I'm doing this to celebrate the anniversary of this particularly problematic alleged martyrdom. And also, on a rather selfish level, although I'm planning on stepping away from Thomas of Monmouth's book for a while after this and exploring a broader base of sources for the next few months, there are so many great little episodes and oddball miracles in this book that I'll be coming back to it multiple times in the future, and it would be very nice to not have to rehearse the same bracketing information about the fundamental antisemitism of the William of Norwich legend every time I do. So, with this episode in the can, I can just say, "Go listen to Episode 11 for a detailed discussion of this problem."

So, what is the problem? Well, as I said in the introductions to Episode 1 and to the linked Episodes 7 and 8, the reason William of Norwich is deemed a saint in this text (a sainthood, by the way, that is not officially recognized by the Catholic Church today) is because he was said to have been ritually murdered, and thus martyred, by the Jewish community of Norwich. His is generally regarded as the first medieval legend of child

martyrdom by Jews; several others followed, of which Little St. Hugh of Lincoln is perhaps the most familiar to English-speakers since his story is retold by Chaucer in *The Prioress' Tale*. In this myth of sacrificial murder emerges the phenomenon of the blood libel, which is specifically the belief that Jews used the blood of Christians in Passover rites, among other things. Now, it's been pointed out by some that the legend of William of Norwich doesn't actually fit the later definition of the blood libel, because despite there being a lot of blood imagery, Thomas's depiction of the murder lacks any actual attempts at blood magic nor does it have the cannibalistic overtones of later examples of the blood libel (Bennet 129–130). But setting aside the precise definition of a term coined much later to describe an earlier phenomenon, I think we can quite safely see this story as a clear forerunner to the kinds of legends that would emerge over the next several centuries.

For our purposes, I'm going to focus primarily on the immediate aftermath of the discovery of William's body in a wood outside of Norwich. There's lots about William's life leading up to his murder we could talk about and lots about the highly dubious testimony that surfaced months and even years after the fact on which Thomas of Monmouth bases his case. And there are all kinds of fascinating political dynamics and scheming that you could build a miniseries off of in this story. But that's rather too much for little old me to wrangle with today. If we *were* going to stage this story as a TV mystery, today is all about the pilot episode, and as per modern mystery convention, that means it starts with the discovery of a body.

[Clip from Twin Peaks, "Pilot."]

SHERIFF HARRY TRUMAN: G'morning, Pete. [It's] Harry.

PETE: She's dead. Wrapped in plastic.

SHERIFF HARRY TRUMAN: Whoah, whoah. Hold on, hold on a second, Pete.

Where?

[End of clip.]

In an influential article on the legend from 1984, Gavin I. Langmuir suggests that Thomas of Monmouth may be the first literary example of the classic English amateur detective who steps in to investigate a crime that the authorities have not properly solved, which is an interesting way to think about this text (820). But, that said, Thomas does not structure his tale as a modern mystery writer would — indeed, he's designed it to *undermine* any notion of mystery about what actually happened to William. What this means for us is that as much as I would love to just start with the finding of the body in the woods — and that is where I'll start with the actual text for today — in order to make sense of Thomas you do need a bit of backstory, because at the point where we'll be coming into the story, Thomas has already told us all the gruesome details of how William was murdered — at least, according to the witnesses and evidence that Thomas has rounded up. So he assumes that you already have all this information when he describes the finding of the body, which makes some of details a bit obscure if you don't.

So here's the basic story. The year is 1144. William is a poor, twelve-year-old boy. He became an apprentice to a tanner, in which capacity he apparently he did considerable business with Jewish customers (or so it was said later, at least). On the Monday after Palm Sunday, a man shows up at William's house. He says he is the archdeacon of Norwich's cook and that he wants William to come along to work for him. William gets permission from his mother, a widow, who is persuaded to let William go

with the stranger after getting a little money from him to alleviate her anxiety. William disappears down the road with the stranger. The only reliable bit of information known about what happened to William after he left his house, from our point of view, is that his body was found later that week on the Saturday before Easter Sunday in Thorpe Wood outside of town.

Now, what Thomas says happened between his disappearance and discovery, based on extremely dubious testimony from a couple of witnesses, is that William was taken by this stranger into the house of one of Norwich's more prominent Jewish residents. There he was tortured and mock-crucified until he finally died. Then the murderers took his body out to the woods and dumped it there.

Now, here's what Augustus Jessopp — the co-editor and co-translator of *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* along with M.R. James — here's what he has to say on the subject of what happened to William, and I think it's instructive. He says:

Our readers will expect some expression of opinion upon the serious question of the credibility of the story and the good faith and honesty of Brother Thomas.

One fact seems certain, namely, a boy's dead body was found in Thorpe Wood on the 24th March, 1144. How it got there, there is not a particle of evidence to show. (xii–xiii)

Now, I will interpolate here a little bit more forensic information Thomas provides. We have plenty of reason to discount his claims about precisely how William died and who did it, but the description of the wounds on William's body seems to me reasonably credible, allowing for some exaggeration. The wounds would have been

observed by many local witnesses whom Thomas would have known as he was writing his account some five to ten years later. Thomas describes the wounds mainly in the description of the murder, and he assumes you'll know these details when we get to the discovery of the body, so I'll go ahead and give you some of his descriptions of the murder here. First, he says: "For while some of them held him behind, others opened his mouth and introduced an instrument of torture which is called a teazel and, fixing it by straps through both jaws to the back of his neck, they fastened it with a knot as tightly as it could be drawn" (20).

This teasel is later found with the body. Now, I haven't gotten a terribly clear answer from the scholarship on what precisely this teasel would have been in this context — indeed, different scholars seem to have assumed slightly different things about it. Thomas's Latin word for it is simply *tormentum*, a thing for torture, and he says that its name in English is a teasel.³¹ We know from something Thomas says later that it's made of wood. This adds one point of clarity. So, in nature, a teasel is a big, bristly pod, like a large thistle. Because they are covered in fine spines, teasels were used in clothmaking to tease (hence the name) and dress cloth. From this use, the word *teasel* comes to also be used to describe a wholly man-made tool used for the same purpose. This tool usually looks a lot like a modern pet brush — a wooden block or paddle with thin nails sticking up from one of the sides. But one could also imagine — and I say imagine because I have no concrete evidence for this at all — but one can imagine a wooden object shaped more like a botanical teasel — kind of like a pine-cone or acorn-shaped bedknob, a bit of

³¹ "...alii aperto ori tormentum quod uulgo tesseillon dicitur intromiserunt..." (20).

ornamental woodworking, which could well be used much like a ball-gag. Either way, of course, none of these things is something you'd want stuffed in your mouth.

Thomas also says that more knotted ropes were tied tightly around Williams' head, so that the knots would press on his forehead and temples when the ropes were tightened, and that his head was shaved and pierced with thorns. Both of these details could well be rooted in examination of actual marks on the body.

Finally, Thomas also finds evidence that he claims shows that the boy was quasi-crucified. He says,

And as we afterwards discovered, from the marks of the wounds and of the bands, the right hand and foot had been tightly bound and fastened with cords, but the left hand and foot were pierced with two nails: so in fact the deed was done by design that, in case at any time he should be found, when the fastenings of the nails were discovered it might not be supposed that he had been killed by Jews rather than by Christians. (22)

Now, we'll get into this a little bit more after the text, but while we're right here, I might as well just highlight something that Langmuir also points out (841): what Thomas is actually saying here is that the wounds don't really match up with crucifixion — there are only wounds in one hand and one foot — but then he just concludes that this proves that the Jews deliberately masked the crucifixion wounds so that when the body was discovered people wouldn't conclude that it had been crucified. This is the kind of deeply self-serving logic that you see applied throughout this case. Oh, and the last bit of medieval medical examiner info is that Thomas claims that boiling water had been

poured over William's wounds to wash the blood away, though it's unclear if was a peri- or a postmortem act.

I just have two other quick bits of relevant background info, one of which is textual and the other contextual. Context first: Jeffery Jerome Cohen points out in a 2004 article that when Thomas is writing, many of the monstrous tropes that we associated with medieval antisemitism — the idea that Jews were well-poisoners, that the blood of an innocent was an ingredient in Passover matzo, or that they ate the flesh of Christians — these weren't developed myths yet by the mid-12th century (42–43). We're going to see a kind of xenophobic mass hysteria building in today's narrative, but it is kind of interesting to bear in mind that this is a mob being whipped into a frenzy even without this more fully demonized image of the Jew that was going to start dominating popular medieval discourse in the next couple of centuries and carry on, of course, well into the modern era. There are antisemitic notions certainly circulating in the mid-12th century, but they haven't quite escalated to levels of absurd fantasy that come later. However, the Jews of Norwich were a relatively new community. The presence of Jews in England increased considerably after the Norman Conquest, with Jewish merchants coming along with the Normans and living in England under the king's own direct protection. In fact, the Norwich Jewish community had probably only come to the city about a decade before the murder, so they are still very much outsiders to the locals (McCulloh 737). Indeed, Cohen argues that before the arrival of the Jews, the chief ethnic divide in Norwich was between the Anglo-Scandinavian townspeople and the Norman elites who came along with the Conquest; in 1144, then, the Jews come to serve as a new Other that these two groups can come together to oppose, setting aside their differences to unite as Christians

against a non-Christian threat (39). You can see the same political function at work on a much larger scale in the Crusades, of course.

The other bit of necessary background information is about a miraculous sight that presages the discovery of William's body. Thomas says that on the night of Good Friday, a beam or ladder of light was observed by many townspeople that seemed to come down from the sky and touch a spot in the woods. One of the witnesses of this is a nun named Legarda, with whom our text for today will begin.

The translation I'll be reading is once more Jessopp and James, from 1896. The manuscript includes little chapter titles that I'll include in my reading, since they do convey some of the character of the text. And here we go, with the discovery of William's body.

[Here is performed Thomas of Monmouth's account of the finding of the body of William of Noriwech. This begins with the story of the nun Legarda, who awakes from her vision much troubled, and therefore takes a few companions and ventures into the spot in the woods that had been shown to her. Here she finds the body of William, upon which two ravens are trying to feed, though every time they settle on the body, they fall off to one side or another and are unable to wound it. Perceiving that the body is blessed, Legarda drives off the ravens and, rejoicing, returns home. The story then shifts to a forester named Henry de Sprowston, who encounters a woodcutter while on patrol in the forest. This woodcutter tells Henry about the body of a boy he had seen, which Henry proceeds to investigate. He, too, finds the body, showing upon it signs of torture,

and from this evidence of cruelty suspects that the murderer is likely a Jew, for he believes no Christian would do such a thing. Henry then returns to town, reports the news, and brings back a priest so that the body might be taken to a churchyard. However, because of the proximity of Easter, they decide to wait and determine their course of action after Easter Sunday.

In the meantime, crowds of people from the town arrive to look at the body and accusations about the Jews of Norwich begin to spread. Before the crowd can become violent, the sheriff of Norwich restrains them. On the Monday following Easter, Henry de Sprowston returns to where the body is still lying in the forest. Afraid to move the body to a churchyard without explicit permission from the bishop, he buries it there in the wood where it had been found.

Shortly afterward, word reaches a relative of William, the priest Godwin Sturt. Godwin goes with some friends of William's to see the body and determine if it really is William who was found. As they begin to dig up the body, the earth around it miraculously lifts up and heaves as though the body beneath were alive. After some shock, the diggers exhume the corpse and discover that it is, indeed, William, who has remained incorrupt and surrounded by a sweet-smelling odor.

Godwin returns home and tells what he has seen to his wife, Liviva. She, then, reveals that this has all confirmed a dream she had in which she saw herself being attacked and maimed by the Jews of Norwich, which she now interprets as foretelling their murder of her nephew.

This selection ends with an account of William's mother, Elviva, and how she reacted to the news. Thomas reports that she became nearly mad with grief

upon having the news of her son's murder confirmed. After some people told her the rumors that the Jews were responsible, she went through the streets of the town accusing and denouncing the Jews, and by the intensity of her expression convincing many others that the Jews were responsible. Thus crowd begins calling for the destruction of the Jews of Norwich (32–42).]

So, what happens next is that the priest Godwin Sturt becomes a demagogue, leading the charge against the Jews of Norwich through rabble-rousing speeches. But he's ultimately unsuccessful. The royal authorities, in the person of the sheriff, don't take action, and no lynch mobs are formed. Indeed, the murder rather falls off the public radar until an incident about five years later, in which the followers of a local knight assassinate one of the prominent Jews (a man to whom, as it happened, the knight owed a lot of money). This led the Jewish community to appeal to the king for justice. At this point, the bishop, William Turbe, acting in the knight's defense, raised the issue of the murder of William as an injustice that must be set right before one could even begin to talk about awarding the Jews some sort of compensation. As before, the secular authorities aren't persuaded (or, as Thomas would have it, are bribed into submission), but the pot has been stirred, and soon you have couple of locals having miraculous visions of William, and shortly afterwards Thomas of Monmouth joins Norwich Cathedral Priory and is soon the Bishop's henchman for drumming up support for their local martyr. And soon enough the cult of William is booming business.

But that's getting beyond our story for today. And even the consequences for the Jews of Norwich is a bit beyond our topic. What I think is almost inescapably striking

about this narrative of the discovery of the William's corpse is that if you just clipped out a handful of comments from Thomas, the whole thing would read as a perfectly straightforward — and even self-aware — tale of how mass hysteria can sweep through a community. Once you strip the narrative of all the later accretions — a servant who claims to have watched through a crack in the door to see William murdered but didn't bother to tell this story to anyone until years later, or the man who remembers seeing the Jews carrying a body into the woods but saves this recollection for a deathbed speech, and other similarly dubious assertions — once you drop the details of the story that were almost certainly invented only around the time that Thomas started collecting stories about William, then you can see in this passage exactly where the belief that the Jews committed this crime began, a belief that fundamentally shaped and distorted all future developments in the story. It begins with the forester Henry de Sprowston beholding a horribly abused body and deciding that no Christian could do so horrible a thing, especially so close to Easter. Which leads to the corollary that it must have been done by someone who holds Easter — and, by extension, Christ — in contempt.

Now, this reasoning proves persuasive to at least some members of a xenophobic medieval community (though probably not as many as Thomas suggests), and it's from this kneejerk reaction that so much of the rest of the antisemitic energy flows. There are more allegations that come from Godwin Sturt, the uncle, who further cements the Jewish angle with circumstantial reports from other members of his family, including the prophetic dream of his wife that we just heard, and he may well have had other motives for pursuing this particular line, which I'll come to in a bit. But really, it all just starts from pure horror at the brutality of this crime. Now, it may seem a little odd in the

context of this podcast, where brutal death and horrific tortures are commonplaces, that medieval people might be shocked as much as we are at a murder like this — or maybe even a little more shocked than we are, given the degree to which cable news has probably desensitized us somewhat to serial killings and sex crimes. Of course, many of the stories I present on this podcast were written quite deliberately for the purpose of shocking the reader — we shouldn't assume a medieval reader would just yawn at many of these stories as though their just quotidian reports, even though that's one of our stereotypes of the middle ages. But, nonetheless, it is, in its way, refreshing to see a community so recognizably rattled by an apparently sadistic murder.

In a little while, I'll touch on some theories about the murder itself, but before that, I want to go back to how Thomas as a writer tells this part of the story. It is very strange. By all other evidence, he is firmly in the "William was martyred by Jews" camp. His life's work as William's own special sacrist comes to depend upon it. It makes sense in context that he would agree with the assertion that the monstrosity of the crime proves that it must have been committed by some capital-*o* Other. What doesn't make as much sense is why he would then so plainly portray the spread of this news with all the tropes of rumor and panic spreading through a population. You would think that all he needs to say is that the guilt of the Jews was plain and everyone agreed, but they got away with the crime because they bribed the sheriff. How does it help his position in any way to bring so much attention to how this truth was largely spread by excitable young men and a hysterical — and in this case the misogynist connotations of that word are very much in play — a hysterical mother. These tumultuous crowds rushing hither and thither — these are images of busyness that did not have positive values in the medieval moral

system, especially from a monkish perspective. So why would Thomas paint this vital part of his story with such negative qualities?

Well, we might float a couple of possible answers.

First, we must recognize that even with what may seem to be equivocal details, Thomas is quite firm that this rumor — even recognizing it as rumor — was nonetheless spurred on by the divine will. So, yes, people jumped to conclusions and were persuaded by the credulous and rash allegations of a grieving mother, but this is all okay, because God was using exactly these methods to spread the truth. It's a tidy little theological out for Thomas, but, again, rather than having to justify this panic, he could have simply elided it. When I said that if you just dropped a few phrases, this story would be a fairly objective portrait of mob panic, it's these "God willed it" phrases I'm referring to.

Another possibility is that, rhetorically, Thomas actually is deliberately using the fervor of the crowd to create pathos, to convey some of that emotional intensity to the reader. This fervor isn't *rationaly* persuasive, but it might still serve Thomas's purpose in making the reader share in that raw emotion. In other words, the images of the restless, horrified, and ultimately furious mob are there so that we might share in those powerful feelings, not for us to stand above them and critique them. And, of course, Thomas still has his divine will argument available to dismiss the rational objections.

But the dominant interpretation from scholars on why Thomas includes details that aren't necessarily favorable to making William's martyrdom an unquestionable fact is that a lot of the people Thomas is writing were, indeed, actively questioning it.

Thomas announces this endemic skepticism himself. A bit later on in his book he writes:

When these firstfruits of the miracles wrought by the merits of the blessed William were brought to light, there were many, ungrateful for the divine benefits or the signs shown, who mocked at the miracles when they were made public, and said that they were fictitious. Yea these, hard and slow of heart to believe, suggested that the blessed boy William was likely to be of no special merit after his death, who they had heard was a poor neglected little fellow when alive. Others there are who, because they had known him as a poor ragged little lad picking up a precarious livelihood at his tanner's business, think scorn of him; and so can by no means believe that such an one, with no previous merits, should have attained to such eminent excellence. And there are some too who, though they saw with their own eyes that he, whatever he was, was cruelly murdered, or heard of it with their ears, or read of it in this present record, yet say: "We are indeed certain of his death, but we are entirely uncertain and doubtful by whom and why, and how he was killed. So we neither presume to call him a saint nor a martyr. And since it is not the pain but the cause that makes the martyr, if it be proved that he was killed in punishment by Jews or anyone else, who could confidently believe that this lad courted death for Christ's sake, or bore it patiently for Christ's sake when it was inflicted upon him?" To all these equally and to each severally we will make answer. (85–86)

As he indicates, he goes on from here to re-argue the merits of his case. But the significant idea here is that unlike many other hagiographers, Thomas has serious constraints on how far he can rewrite the details of his story, not only because it happened locally and within living memory, but also because there remains a faction in the town and in the priory that are still not on board with William's cult, and who, one supposes, could challenge any details that Thomas misrepresents. In fact, we've seen a bit of this division before on this show. The conflict Thomas has with Prior Elias over the putting candles and a special carpet on William's tomb that we saw back in Episodes 7 and 8 is part of this. Jessopp proposes that Elias was probably the head of the faction within the priory that resisted the Bishop and the attempts to establish William's cult because they didn't believe he was actually a martyr (*Life and Miracles* xxi). It's after Elias's death and the election of a much more William-friendly prior that the cult really starts to properly take off.

And so perhaps we have this vivid depiction of a crowd almost frenzied with rumor-mongering as a kind of sop being thrown to the skeptics. It's Thomas saying, "Yes, I will show you that I understand how you saw this event unfold. I'll give it to you. But since subsequent miracles have proven what was really true, I'll use that fact to show why your *continued* skepticism is unfounded."

I find this explanation for why Thomas uses the rhetoric he does to be very plausible. And it serves as a reminder and challenge to the stereotype of the middle ages as exceedingly credulous and ready to believe any old tall tale — history is written by the winners, as we know, and for many a medieval legend, this means that the voices of very

real skeptics and doubters have often been scrubbed out of the history. But we do, from time to time, run into texts where the skeptical position is preserved.

The only section of today's text that I still wonder about is the Thomas's depiction of Elviva, William's mother, which I don't see much discussed by the scholars I've been reading. He presents her in a kind of catalogue of medieval misogynist tropes — her rashness, her intemperate passion, her willingness to believe whatever she hears — he really seems to be going out of his way to present her in a very negatively valenced way. Now, maybe this is also an attempt to employ pathos — after all, the overwhelming emotion of grieving mothers and widows is a staple of classical rhetoric and poetry. So perhaps the misogynistic characterizations are not meant to be especially *judgmental*, but are simply part and parcel of fitting her into a stock type of the mother wracked by grief.

I would say that's a sufficient enough answer, but if you want to go down a conspiracy theory road a bit — and in a true-crime narrative, who doesn't? — there is another possibility. It's possible that, though he needs them for his story, Thomas doesn't really like William's family. They are, in fact, kind of his rivals — they are the other group that has the best claim to William as their own. Indeed, we learn much later in Thomas's book that William's uncle Godwin the priest has kept the teasel and has been using it a relic, dipping it in water which he then uses to dispense cures — and he's doing this for profit. Thomas gives us a little miracle story of Godwin suffering for this — his chickens all mysteriously die — after which he stops charging people for their cures. But there is certainly a sense of a rival authority in Godwin and his relatives which it certainly doesn't hurt Thomas and the priory's shrine to puncture and deflate a bit.

Well, this has been an extraordinarily long episode, so I must be wrapping things up. But I would like to end with a quick, amateur criminological look at the discovery of the body. First of all, one more point about Godwin, whom we've already seen profiting from his nephew's alleged sanctity. John M. McCulloh suggests that Godwin may have jumped on the blame-the-Jews bandwagon right from the beginning with gain in mind. He says, "Godwin may well have sought to turn a family tragedy — the murder of a child by an unknown sadist — into a financial windfall, accusing the Jews of the crime in the hope of gaining compensation or at least a substantial bribe to drop the charge" (737).

Some others have suggested — as would probably be the first thought of anyone familiar with modern police investigations — that Godwin himself or someone in his family was the real murderer.³² After all, when a child is killed, the first suspects are the family. Thomas does not suggest any specific signs of sexual abuse, but that is something we would tend to expect to see according to our modern understanding of what's common in these kinds of child murders (whether Thomas would omit such a thing out of some sense of decorum is unclear, though one would think its propaganda value would outweigh qualms about propriety). Anyway, we might well be suspicious of the uncle of a fatherless adolescent boy (by the way, the fact that Godwin was a married priest was not yet as scandalous an occurrence at this point in history as it would be later, but it wouldn't have been a point in his favor, either). We might also remember that the story of William going off into town with a stranger comes to us almost exclusively from family members, who could easily have fabricated it. And the fact that the body wasn't actually buried or concealed in the forest but left out in the open is the kind of detail a modern

³² Bennet summarizes a few of the alternative theories of the crime that have been floated over the past century and a half (134–135).

profiler might interpret as suggesting a bond between the victim and the killer: the body is left to be found and to be given a proper — and, indeed, we might say a *Christian* — burial.

For me, though, the two strangest events are the people who find the murdered body but don't go straightaway to tell anyone. In medieval Scandinavian law, it was a crime not to report the discovery of a body.³³ I don't know if such a law applied in England, but one would expect there might at least be some suspicion. Our first discoverer I think we can safely dismiss. It seems most likely to me that the nun Legarda's trip to visit William's body probably originated as at best a dream-vision that in the retelling transformed into an actual trip into the forest (it could also be a false memory or an outright fabrication, of course). The person that intrigues me is the nameless woodcutter. He's out there cutting his wood, and suddenly a forester rides up to him — a fish and game warden/park ranger, basically — and that's when he says, "Oh, by the way, I found this dead body nearby. Maybe you should look into it." Is peasant life really that callous that he's perfectly content to finish doing his job before he goes and tells anybody? Maybe so. But it seems very odd and suspicious to me. And doubly odd that Thomas spends so much time describing other people's first encounter with the holy body in the wood, but the woodcutter's discovery of the body is unremarked on. He disappears — if not from the scene then at least from the narration — without a trace.

³³ For example, Gulathing law (cap. 161) states the obligation to announce a corpse discovery: "There is still this: that if you find a man slain out in the woods, then shall he [the finder of the corpse] First cover up that body and report [the death] to the first man he meets; and he shall seek a meeting with the dead man's heirs if he is within the district; otherwise he shall send out the thing-token and announce [it] to the thing. Now whoever remains away from this thing shall pay six oras: this is called the large thing-Fine. Now if he [the finder of the corpse] does not do [what is here prescribed], then he places the killing in his own hands, if the heir should wish to indict him" (as translated in Jurasinski 176–177; Jurasinski actually does find similarities between this law and English laws documented from the period of Cnut's reign).

It's easy to see why this story has attracted a fair amount of arm-chair sleuthing, since Thomas doles out so many little striking details but never quite enough information to put a whole picture together — at least, not without God's will to fill in all the gaps.

And I'll conclude with two quotes. The first is from Jessopp, writing in 1896, who characterizes Thomas thusly: "A man may start by wishing for truth without going the right way to arrive at it, and may end by embracing falsehood till he cannot bear to part with it" (xiv). That's a bit of wisdom that's as applicable today as it was in the 19th century and as it was in the 12th.

The second quote comes from a well-known sage writing in 1960:

[Clip from The Twilight Zone, "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street":]

ROD SERLING: The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices — to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill — and suspicion can destroy — and a thoughtless frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all of its own — for the children — and the children yet unborn. And the pity of it is — that these things cannot be confined — to the Twilight Zone.

[End of clip.]

So, what was our riddle last time? Oh yes, it was a bit of playground rudeness. It was this: "What time of the year may maidens most with their honesty fyest in the church?" where *fyest* means "fart" (Riddle 36). This riddle comes from the 16th-century *Demaundes Joyous*, and the answer given in that text is: "In Lent season, for then every

saint's nose and face is covered so that they smell nothing." This is a reference to the practice of covering up the statues of the saints as well as the crucifix during Lent. So, ladies, if you were hoping to fart in church, you've missed your chance. You'll have to wait until next year.

Here's a riddle for springtime: "Two times two a clatter make, one twitches and two dance." Once more: "Two times two a clatter make, one twitches and two dance." What is that describing?

I'll be back with the answer — and a shorter episode — in about two weeks, give or take. Until then, you can reach out to me in the usual places: via Twitter @mdtpodcast, via email by writing to *patrick@medievaldeathtrip.com*, or by leaving comments at our website, *medievaldeathtrip.com*, where you can find more information and older episodes. That's more than enough for now. Take care, and thanks for listening!

PART II (WEIRDNESS):
LIBELLUS DE MUTATIONIS

*Here begins the
Libellus de
Mutationis*



Most beloved friend and brother in Christ, greetings
and good health! My soul exults in this most worthy news

that even in the vigor of your youth you have risen to so esteemed a position in the bishop's household. Your excellence, which I perceived even when you were still learning your letters, has been duly recognized by those of far greater discernment than myself. How can I but shake my greying head as I picture in my mind you sitting in judgment over squabbling abbots and disputatious canons, as I, who once chased you round the cloister after you had in your boyish impudence put that eel in the cellarer's chamber pot, remain here in restful but dull exile.

I am delighted that you received the copy of the Life and Testament of Tatwulf, of blessed memory, which I sent you by way of your servant who, I trust, reported well of us, your devoted brethren. I feared for my little book, as the rough roads to our refuge here in the wilderness have themselves chewed up iron-shod wheels and the flux of the fords has consumed pack-mules and stripped bare wagons beyond number. And such are only the threats of nature that beset the traveler this place, to say nothing of the outlaws who move with the ease of wolves through the trackless forest. But I rejoice in your letter and in the knowledge that not only did you take into your hands the wretched fruit of my labors, which I feared to be fit only for crushing and turning into cider, but that you had it brought to your table and ate of it, forgiving it its rustic bitterness. What sweetness it possessed comes not from my rocky and ashen soil, but from the holiness of that holy person whose deeds it recounts.

When I sent you my book, I humbly bared my back to whatever lashings your correcting hand might give me, that I might be spared greater punishment if my rude style

offend the Author of All and his blessed servant. But, gentle shepherd and generous friend, you touch me not with whips but with overflowing words of earnest inquiry. And what a gift you have bestowed upon me that you pose to me questions and test fabric of my work, its buttresses and beams, to ensure that it will stand the winds of doubt and impious debate!

I am not surprised that you wonder at some of the marvels which surround the holy hermit. Alas, it is no longer within my power to supply to you the ancient witnesses from which I drew my account Tatwulf's early life. On the one hand, the tract I found preserved in amongst our books you could scarce have read yourself, being written in the degraded language of these valleys and in unshapely letters which I could decipher only with long effort that nearly left me blind; but even if these obstacles were nothing to you, it happened that the subsacrist left the delicate leaves out on a table one night, and one of the abbot's hounds destroyed it utterly with his slavering jaws. And on the other hand, what history was not recorded in that former tract I gathered myself from the mouths of the eldest of us here, most of whom are now as dissolved into dust as the remains of that vellum. What you have in my book is all that God desired to be saved from oblivion.

It is natural that you should question how it is that this saint could exhibit such variety in his manners and aspect and how he could appear in such diverse places at such diverse times. First, let me settle your mind that there was no confusion on my part as to the account of his preservation of the ship of prisoners during the storm. You are right, indeed, that this tale is very similar to the tale of the ship in Picot's *Life of Meurig*; truly, your learning encompasses much that you would be familiar with this obscure book. But to that I must point out that Picot stayed here for a time when Adrian was abbot and he

was working on his history of the bishops of Worcester. Perhaps he learned that story here as a refectory reading or in his own research among our records, and then later in life misremembered which saint it properly belonged to. Or it may well be that Meurig and Tatwulf both performed the same miracle at different times; it should be no wonder that as the lives of the Lord's saints shape themselves according to the first mold, the life of Christ, so we must not wonder that the saints should come to resemble each other, even to the point of confusion, for though of different flesh and from different nations, they issue from the same spiritual womb.

As for the saint's varied appearance and fluctuations in tongue, my admiration overflows for your comprehensive and extensive litany of what you have called contradictions. Such keen attention to my poor book is far more than I could have ever hoped or asked for. But these transformations are not the barbarous errors of a feeble mind and a shaking hand, though my mind and skill are feeble enough. It is understandable that one such as yourself who has only ever known the steady and constant rising turn of Fortune's wheel (and may you never know otherwise!) would have difficulty accepting the changes that can be wrought in a person who has tumbled down and been crushed under that wheel. Where you believe you are seeing a series of different men being made into one by nothing more than the application of a name, these changes from one state and one form, from one mind and one manner, to another quite different is a manifestation of the truth of his holiness burning through mere flesh and words and giving them new shapes and meanings. As with all marvels, such change and transformation can fill us with doubts and make us question the truth of the changed thing. It is right to interrogate such changes that we may know those wrought by truth

from those wrought by devilish corruption. There are several stories from this abbey — the nest from which you flew to the heights on which you now perch — and others that I learned in my meager studies here that touch upon the varieties of change, holy and infernal, that exist in this world. If you will allow your old friend to sit beside you and contemplate aloud as I did with you in the past, we can perhaps divine the truth of this matter together.

*The Dream of the
Maid of the Mount*



I once had related to me a wise thing said by
Saewen, the Maid of the Mount. My old master, Runfred

knew her when she lived and often spoke of his desire to write down his recollections of the things she said and the visions she had shared. But this he never did, always tasked instead with recording the deeds of this abbot or that bishop, and so now her wisdom and revelations are lost, but for a few songs and a few stories remembered by old men. This is one. The Maid said: All things begin in creation and end in destruction; through the first gate all things enter the world and through the other all depart. And these arrivals and departures we mark with due fanfare and fitting hospitality, and indeed, our attention is too easily fixed upon these occasions and becomes blind to what transpires in between. Once this holy woman dreamt that she was once more a youth, and that she stepped from a cold darkness into a great hall and was most graciously announced and greeted and given drink to warm her and stir her spirits. And so she drank and joined in the dance that whirled in the front of the hall, a confusion of young men and women together, dressed in all manners from low to high degree and more like to an unruly village festival than a celebration in a noble house.

She danced and spun and leapt and altogether quite forgot herself in the interweaving rings of dancers. As she danced, she felt her slippers pinch and pain her sorely, until it seemed they split their stitches and flew from her feet like crusts of snow kicked off at a doorpost. She then saw that her slender feet had grown long — and grew longer still — until they were as long and thick around as the bone of an ass's foreleg, and her delicate toes became as swollen as plums with soles tough as those of any forester's boot. And yet, despite this wondrous change, she felt no fear or anxiety, but instead rejoiced, for she found that she could leap higher and twirl this way and that without stumbling.

Soon there were many gathered around her awaiting a turn to dance beside her. As she clasped one young man by his elbow, she perceived that she now possessed secretly between her fine-boned fingers a set of claws as sharp and curved as sickles, which she could cause to spring out. With these she gripped the youth tightly until blood began to seep through the sleeves of his garment.

The scent of blood seemed to overwhelm her senses, but far from growing faint and cold, she burned with passion. She twirled through the rings of dancers, taking now one partner and now another, leaning in for kisses and nicking their necks and ears with her teeth. Some time had passed in this when she found herself confronted by a youth, narrow-shouldered and delicate, but bold in his posture and princely in his array. He bore before her a round mirror on a stand, resembling a pyx as much as anything else. This mirror he held up to her, and when she looked upon it, she saw that her face was like to a great cat, the lip cleft to bare sharp teeth and a long, rough tongue, her cheeks and broad, fair forehead dappled with hair — not the rough bristles of a man's beard, but fur, here

golden, here white and soft as goose down. Golden-green were her eyes, like new-cut sheaves, the pupils black and daggered.

She stood entranced by her own image, not in horror but in vain delight, until the youth struck out with his other hand and pierced her in the thigh with a little dagger that hung from his belt. She leapt back from him, crying out, but those around her laughed and jeered and relished the sight of her blood as they wrapped their own wounds. Turning round the circle from one to the other, she found no friendship until she came back to where the youth stood, and in her rage she fell upon him and chewed out his throat with her teeth. As she worried his soft, beardless neck, another change came upon her. Her teeth, still sharp, grew longer and thicker until they protruded from her lips and no longer pierced but sliced through the youth like knives. And as she swallowed the blood, her flesh grew fat and grey, her fingers thickening into trotters, her chest and stomach swelling till her clothing was rent and fell upon the floor. Her fine fur grew wiry and coarse, and even without a mirror she could see her own fleshy nose projecting from her face, turning upward and forming a bloody snout. She was a wild sow, fierce and feral, and after sating herself on the meat and blood of the youth, she charged the circle of dancers, sending them fleeing in all directions.

She gored first one and then another and knocked over benches and wine jugs. But as she did so, her dark forest flesh began to grow pink, and her savage tusks became worn yellow stubs, and her breath grew labored as she fattened further, until she was no longer a fearsome beast, but a plump, soft denizen of the sty. Now the dancers no longer recoiled from her, but began to kick and beat her and drive her about the hall until a pair of men in leather aprons came with ropes and the instruments of butchery. They caught

her and tied her feet together and someone began to set up a gambrel while the men sharpened their knives.

As she lay quivering on the stone floor, her anger now drowned in a flood of fear, a new change came upon her. Her thick limbs grew slight, thinner even than the finest lady's wrist, and so she was able to slip them from the ropes and spring up, now light and lean with all her strength compressed into her legs for instant flight. Now the smell of blood held no enticement but instead repulsed her, and fangless, clawless, she bounded away from the revelers, a dappled doe. For a long time they hunted her and she evaded them, dashing between pillars and behind benches, until she was at the far end of the hall, where few people were and even the music could hardly be heard. Here she wandered fearful for a long time, hungry, for the flagstones yielded no grass or tender shoots, and alone, for she dare not approach anyone lest she wind up on the spit.

But here at the edge of the great hall, a final change overtook her. She seemed to dwindle away, and her hind legs grew thinner still, and her forelegs grew both thin and enormously long. Her lips grew hard like bone and her teeth fell out along with her fur, until she was a tiny, pathetic thing flopping this way and that on the ground. But then she broke her doeish, hunted silence and a song emerged from her hardened lips, and as she sang white feathers emerged from her pebbled skin. Her useless arms became wings, and she flew up among the rafters and the cook smoke, and the people below pointed at this visitation by a dove, a good omen. For only a short time she flew about the hall and looked again upon the dance, now resumed. Then, with speed more like a sparrow than dove, she flew out the far doorway at the other end of the hall, into the night.

This holy lady did not expound this dream herself, but Runfred and others understood that in part it clothed in outlandish forms the tale of how she had come to that lonely place where she dwelled, a woman of decorous mien and wretched garb who kept the truth of her past a secret from all. But it describes a larger wisdom, as well. By the doorways are signified the gates of life of which she spoke, birth and death. By the dance is signified this earthly life, and the rabble whirling within the noble walls are the host of fallen mankind, a poor inheritor to the majesty of Creation. And by her manifold changes are signified the many lives that a single man or woman will live and the many roles they will occupy in this world, which come upon us by the will of Providence. Furthermore, this dream truly prophesied her holy death, thus proving it to be no mere fantasy or product of an unsettled stomach. And so it is worthy to be preserved here.

*Concerning the Form
of Bears*



So in figures and shadows of a dream we see
manifest in the flesh the changes that happen in the spirit.

But the mutability of flesh is not confined to the unnatural visitations of visions. As we know from ancient authorities — and as I have heard myself from one who was at one time a forester for the King of France — the female bear gives birth to cubs that are at the start of their lives formless masses of flesh, as though they were unmolded clay. They only acquire their shape through the attentions of the mother, who with her rough tongue sculpts the unruly flesh, portioning it into limbs and impressing features upon it. I have heard some deny this and argue that a brute animal is incapable of such deliberate art, and that the mother's nature and form is passed on to the offspring through her milk, quite passively and without any craft of the tongue. To this objection I reply that any who

believe animals incapable of art need only look to the spider and its web, the bird and its nest, and the bees and their hive. Furthermore, in order to suckle one must have a mouth, and so the mother must at least bestow this much with her tongue. But perhaps there is some truth to both stories, and that through her tongue the mother passes her shape on to her offspring, and through her milk passes her fierce nature. As Isidore informs us, milk is but blood transformed by the properties of the breast, and as the blood carries one's nature and temperament, so too does the milk.

There are diverse opinions on why, among all animals, the bear acquires its form in this way. Some say that it is due to the solitariness of bears, who, unlike the wolf, roam the wilderness alone. It is said that a pregnant female is driven even further from the company of her kind, such that she will meet no other between the mating and the birth. As we know from numerous monstrous cases, the child in the womb is greatly subject to what the mother sees, such images travelling from the eyes down into the bowels — as anyone who has been made to weep by a painted image or become nauseated at seeing the blood of another can attest — and thence into the womb. Thus we see children whose mothers were overly fond of horses being born with hooves, or the child of a mother knocked down by a bull being born with horns sprouting from its head. But such cases aside, most women spend their days gazing at, listening to, and being touched by other people, and thus in the womb the unformed child is stewed in impressions of mankind. And so it is with most animals. But the mother bear, traveling in utter isolation, passes no such impressions on to the cubs in her womb, and that is why they are born unformed, with no existing mark of belonging to the society of bears.

It is also said that the nature of the bear is to be a hunter and a killer and a consumer of the flesh of other creatures. The bear alone in the forest knows this to be its nature, and it sees that the other greatest hunters in the forest are the wolves and man. The bear knows it belongs neither to the society of man nor the company of wolves, but knowing that it is like them, it gives to its offspring a shape that lies in the middle between a wolf and a man.

Thus the form of the bear is an instability, a feeble stream that all too easily jumps its banks and adopts a new course. It is said that there are men among the heathens of the North who, by putting on the skins of bears, are able to become bears themselves, fearsome in battle. I do not know the truth of this, though it is easy enough to believe that a man may take on the nature of an animal, if not its form. I have had enough experience of bestial men to know this to be true. And though the philosophers may dispute it — as they dispute the changeability of forms — I believe it is likewise with fables and fiction, which can inwardly take on the nature of truth, though they remain fantasies in form, like the bear-shirts of the Northmen. And they are like the bear cub, too, shaped from formlessness and endowed with limbs and features by the poet's tongue.

I am reminded of a particular story concerning a bearskin that, though of dubious provenance and form, nonetheless has been infused with the milk of truth.

*The Robber and the
Bearskin*



The bishop of Hereford possessed many forbidden books, and many more that would be forbidden if they

were known to the wider world, which had been gathered by one of his predecessors.

Often he would have these books read from as his household dined, and it was on one of

these occasions that I heard a tale of some antiquity which I have not found preserved in any of the pagan authors that I have read or heard of.

A rich man lived in a fortified house, as is often the case, for whereas the poor man buries his meager treasure and puts the dog outside to sleep before the door, the rich man walls himself and his household up with his goods and lets the dogs sprawl in the bed with him. His wealth was widely known, though the height of his walls testified to it as well as any gossip. And watching the sun set behind these walls every day was a band of robbers who had established themselves in the forest outside the rich man's city.

Men who live in the forest are men who cannot abide a wall. We are told that these men were robbers, but we are not told whether they lived in the forest because they were robbers or if they were robbers because they lived in the forest. But we can be sure that they were both robbers and men who disdained walls, and as such they were determined to break into the rich man's fortress and plunder his treasury. For some time they had been waylaying the wagons carrying fine foods and goods to and from the gates of the rich man's house, but far from satisfying them, these portions of the rich man's luxury only enticed them the more.

One day, the bandits stopped a caravan of heavy wagons winding their way along the forest road. Rather than robes and rugs, silks and spices, or coins and cups, the wagons were loaded with cages containing a menagerie of strange and fearsome beasts from the wildest wastes of the world. There were among these a pair of enormous dogs each as big as a pony, a bird capable of human speech and conversation, a unicorn stallion, and — most marvelously of all — a great bear whose fur was solid white from its head down to its paws. It turned and lurched in the narrowness of its cage, stretching

out a long neck, more like a stag's neck than a bear's, and bellowing until spittle foamed and dripped from its black lips.

At first, the robbers were at a loss as to what to do with their latest plunder, for it is not so easy to find buyers for exotic animals on short notice, and unlike stashes of goods and ornaments, there is cost in keeping and feeding such animals while a buyer is sought. Indeed, the robbers could think of only one man in the city who might buy such cargo, and that was the rich man himself who had already procured this shipment of beasts. Pondering this problem, the leader of the robbers began to devise a plan. They would disguise one of their number as one of the animals and others in the livery of the caravan guards and by such means deliver their comrade to the rich man's house to be taken inside the wall. Then at night, he could slip from the cage, unlock the gate, and open the house to the rest of the bandits.

Among the robbers was a man they called Thursa on account of his enormous size, for that name means "ogre." He stood a head taller than the next tallest of his fellows, and his chest was so broad that any attempting to clasp their arms around him might scarcely touch the fingers of one hand to the other. Though immensely strong, Thursa was no brute, but was known for his wit and quick tongue. He could have been their leader, but for having little facility with numbers and sums — and, as I have mentioned already, being a robber is only in part about seizing goods through force or intimidation. It is just as much about being merchant to those goods afterwards. Many a fearsome murderer lives in the poverty of a holy hermit because they trade away what they take for almost nothing, that which was taken by force stolen again by the guile of merchants. So the chief of these bandits was no renowned fighter. In truth, he was poor in

battle, having long before lost his right hand not in any conflict of arms but as punishment for thievery in some heathen marketplace. But he was skilled in portioning, summing, and negotiating figures, easily getting the better of men with twice as many fingers to count upon, for he could, like to a devilish Jerome, silently count on the abacus of his mind.

On their leader's orders, the robbers first wrung the neck of the speaking bird to prevent its ever testifying to their crimes. Then they killed the bear. For a warrior or even an entire hunting party, facing down such a monstrous beast in the forest would have been a great feat, worthy of being memorialized in verse. But mere prose will suffice for these robbers, who, with the bear securely penned up in its cage, thrust a single spear through the bars and into its breast. They worked the tip of the spear side to side in the wound, so that the blood gushed forth and the beast collapsed forward, driving the lethal point still deeper. And so the bear was slain with a single wound, preserving its skin as much as possible.

Being men of the forest, there were several among the robbers who were skilled in the skinning of animals and the preparation of furs. They removed the skin from the bear with such craft that they could close the fur up again around Thursa with only some small seams in the limbs and a large seam in the belly. The forepaws were kept fully intact, with part of the bones of the forearms remaining inside the skin of the arms, which Thursa could grasp with his own hands and use to wield the heavy paws like a pair of clubs. The bear's skull remained inside the head, and they affixed it to the top of a helmet that Thursa could wear. The dead, lolling tongue they pinned down to the gums, and the dead, dulling eyes they plucked out and replaced with baubles of glass. There was no

time to tan or treat the skin, and it was still slightly warm and slick with blood as they stitched Thursa into it. But he never lost his good humor, despite enduring such a gruesome garment and a growing legion of flies.

The rest of the band got into their disguises, taking pains to hide the bloodstains on their own stolen garments. The leader himself took on the role of the caravan's beast warden, his missing hand seeming a natural sort of wound for one in such an occupation. And so they led their stolen caravan on to the edge of the city.

As they approached, the deception was put to its first test, for laborers left off tilling their fields to come to the edge of the road and watch the wagons pass by. Anyone who has seen a mummer's show or played harvest games knows what a man dressed in a beast's skin looks like. A fool may put on horns and a bull's hide, and he may snort and paw the ground, but when he chases after the children, their shrieks of fear are mixed with laughter. Even a child can tell a real beast from a mock one, and they fear only for those brief moments that they can let themselves forget that they know the difference. Even the finest artifice displayed by those men who perform as beasts at court cannot eclipse nature. When seen straight on, the man inside shows through the beast's skin, not by the exposure of his own flesh or countenance through the seams and fastenings, but by outline of his limbs beneath the fur — human limbs ill-fit for filling out a beast's bulk and mismatched to the proportions of a beast's joints, so that the skin is always stretching or bunching, shifting and sliding over a skeleton far unlike that which it once contained. And so the man who would play a beast is so easily betrayed by the truth of his bones, no matter how he may try to contort them.

Thursa diverted the scrutiny of the fieldhands through spectacle. The robbers had placed with him in the cage the carcass of the talking bird, gutted but not dressed. He could make it appear that he was worrying the bird with his jaws by wedging his muzzle into the hollowed ribcage and shaking it viciously back and forth, producing a storm of bloody, gem-colored feathers that clouded the air of the cage. The blood of the carcass further helped mask the blood of the bear itself that remained in its fur and stained its black lips and white belly. Most of the people watched this display with amazement and delight, and none cared to sacrifice the pleasure of the violence by questioning or doubting or scrutinizing its cause. And when a few did venture closer — mostly children — Thursa would retreat to the other side of the cage until they were just close enough to peer over the wheels and inside, and then he would lunge towards them with a most convincing bellow, flinging his full weight against the bars of the cage. This sent the curious dashing away back into their fields and drew the attention of the other onlookers to the questionable integrity of the cage, whose joints creaked and groaned most worrisomely as Thursa tested their soundness again and again. And finally the diversion of the caravan had run its course and the unending labor of the fields called the crowd away from the road, though they took up their tools with a new lightness.

The second challenge came when the caravan arrived at the gate of the rich man's house. Here they were met not by simple plowmen and their wives and children, but rather by the rich man's own animal keeper, who oversaw the fighting pit where the rich man set beast upon beast — and occasionally beast upon man — for the entertainment of himself and his guests. The keeper and his men could not be distracted by mere blood and frenzy, Thursa knew, and so he changed his strategy. He courted their boredom. He lay

on his side, pressing his back against the bars of one side of the cage and tucking the great forepaws beneath the head, looking half-dead with the heat and flies. He only stirred a little, shifting the head or stretching a leg, disregarding the jabs of the keeper's men, who thrust their sticks through the bars to try to rouse him. Their initial interest in the marvel of the white bear was thus turned to a sneering disregard, and they moved on towards some of the livelier animals — though, indeed, all the animals of the menagerie, both true and false, were rather dulled with heat and thirst and long captivity.

“What are these worthless carcasses that you've brought me?” asked the keeper angrily, beating his stick against the bars of the cages to little effect.

“All they need is to be watered and rested, and you will see them spring back to life,” answered the chief of the robbers.

“What poor care must they have received from you all this time to be in such a state. No doubt they are riddled with worms and ulcers and will be good for nothing in the pit if by unbelievable good fortune they don't drop dead before they're tried,” argued the keeper.

“I promise you, they have been kept very well,” replied the chief of the robbers, “despite a long and difficult journey. It is only today that we have been unable to stop and tend them properly, because we were warned that a gang of fearsome bandits lives in your forest and preys on travelers like us who must take the long and winding road through it. For our own security we did not stop once while we were in the forest, but hurried here with as much haste as we could manage. And we cannot linger here longer, for my men and I — having, I hope, passed the wagons over into your care and received our fee — must hasten back along that dismal path before night descends and we find

ourselves being stripped of both our journey's profit and our lives." Thus spoke the chief robber, imitating the combination of rather high-flown phrases and wheedling tone common to that class of merchants who specialize in playthings for those like the rich man.

"Of course you must be off straightaway, so that you can take my master's money and be safely away when I wake up tomorrow to a heap of dead animals," grumbled the keeper suspiciously — but his suspicions were being directed precisely where the robbers wanted them, not on the great white bear but on the men bearing him.

The chief robber and the keeper then began to negotiate a price, with the robber feigning great indignation as he allowed the final settlement to reach quite a low figure. This money was nothing to him compared to what they would get when Thursa opened the gate that night, and the keeper walked away so pleased with himself for getting such a bargain that he scarce paid the animals any notice as his men pushed the wagons through the gate. The robbers made their way back to the edge of the forest, discarded their caravan livery, and waited for night to fall.

Inside the rich man's walls, the animals were taken from the wagons, put into stalls and pens, and given water and food appropriate to their kind. When the keeper's men came to Thursa's cage, they were somewhat at a loss as to how shift such a large, seemingly inert but still potentially lethal mass. They were experienced enough — those who had survived years in this occupation, at least — to know not to trust an ill animal. Only after much prodding with dull pikes and hooks did Thursa finally emerge from the cage. He did this sluggishly in a series of almost drunken lurches, collapsing back onto his side several times. This labored progress again masked the unnaturalness of the

costume with the veil of illness. Furthermore, by the time they finally got him into an empty bear pen, the handlers were so exasperated with their lethargic charge that after sloshing a bit of water in his trough they largely ignored him for the rest of the afternoon.

Those were hours of great privation for Thursa, who suffered like Tantalus in the stifling heat of the bloody skin, for though he could dip the muzzle of the bear into the trough, no water reached his human lips. And since he was mostly unobserved in his pen, the temptation was great to slip his head out from the seam in the chest and slake his terrible thirst. But Thursa did not risk giving away the deception and endured this agony as though he truly were a mute beast.

At last night came, and the noises of the rich man's household diminished into silence. Now Thursa opened his pen — for though the latch would have defeated a true bear, it was a simple mechanism for a man to manipulate — and crept out. Because he had been lying on the floor of his wagon playing sick when he was brought in, he had not observed the precise path that had taken him from the gate to the animal pens. The distance had not seemed far, but he found himself now quite uncertain of what passage to take to get him through the rich man's enormous estate and to the gate where his comrades were even now awaiting him.

He took a wide passage in which moonlight entered from windows placed high above in the upper walls. As Thursa lumbered down the passage, struggling to see the half-lit corridor through the narrow slits cut for him in the neck of the bearskin, a young servant boy emerged silently from a doorway where he had just been delivering a late night flagon to one of the rich man's many parasites. The boy stopped short, his eyes growing huge with terror as he saw the great bear rearing up on its hind legs, its white fur

luminous in the moonlight. For a few heartbeats the silence of the house persisted, until the boy took off running down the other end of the hallway. Once again, the deception had worked, for this boy ran not like village children laughingly evading the charges of the so-called harvest bull, but rather like one who knows that death is pursuing him.

Thursa heard the slapping of the boy's feet on the paving stones, but only caught sight of briefest flicker of movement at the end of the passageway ahead of him before the boy was out of sight around a corner. Thursa pursued, but awkwardly. When he reached the turning, he found that it opened out onto the far side of the main courtyard, and he could see the gate set into the wall across the wide space directly opposite him.

But as he stepped out into the open air, he heard shouting coming from multiple doors and torches were flickering to life in windows all around. The servant boy had raised the alarm that one of the animals was loose. When Thursa emerged into the courtyard, the cries from the windows intensified, and he heard several different voices calling for the hunting hounds to be released. Two guards were standing at either side of the gate, and as Thursa charged towards them he prepared himself for battle. But seeing a great beast bearing down on them, these two men fled their post, nearly matching the nimble servant boy in speed. They were fully prepared to die fighting off bandits or rebel farmers, but they did not take facing down a raging bear as part of their sworn duty.

Thursa reached the gate and put his shoulder to the heavy timber beam that barred it at nearly the same time as the pack of hounds coursed into the courtyard from the passage leading back to the kennels. When the timber fell from its braces and the gate began to swing open, they were on him.

No support came from the other side of the gate. Once they heard the alarm go up, the robbers had scattered back into the fields, where they concealed themselves. They were prepared to creep into a sleeping house and silently slit throats, but they would not risk an open assault on a fortress bristling with frightened men on high alert.

So Thursa stood abandoned in the arched gateway, surrounded by snapping, slavering jaws. At first it seemed him might escape, for the dogs were viciously biting and worrying the loose bearskin, but few bites were actually clamping down around Thursa's own limbs and piercing his own skin. But the hunting pack was intent on not just drawing blood but dragging their prey down to the ground. The dogs leaped and buffeted him from all sides. They latched their jaws into the fur at his back and shoulders, until, with an ill-angled swipe of his heavy paw, Thursa lost his balance, staggered under the weight, and fell. The bandits saw him fall from their hiding places in the shadows. Unable to let out a cry of grief lest they draw the attention of the guards upon them, they slunk back into their forest in silence. Once they had Thursa on the ground, the hounds ripped open the throat of the bearskin, and then, senseless to any notion of shock or surprise in their animal frenzy, they ripped open the throat of the man uncovered inside the beast.

And so for a final time the deception succeeded. We are told that even as he was falling, Thursa maintained the mime and never let a human word escape his lips, but roared and groaned as a bear all the while, and in this dedication his death is presumed to acquire some dignity — even for a murderous thief. But I do not believe for a moment that he could have saved himself if he had begun to speak and gesture as a man. The

bear-hounds attacked their prey as they had been trained to, and their noses either could not discern or did not care about the scent of man beneath the scent of the beast.

No doubt the rich man's men marveled when they examined the corpse in the daylight. Perhaps they admired the boldness and craft of the deception. Perhaps they attributed it to heathen magic — which would certainly be easier to stomach than admitting they had been gulled. And perhaps there was some magic in the end, for as we have seen, the form of the bear is unstable and its nature, too, can leap the ordinary boundaries. As he lived, Thursa was a false bear in both form and nature, but in his dying moments, his actions freed from any further necessity to deceive, nature's own arbiters judged his performance true. And so it can be with stories, too, that wrapped in an artificial and stitched-together integument, the truth that is covered can become the truth of the covering. We have a story in our own country that shows this.

The Plague of Mice



There was once a Mercian thane who held a manor in the land where our dale opens up. Though he had once been a warrior of some renown, in his old age he was overcome with a passion for the cultivation of the land. The other thanes, who left such matters to their reeves and overseers, mocked him and called him Old Dungbeard, for it was said that his beard was often dredged in the dirt from his stooping to inspect some seedling or to examine a furrow. But he did not seem to mind their chiding and did not stint in his fervor for improving his land. He marshalled his plowmen in ranks just as he had once commanded bands of spearmen. He drained the marshy fields and dug up stones from the rocky turf, and over some years transformed this estate — which before had been accorded largely

waste, barely fit for the grazing of goats — into grain fields as prosperous as any in the flat and fertile south.

One year, the harvest was greater than had ever been seen in that region before, such that Old Dungbeard boasted that he could feed his horses on wheat bread, and even the household servants received wheat flour on twice as many days as was customary. Exulting in his plenitude, he bragged to all those who had mocked him that this bounty was the direct product of his own mastery of plant lore and plowcraft. Thus the proud man in turn mocked God and credited to his own frail faculties what was granted him through God's benevolence, which, when spurned, is easily turned to stern discipline, as many stories show us. But for a time, God permitted this sinner to enjoy his miscredited success.

By the start of winter, Old Dungbeard had filled up his granaries to overflowing so that he had to lay up the surplus in his hall, with sheaves stacked along the walls of his own bedchamber. His wife and her servants bitterly complained, saying that it was cruel of him to make them sleep, as it were, in a barn. And so, just as the master earned God's ire by prideful boasting, so too did his family for showing ingratitude at so great a gift in those times when famine stalked much of the land. Old Dungbeard sent his wife away to lodge with her sister in the northeast and enjoyed his bed alone, but for the company of his own servants.

On the day after the first frost, Old Dungbeard went out to inspect his granaries. To his horror, he found inside one of them that a great number of sacks of the threshed grain were completely empty and that many of the bundled sheaves had been disturbed and much of their grain picked away. The earth around the building was stiff with the

cold and no robber's footprints could be discerned for tracking. So he determined that he would keep watch that night within the granary with two of his servants. And so they did, sitting within the granary as the sun set and the air grew cold and still. They burned some peat in an iron box to warm themselves and told stories to pass the night. In the deep of the night, when even monks are asleep and escaping the cloister through their dreams, the three wakeful watchers became aware of a sound within the darkened building. At first, it seemed to them to be the wind whispering through gaps in the wall planks, but the night outside was quiet and not even a blade of grass stirred. Within, though, the sound grew until it seemed a tempest was roiling under the granary roof, thrashing the brittle sheaves with a fury. One of the servants lit a torch and approached one of the sacks of grain near to where they were sitting. And see! The fabric of the sack bulges and spasms like flesh under the heat of the interrogator's iron! With the tip of a long knife, this servant slit open the side of the sack, and as the grain began to spill out, with it came a torrent of little brown mice.

The mice, startled to be so suddenly exposed to the open air and the light of the servant's torch, darted away in all directions, and several ran straight across the servant's own feet. The servant, as startled as the mice themselves, cried out most unmanfully and leapt from one foot to the other, as though he might with enough skill contrive to lift and keep both feet off the ground at the same time. In his excitement, he lost hold of the torch, which fell upon the sacks of grain and in an instant ignited them with rapidly spreading flame. As the sacks burned, so too did the mice within them, and soon they were streaming out from the sacks, their fur smoking and smoldering. These mice fled under the cover of the stacked sheaves, and soon these, too, were ablaze.

Old Dungbeard watched all this happen, and before he could speak his first command, the granary was awash with flame. And in the brightness of this flame, he could see that the entire granary was alive with mice, who, as the fire spread, abandoned their feast and began to flee through nooks and knotholes and every other tiny imperfection in the granary walls out into the night. Old Dungbeard ordered his servants to beat back the flames, but even as he said this, it was clear that the fire was beyond containing. So he then commanded that they carry outside as much of the as yet unburned grain as possible. Old Dungbeard himself ran on his aged legs to the hall to raise the alarm, but by the time he got there, the granary was fully consumed by the flames. By good fortune, it was built far enough away from the other granary and the storehouses that the conflagration did not spread to them, though small spots of fire erupted among the dry stubble of the fields where some of the burning mice had managed to run before expiring. These fires the servants who rushed down from the hall were able to stamp out with their feet, but they could do nothing for the granary but watch the timbers collapse in great plumes of sparks and falling embers. The two servants who had kept watch with Old Dungbeard were not found until the next day, when their blackened bones were dug out from the ashes of the building, where they had apparently fallen, overcome by smoke and heat while trying to carry out their master's orders. Of the great bounty of the storehouse, only five sacks of grain had been saved, carried out by these two faithful men before death claimed them.

There was little time for grief, though, for winter's hands were already squeezing the day and stretching the shadows like dough, and soon night would come upon them. The old thane, though wounded by his loss, was quick to prepare a strategy to secure his

remaining supply. He summoned twenty or thirty men belonging to the manor, some from the fields and some of his household servants. He gave to each of them a torch and commanded them to form a ring around the second granary, so that with the flames of their torches they might repel a further incursion by the verminous host.

Again night fell and the wind howled down from the north and froze the land and greatly harassed the men watching over it. The flames of their torches waned in the gusts. Their hands grew numb and cloddish, their lips cracked, and their cheeks stung. Many complained that just as the wind froze their breath, so did it also freeze their very spirits near to death. One of them, a plowman, led the singing of a bawdy song, in vulgar imitation of Matins prayer. As the night deepened with no sound or movement from the fields, many began to speak longingly of returning to their homes and hearths. But Old Dungbeard ranged about within the circle like a hound tracing the boundaries of its pen, with his stick ready to strike the backs and shoulders of those who grumbled or became stupified by the cold. He roared at them as he once had roared at ranks of spearmen. But the discipline of these servants was hardly that of trained warriors, nor even that of the monks they mocked, who are at least well accustomed to the chill of midnight vigils. What mettle they had was brittle and would not bear much battering.

So it was that when at last the mice came suddenly upon them, the ring of men the old thane shaped with his blows was soon unwrought. The mice came from the north as though they had been borne down on a sea-current in a fleet, full-sailed and slick-prowed. They darted through the legs of the men whose torches had been most diminished by the wind, and though the men swept their torches across the ground like scythes, they barely disrupted the stream that cascaded over their frozen feet. Some of the mice, perhaps being

cold and hungry themselves, scurried up their legs and into their garments to nose in and nip at the warm crevices that they found there. All thought of defending their master's sacks of seed fled as the men thought only of protecting their own.

Old Dungbeard brought his stick to the northern line and swung it about at his men with as little effect as their torches had on the mice. With their master preoccupied and hearing the horrible cries of their fellows, the men on the southern side of the granary took their chance and ran off into the night. All the while, the mice streamed up to the granary, climbed the four pedestals upon which it rested — subjecting its four legs to the same tickling torment that afflicted the men — and disappeared into its walls.

Those who saw it said that such a multitude of mice had never been seen before, that they ran across the ground in seemingly endless columns like ants. But this is not so marvelous as an unlearned person might think, for as the ancient scholars tell us, both the mouse and the ant, along with the toad and the spider and the locust, belong the class of creature called vermin, and it is in the nature of this type of creature to form hosts and swarms.

Old Dungbeard turned his stick from beating upon his men to beating upon the mice, but he might as well have tried to beat a brook into submission. And though by morning the end of his stick was slick with blood and the battlefield lay strewn with the tiny corpses of his foes, carrion for sparrows and wrens, the greater part of the invading force had sated itself within the granary and departed again across the fields to the place where the wind came from. When Old Dungbeard examined his granary, he found he had lost not less than half of what he had stored up there.

Having learned that he could not trust the courage and cunning of his servants, Old Dungbeard determined that on the third night he would trust in fortifications. The ground being far too hard to dig a moat, he devised a barricade of timber and firewood, so that where thirty feeble and frightened brands had failed, a thousand stacked together might prevail. He set to gathering the burnt and broken timbers of the first granary, along with dried brambles and other kindling from the forest, so that he might encompass the remaining granary with a wall that could be set alight at the first sign of the enemy's return.

Many of his servants who had fled had not yet returned, some because they feared the land was cursed and others because they feared the beatings they would receive from their furious master. But he found five loyal servants whom he rallied and led out into the forest which edged his fields to collect the necessary material. The servants went into the wood with their axes, but not long after they came rushing out, trembling and afraid. Old Dungbeard cuffed them about the ears and said, "You useless children! What tiny creeping thing has frightened you now? A pair of beetles? A little wriggling worm?"

"There is a great beast in the wood," they said, "and we shall not go in again."

No matter how much he abused them, the servants would not be moved — in such wise can cowardice become a kind of bravery — and so Old Dungbeard went into the wood himself, armed only with his stick and his temper. He came to the small open place where the servants had begun cutting the brush and looked all about. Though he was aged and his eyelids drooped and his ears bristled with white hairs, his senses were nonetheless quite keen. He neither saw nor heard anything unusual moving amongst the trees, and only a certain acrid odor in the air indicated that an animal had perhaps recently passed

by. Old Dungbeard then decided to return to his servants to further upbraid them, but when he turned around he beheld crouched at the edge of the clearing an enormous cat, entirely black in color. The thane was greatly startled at this and his heart was wounded with shame that while attempting to stalk a beast he had himself been stalked so masterfully and caught entirely witless and unready.

But the creature did not pounce upon him as he thought it would. Instead, it stood up on its hind legs like a man — and at nearly the height of one — and greeted him as one landholder to another, saying “It is a fine day for a hunt, neighbor. What brings you into my wood?”

Old Dungbeard marveled at the cat’s words and bearing, but even in his astonishment his first thoughts went to how the animal had named the wood.

“I have the rights to this wood,” he replied, “and to the timber, produce, and game within, as given to me by the king, and I shall not have my woodcutters harassed in their rightful harvest.”

“You may have rights granted by your king, but I have rights granted by mine,” said the cat. “But I have no interest in kindling, and I give you leave to chop as much as you like. Nor do I care for acorns, mushrooms, or berries, and the kind of game I expect you hunt is not what I crave. So I see no reason for there to be any conflict between us. But if you like, I can summon my clerks so that we might compare charters.”

Old Dungbeard’s next answer did not leap from his lips as impetuously as the first. On the one hand, he was loathe to do anything that might be taken as tacit submission to the creature’s outrageous claims, but on the other, he was not at all eager to meet whatever beastly retinue it might call forth from the deeper forest. At last he spoke,

saying, "As you have answered with such peaceable and conciliatory words, I must welcome you in the spirit of friendship, wherever you wish to roam."

Now that it was satisfactorily unclear who was giving permission to whom, the two barons could converse with much greater ease, or at least as much ease as there might be between a beast and a man.

"These thornbushes and withes are an unusual choice of firewood for a hall such as yours, neighbor. Surely, you have not been caught unprepared by the cold?"

"Indeed I have not," answered Old Dungbeard. "My hall and hearth are as warm as any and my kitchen fires burn both day and night. It is not the northern wind that afflicts me, but rather a plague of mice that has descended upon my grain night after night in such numbers as I have never seen nor heard of before."

"Perhaps my retainers and I could help you with this problem," said the cat. "I can offer you my service in exchange for some small service of your own."

Again, Old Dungbeard hesitated before answering. Certainly, a cat was equipped by nature to be a scourge of mice and would be a good ally to have against such an enemy. However, he also suspected that this creature before him was no cat fashioned by nature but rather a devil, for he knew that devils often took the shapes of beasts, and he also knew that treating with a devil would surely imperil his soul. After considering this matter, he finally answered the cat in courteous terms that he was already taking the problem in hand and did not need any additional assistance.

"Very well," said the cat. "But if you reconsider, remember that you may call upon me." Then the creature dropped back down upon all four of its legs and disappeared soundlessly into the deeper forest.

Old Dungbeard did not at first relate this encounter to his men when he returned to them at the edge of the treeline. Instead, he said only that what had frightened them was only an unusually large and stinking polecat and that he had given it a good thrashing with his stick and driven it off. He instructed them that if they saw it on this side of the wood again they should call for him so that he could return with a bow and claim its pelt, but otherwise they were to resume the task that he had brought them here to do. He had to employ his stick a few more times, but eventually he had the men once again cutting and hauling brush.

As the day began to grow dark, he had the brush dragged up to the second granary and commenced the construction of his bulwark. By nightfall, he had ringed the granary with a fence of heaped up timbers braided through with thorny vines, raised to the height of a well-grown child and the same measure thick and anointed with the blood of the servants, whose fingers and arms were most sorely pricked and scratched. It was a thing of little craft but great cunning. Old Dungbeard commanded these same servants to stand at five points around its inner edge with torches ready, while he patrolled the outer perimeter, awaiting the approach of the enemy.

This vigil passed more pleasantly than the first, for the barricade blocked much of the wind and the men were confident in their master's strategy. Indeed, some of the servants who had fled the night before willingly gathered nearby (though not so near that their master might strike them) to watch what would happen this evening. When the mice again began to surge up out of the field — from what secret burrows no one knows — Old Dungbeard gave the cry and his men set the barrier alight.

It took some time for the fire to spread through its whole length, for much of the new cut brush was still green, and for a time the mice passed through the barrier and seemed about to overwhelm the men penned within, but at last the flame took firm hold and the wall blazed fiercely about its entire circumference. The mice retreated from the flames back into the night, and the men outside the wall sent up a joyous cry. The men within were not heard from for some time, as they soon found themselves swooning from the smoke and the heat, and in the end they had to take refuge within the granary itself, though even there they could feel the heat through the walls and feared that the building would be consumed just as its brother had. But having served their purpose, the flames died down, and by dawn the barricade was reduced to a ring of ashes and coals.

Old Dungbeard had not slept since the first vigil in which the mice had been discovered, and so, confident in his strategy, he sent home the five loyal men (who themselves had been wakeful since the second night) and instructed another group of servants to gather more material and reconstruct the wall at a slightly greater distance out from the granary, and though the new wall was only a short measure farther out from where the ashes of the first lay, its actual length was thereby greatly increased and much more wood was required to fill it out. The master then returned to his hall and after a celebratory mid-day feast, retired to his chamber, where he fell into a deep sleep.

As he slept, he had a most fearful dream. He saw his men felling trees in the forest, the ground beneath them scoured clear of even the smallest twig. Teams of oxen dragged the green and groaning timber from the wood, gouging deep tracks across the orderly furrows of his fields. He saw a train of women who at first seemed to him to be dead, their skin grey and cracked, but then he recognized that they were simply coated all

over in ashes, which they carried in baskets away from the estate. Ash sifted from the baskets as they walked and covered their path like snow and drifted across the field, so that it looked like the crop itself had been burned by a ravaging army. He followed the oxen to the place from which the women came, and found that his barricade now encircled the whole of the hall and its buildings and was kept perpetually burning so that the greenwood might be more easily consumed.

He awoke from this dream to the smell of smoke — an odor that has announced to many a waking sleeper that the hour of their doom is at hand — and rushed from the hall into the night. But he found that the wind had merely carried into the hall the smoke of the second barricade, which was now lighting up the night like a burning town. In the morning, the servants chattered excitedly about how the wall had once again defeated the mice, and that their master would prove himself even greater than the mighty Pharaoh by weathering his plague so well. Hearing such things restored to Old Dungbeard some of the pride that his dream and nocturnal terror had shaken. But as he oversaw the preparation for yet a third wall, he worried that some true portent might have visited him, for already his men were beginning to struggle to gather enough suitable material from the edge of the wood before the day — in a season of shortening days — drew to a close.

Again he slept in his chamber while flames guarded the granary, and again he was visited by a dreadful dream. He saw his estate as he had seen it before, more resembling a battlefield than a farm, but this time there were no teams hauling trees from the forest. Instead, they tied ropes to the dwellings of the servants and the plowmen, and they goaded the oxen until the buildings were pulled down and their frames shattered on the hard earth. This wood they then carted to the barricade, and the children and

grandmothers huddled together on the bare ground amongst potsherds and bits of thatching. Then he saw that ropes were being tied to the corners of the hall itself, and men beat the oxen with sticks until blood flowed from the beasts' straining backs, and at last the timbers of the hall began to give way.

Old Dungbeard awoke from this dream even more disturbed than from the other, though his house was as full of victorious boasting as before. For the third time his servants went to the forest with their axes and returned to build up the barricade, but this time they had to work somewhat into the night before it was completed. Once Old Dungbeard was satisfied with the construction, he went to his chamber and slept.

A third dream came to him, which marked the completion of the vision. This time Old Dungbeard stood within the ring of fire with no horizon to be seen but the flame. The ground all about him was stripped bare and only the postholes of the hall and the other buildings remained to mark that anything had ever stood there. The people of the estate stood in ranks before him, while a pair of burly cowherds stalked the ends of the rows. From time to time, they would select a man or woman from the end of a file, and carrying the wretch by the hands and feet like a sack of grain, they would walk to the edge of the fire and fling the writhing body onto the pyre. They continued like this for some time, until Old Dungbeard could bear the screams no longer. He ran up to the brutes and buffeted them with his stick, but he might as well have been beating upon the senseless earth. After he exhausted himself, they picked him up and heedless of his protests tossed him into the flames. Even within the dream, he felt the fire washing over his flesh, pouring up over him like a reversed cataract — for fire is a contrary liquid that rises to

the sky where others fall to the ground; thus, it signifies divinity in its ascent to heaven and also signifies the infernal in its perversion of the natural categories.

When Old Dungbeard awoke from this vision, it seemed to him that his skin was still being licked and nipped by the flame. He threw off the bearskin that guarded his bed from the night's chill and for a moment was confused to find a second fur spread over him beneath the first, as though his wife (had she not been absent) had demanded another cover from an attendant during the night, as she sometimes did. But see! It is not a luxurious and costly hide that covers thethane, but a living carpet of mice! Their tiny claws and hot bellies wriggled across him, itching his skin like a hairshirt — worse than a hairshirt, for while a hairshirt merely contains a certain quantity of vermin, this fabric was itself composed of vermin. As they moved about, they bit him and left his skin dotted all over with tiny wounds so that he resembled one with the pox.

The walls around him seemed to crackle with flame, though the room remained quite dark; it was not flame, but countless mice gnawing away at the surplus of sheaves stacked up on every side. Beneath this din could just be heard the screams of two of his bedchamber attendants, who were awakening to find themselves similarly afflicted.

Old Dungbeard leapt from his bed fully naked, for he would not touch or take anything from it with which to wrap himself. He ran into his hall to find his stockpiles there swarmed just as they had been in the granaries.

“All is lost,” he cried, “and nothing shall preserve me!”

At that moment, the black cat which he had encountered in the forest dropped down from a beam above him. Old Dungbeard was greatly startled at this apparition —

though we who are learned in the ways of devils should not be — and stood naked and gape-jawed, as though the man had become a dumb beast while the animal spoke.

“I hope you have not forgotten my offer, neighbor,” said the cat, standing up upon its hind legs as it had done before. At the sound of its voice echoing throughout the hall, the mice ceased their feasting and scrambled away into the night through every hole and crevice, departing even more swiftly than when they had fled the deadly fire in the granary. Soon the hall was unnaturally silent, for all the servants had fled from the mice without even pausing to consider the fate or wellbeing of their master. As such, none witnessed the bargain that Old Dungbeard struck there, and what it was only came to be known later.

When morning came, the servants crept back to the hall. There they found Old Dungbeard dressed in fine robes — a bit motheaten, for he seldom wore them, spending so much of his time overseeing the cultivation and improvement of his land. But now he was dressed for leisure, and he instructed his servants that today would be a feast day for all and that no work was to be done. His servants were at first afraid to approach him, partly because the skin of his face and hands was still marked with tiny, bloody scabs and because his uncustomary magnanimity resembled the softheadedness of one besotted by fever. But he soon allayed their fears and reassured them that their sufferings were at an end.

The servants were confused, but as they began to prepare an extravagant meal and evening entertainments (and how strangely such labor increases when work is prohibited) their worries were replaced by the anticipation of pleasures. Some men did begin to head for the forest, for they expected that the construction of the barrier around the granary

would proceed of necessity despite the festivities, and others moved to carry some of the grain stored in the hall down to the granary, for some room had been made within by the earlier depredations of the mice. But their master mocked them and rapped them with his stick for their insolence. He promised all that the harvest was now securely protected just as it stood.

The feasting began at midday and continued on past nightfall — an odd feast, for there were no guests, only Old Dungbeard, his servants, and the people of the estate. As the revelry and the hearth fires were dying down, three men went off into the night to find relief from their drink at the edge of the fields. They were interrupted in their discharges by the sight of a number of dark forms prowling out of the wood. One of the men grasped a torch he had staked into the ground and raised it up, and then he perceived in the light dozens of green and yellow eyes moving across the field. These men ran back to the hall, and though ordinarily such a tale as they told would be dismissed as the fantasy of eyes pickled in strong liquor, the people of the estate had already witnessed such marvels of late that they readily accepted report of another. The cheer of the feast was turned to fear. The women gathered their children to them, and those men whose courage did not fail them (or whose curiosity outmatched their cowardice) went out of the hall to see what new plague was to be visited upon them.

First they saw the mice, appearing at a distance like ripples upon the ground around the unfortified granary, as though a frenzy of eels were feeding around the piers of a dock jutting out over a muddy landing. But suddenly a large shape and then another seemed to glide across the turbulent surface, cutting still wakes of bare ground behind them. More of shapes shot from the shadows, and the mice of an instant broke their tight

but disordered ranks and scattered in all directions like the white down of a milk-witch stalk (or, as it is also called in other places, the egg-wort or dandelion). Some of the mice ran towards the hall pursued by the dark figures, and as they approached, the onlookers perceived that these creatures were enormous cats. They were not as big as the great cat that had appeared to Old Dungbeard, but nonetheless they were far larger than any common cat — larger even than the wildcats sometimes seen in the forest — closer in size to a greyhound and nearly as swift.

The people marveled at this sight, and it was not long before the mice had retreated and the cats ceased their prowling. But they did not return to the forest. Instead, they stretched their thin bodies — for despite their vigor, they seemed frightfully emaciated — and licked their limbs and lips and lounged about the grounds. In the morning, the cats were still there, basking in the dim winter sun. From time to time, a man or child would approach too near to one of the creatures, and it would hiss and bare its sickle-like fangs, sharpened for a hunter's harvest. The people were ill at ease and huddled together, whispering their anxieties to each other. But Old Dungbeard strode about the estate proudly, taking stock of the granary and delighting in its undiminished inventory.

That night and the next and the one after, the mice returned and were scattered by the cats. The people for the first time began to perceive a reduction in the numbers of the mice who emerged from the fields, who until then had weathered all their various losses with no discernable effect on their population. At the same time, the number of cats increased day to day, though they grew no fatter. Within a week, at least a hundred of the monstrous animals stalked the estate. They stretched out upon the lintel-stones of the

dwellings and hissed at any who tried to pass within or without. They perched upon eaves and stared down upon passersby, licking their lips. Finally, a night passed without any mice being seen, but when morning came, the cats remained.

Some of the men came to Old Dungbeard in his hall and ask that he do something about the creatures, perhaps sending for aid from the abbey, for it was clear to all that these were no natural beasts. Old Dungbeard grew angry with them. “Would you let some petty fear drive you into starvation? Those who scorn a boon deserve to be twice deprived,” he said, and had them soundly beaten. The people of the estate grumbled, but for a time they ate their plentiful porridge and bread and pondered their master’s sentence. And while they ate better than they had in any previous winter, Old Dungbeard himself seemed to lose his taste for bread, and began to consume greater quantities of game, though as the winter deepened it grew harder and harder to obtain, and his hunger showed no regard even for fast days.

But this peace did not hold for long. First, two birdcatchers went into the wood to check their snares and did not return. Their wives made pleas and laments, but the others thought the men had likely run off, tiring of their master’s constant demands. Then three children who had been playing together in the bare field did not come back to their dwelling when their mother called them. The men went into the woods and walked the boundaries of the estate, but no sign could be found. Their mother wept and wailed at the door of the hall, but Old Dungbeard would not open it to her. Finally, one night a plowman and his wife came upon one of the cats within their house, standing over their infant son. It took the babe by the neck, as a cat might carry its own kitten, and bounded up through the roofbeams and out the smoke hole. The plowman’s cries summoned a

large crowd, but the infant could not be found. In the rage of his grief, the plowman took an ax that was near to hand and rushed upon the first cat he found, one which was sitting atop a wood pile. Though it seemed entirely at rest upon the logs, as the plowman tried to bring the ax down upon it, the cat sprang away with unnatural speed, and the ax bit deep into the wood alone. Of a sudden, cats seemed to rise up out of the shadows all around the plowman. They pounced upon him, so many that his body could scarce be seen beneath them. His fellows were too startled to even begin to come to his aid, and before anyone had taken a step towards or away from him, the cats had dragged him away into the night. No one pursued, but all fled to their dwellings and guarded their doors.

What had been spoken of only in whispers was now said aloud and often, that these creatures had proved themselves devils and that the estate had fallen under a curse worse than that which had threatened the harvest. Many would not come out of their houses, and day by day more disappeared, though none could say how many fled in preservation of their own souls and how many were consumed by the cats — nor how many of those who chose to flee were caught before making good their escape. But at least one of the household servants got off the estate and made his way to where Old Dungbeard's wife was wintering with her family and told his mistress of the terrors that he had witnessed.

Hearing these things, the noble lady immediately sent messengers to the abbey and a day later departed herself for the estate. When the news arrived at the abbey, the abbot immediately sent a pair of monks off to ascertain the truth of the report. The monks came to the estate and were astounded by what they found. No one came to greet them, no matter how loudly they called, and all the buildings were shut fast. They did not at

first perceive the cats, but soon noticed them crouching, still and silent in the long winter shadows, and before long realized that there were cats all around them peering from every shaded eave and crevice. As they approached the hall, they became aware of a noxious odor, for the creatures had befouled the walls with their caustic spray, as cats will do, though this stench matched their unnatural size in its vitriolic magnitude. The monks' eyes watered from this hell-scent, and they lingered only briefly at the door to the hall before retreating. A cohort of cats followed them, bodies low to the ground and tails twitching, so that the pious men feared greatly for their lives. One of them called out the Lord's name in a voice strong and clear, and at this invocation, the cats dispersed back into the shadows.

Just as the monks were preparing to depart, Old Dungbeard's wife arrived with her guards, attendants, and chaplain. They begged her to come with them to the abbey and wait until they could cleanse the estate, but she would not be moved and marched with her guards to the hall. The cats watched her from their corners and perches but did not come closer. Though she nearly swooned from the loathsome air, she advanced inside with great determination. There she found her husband in the bedchamber, alone and unattended except for an especially large and evil-looking cat that disappeared up into the loft above when she entered. Old Dungbeard was terrible to behold. His ribs stood out so that they might be clearly counted, and his lips had drawn back to bare his withered gums. Surrounded by the bounty of his great harvest, he was near to starvation. She knelt beside him, weeping, and he with labored breath confessed to her all that had happened — the plague of mice, the counsel of the demon cat, the portents of ruin. And at last he revealed to her the dreadful pact he had made in which he had pledged his service to that

wicked shade of the forest dale in exchange for the destruction of those who threatened his stores. He begged her to bring a priest so that his soul might be yet be saved, but the monks had already departed. And so Old Dungbeard, weakened by his last exertion, died unshriven in the early hours.

Meanwhile, the monks arrived back at the abbey and detailed all they had seen. With great haste a party was assembled, and bearing the relics of St. Pacca they made their way to the estate in a devout procession. When they arrived shortly after dawn, they found Old Dungbeard's wife mourning over her husband's body. She told to them his confession and begged their aid in saving her lands from the devil. The monks held the relics before them and walked the boundaries of the estate, praying and calling upon heaven to purge the place. The cats fled before them, hissing and spitting, and one by one vanished into the forest until none remained upon the estate. But even plumes of incense smoke and sprinklings of sacred oils could not quite dispel the rank odor their habitation had left. The monks found that the granary and the hall remained quite full of grain, but the poisonous air had impregnated every sack and sheaf, and nothing was left that was fit for consumption by any living thing. No inhabitant was found remaining in any of the buildings, neither man nor beast, and only a pile of bones in the hall betokened the fate of those who had remained.

All day and into the night the blessings and exorcisms continued. The only structure that was untainted was the estate's tiny chapel. The lady and her attendants wrapped Old Dungbeard's body in a shroud and carried it to this chapel so that a vigil might be kept over it. As they brought the body to the chapel's threshold, it seemed to buck and twist in within its shroud.

“My husband still lives!” cried the lady. “Quickly bring one of the holy brothers that he might yet be absolved!”

They laid the body on the ground, and one of them cut open the shroud. As they pulled apart the fabric, the body sprang out from within, no longer a human form but that of a great black cat. The crowd fell back from this wonder, and the beast pounced upon the lady and crushed her throat within its inhuman jaws. She was dead before she could cry out, though no breath could have escaped her if she had been able to try. The cat bounded away into forest, leaving behind the shroud, now quite empty as many later attested. And so it was that the devil took Old Dungbeard into infernal slavery, and from time to time still today some woodcutter or forester in the district comes home pale and trembling after having seen him still prowling the deep forest and wooded hillsides.

As for the estate, none whom the king sent to claim it stayed long, for the cat-reek could not be dispelled despite all alchemy and invocations. In time, the abbey itself took possession of the land. They burned the stinking buildings to the ground and carted off the ashes. With the coming of the French knights, they at last found tenants who restored it and rebuilt the hall in resilient stone. But none ever mastered the soil as Old Dungbeard had or reproduced his magnificent harvests. To this day, the people who dwell there will not permit a cat to live amongst them, neither mouser nor birder, but kill any that are found. And they endure a great number of mice who get into the more humble harvest and scratch about in the thatching, but neither God nor devil has since sent another plague such as had come before.

Many brethren here have discussed Old Dungbeard’s transformation, for some say the devil has no power to alter the substance of Creation, and others say that he can,

but only dead matter, so that it was not Old Dungbeard who became a beast, but merely the empty vessel of his body. And some say the body was changed not at all but rather consumed by the unnatural animal, which passed invisible into the shroud and took its place. Of these, perhaps the latter proposition has more truth than even its proponents perceive. For in my studies of the old books of our library, in which there are still some written in outmoded English, I found an annal that recorded a familiar story. I do not remember the year and I cannot check it, for a certain stupid person mistook it for an old breviary written in a useless tongue and cut it to pieces for use in mending the psalter and the two books of canon law bequeathed us by Berno of Ripon. But this annal told of a certain Dunbeorht who held the soft land at the end of the dale. When the heathen Northmen crossed the sea and marched not as raiders but as an army down from York and into our country, they were preceded by a great host of common people, displaced from their burnt farms and villages, seeking refuge in the hill valleys of our district. A great number of them came to Dunbeorht's hall and besieged it with their pitiable pleas. But though the hard-hearted thane did not acquiesce, he in no way could restrain them or drive them from his lands where they made their encampment. And so this thane made a pact with Deorling bandits of the forest, that scourge that seems to have been rooted here longer even than the mountains themselves, and arranged for them to come and massacre the wanderers. Eventually this treachery was disclosed to the King of Mercia, who doomed Dunbeorht to death and commanded that his body not be committed to the fire or the barrow, but rather be disgracefully left for the wild beasts. And so his hall was razed and body left on the ground there to be carrion.

A learned man, experienced in the interpretation of the visions of the prophets and saints, may well trace in the story of Old Dungbeard a figuration of the crime of Dunbeorht, a shame clothed in animal skins. Such is the nature of the thane's transformation — not from corpse to a cat, but from history into a fable told at night by mothers to their children. And yet can we know that this fable has not made itself true? For I have been to the estate, and they do not suffer cats to dwell there, and many among us have seen the shadow of a great cat prowling the forest. Sometimes inquiring deeply into things gains us no knowledge or wisdom, but merely robs out the stones on which the walls of our understanding of the world are founded.

An Inquisitive Monk



We have among us now a monk by the name of Frano, who has been made subcellarer despite his youth because he has great skill in reckoning and keeping accounts and is as well lettered as any scribe in the scriptorium. Indeed, before he came to us, he was a scholar in Paris until he was forced to surreptitiously leave the city in the middle of the night to escape the hirelings of one of the university masters, whom this Frano had paid with debased coins, so heavily clipped they could have been wafers nibbled away at by mice. By this example you might know something of his character. This fellow is known among us for his constant questioning of the older monks. At first, we praised him for his inquisitiveness and for the activity of his mind. But even the most temperate mother will tire of the incessant questioning of a small child about matters both petty and profound — both of which can perplex one, either in having to explain something that has never before merited contemplation or in trying to describe a mystery that years of holy contemplation might not illuminate. This I know from my own youth. I recall an occasion on which I

was playing beside my mother as she spun, an ordinary circumstance, and I asked her why it was that when one put dough into an oven it became hard and firm, but when one put turnips in, they became soft. This was not the first question I had asked that day, nor even that hour, though it is the only one that I can precisely remember. And I can remember it because as I asked it a third time, not having received an answer after the first two queries, my mother struck me across the face, bruising my lips against my milkteeth by way of an answer. Of course, I had been handled roughly by many hands before this and afterwards, and the pain of the blow was nothing unfamiliar. But never before this moment had my gentle mother done me knowing harm, and so I felt it to be a far graver injustice than any I had experienced before, an unearned scorn, and in my childish arrogance I thought myself martyred for my natural curiosity. For many years, well into the time I was grown, the memory of that blow, a bitter answer to an innocent question, made me burn with anger and indignation. Perhaps if I had had a family and child of my own, I would have learned the lesson much sooner, but now I understand how questions can become like the buzzing of flies and can drive one to flail about with one's hands, striking out at the air that seems dense with persecuting noise.

And so it is with this monk, Frano, who delights in questions but is as interested in answers as a cat is in its master's complaints. Because Frano is so often thrown into intercourse with reeves and merchants and craftsmen in his duties of recording the house's expenditures, he is on the one hand given much to idle chatter, being somewhat excused from his silence, and on the other, in the remaining hours that he spends alone transcribing his tallies and pacing the narrow spaces of the storehouses and granaries taking stock and noting inventories, he is left alone to devote his thoughts not to prayer or

meditation on sanctity or holy living, but rather to ponder enigmas and unanswerable questions, like a man cracking nuts not to eat them, but simply to relish the shattering of the shells. His favorite time to pose these questions to others is during bloodletting, when the yoke of silence is put aside and even the sternest master will indulge in playful talk and storytelling. And perhaps I am more sympathetic to Frano than he deserves because I am given over to much the same vice, though (I believe) with purer motives — though in truth, my displeasure may come less through irritation with Frano’s questions than with envy at the way he is able to draw listeners away from my own tales and entice them into disputing his questions, while my own story lies waiting for a chance to break loose, like a fox penned in by baying hounds.

It was this Frano who stirred up contentious debate over what power a devil has over flesh, living or dead, and brought us to such bickering as our sanguine humours flowed into the blood cups and untempered choler brought us to bitter anger. After this, the abbot chastised us most severely, but this brought only temporary respite in the arguments. When we next took up the question, one of the older monks reminded me of a story of change after death that I had heard many times as child, but had not recalled in many years, and he filled in many details that either I had forgotten or had never before been told.

*The Troublesome
Thane*



In the second year of Remelin’s abbacy, the road
between the abbey and the mill at place now called

Shuckwell began to be troubled. This first came to light when farmers carrying grain to the mill began to complain that their cartwheels would seize up whenever they came to a

certain place on the road, and horses would startle when coming to the same place and could only be made to pass it with considerable violence. Initially, the condition of the road was blamed, for though for most of its length it was stony and dry, at this place the earth was soft and deeply rutted, and the land to either side of road was quite boggy, with stagnant pools that produced both flies and a fetid odor. Then one day the miller himself, a man strong and thick-limbed, was found on the road insensible and so badly beaten that he was scarcely recognizable. His injuries were so extensive, indeed, that those who found him thought that his horse (which was nowhere to be found) had thrown and trampled him. But when the miller awoke the next day, he said that it was a man who had dragged him from his horse and battered him nearly to the point of death.

The miller's testimony created much consternation among the folk, who feared that a dangerous outlaw or perhaps even an entire gang of bandits might have made a home in the wood there. At that time, a Norman knight named Walter Lark-nose (so-called because of the whistling sound he made whenever he breathed through his nose) held the manor of Muston from the abbey in exchange for his arms, so that the abbey could send the king the knights it owed him whenever he went to war. The abbot sent a messenger to this Walter, soliciting his aid in securing the liberty of the road. The messenger arrived in the area just as Walter was returning from a hunt so that they met each other on the road. The hunting party bore with it the carcass of an enormous boar, its great teeth now stained with its own blood, and after exchanging the appropriate greetings, the messenger marveled over the beast. Walter beckoned the messenger to ride alongside him for the remainder of the journey and narrated to him — not boastfully but in the plain language of a seasoned veteran — how he had killed the boar himself,

unaided. It had happened that a pack of young dogs, not yet disciplined in their training, wrenched the leads from the hand of their similarly young and inexperienced handler and scattered into the wood, bounding and baying and generally creating a terrible racket. The hunt waited while the servants chased after the dogs, hoping to corral them before their noise emptied the entire woods of game. Thus Walter found himself dismounted and alone, sitting upon a log in a small clearing and listening to the cries and shouts of the men sounding out from all directions, but distantly. He said that he neither saw nor heard the boar approach, but looked up from his rest and beheld it standing rigid and bristling only a few paces in front of him. Without so much as a snort or grunt, this apparition charged him, silent and swift as shadow. The knight had no time to reach for his spear, but got one hand around the hilt of his dagger and raised his other forearm up in front of his face to block the creature's tusks before it upon him. Fortunately, he had a heavy gauntlet on his upraised arm and was able to deflect the jaws to the side, so that the boar's head went over his shoulder as the weight of the charging beast sent both tumbling backwards over the log. Walter related that the first sound he heard from the beast was the hissing of its humid breath into his ear as they fell, and only then was he certain that it was an earthly creature and not a fiend. He was not afraid, he said, but only because he had not time to become so. And so, despite a blow that would have rattled the wits and stolen the breath of most men, Walter pulled his dagger from his belt and sheathed it in the animal's throat before it could get its footing, and so it poured its blood out upon him and expired. The other hunters were quite shocked when they found their master, soaked all over with gore but entirely without injury.

The abbot's messenger was much impressed by this story and commended Walter's courage and quick action. When they arrived at the manor, he was invited to feast with the rest of the party upon that same beast while listening to the story retold by one and then another well into the evening, for this messenger was not so foolish to share his own news and fulfill his purpose before he had enjoyed the hospitality of Walter's hall. This clever monk was called Pandulf, and although he had the gift of cunning and had knowledge of both the French language and courtly customs, he was completely without ambition, and though he was nearly approaching his fortieth year, he had never held nor pursued an office as an obedientary or any other position of importance. Thus he remained undistinguished, but well-liked.

Pandulf told Walter of the assault on the miller and of the fear people had of traveling the road, and in the abbot's name he requested Walter's help. The knight agreed and told the monk that he could stay the night at his house and that they would set out in the morning. And so Walter prepared a party of eight of his men, including his two sons — both of age but unproven — and rode to the troublesome spot. Pandulf accompanied them so that he could report the outcome to the abbot.

When they arrived at the ill-omened place, they found a gruesome and heart-grieving sight: a merchant's wagon lay turned on its side in the middle of the road, its goods strewn about the ground, fine fabrics and delicate ornaments trampled into the mud. The body of one of the merchant's guards — as they could determine from its dress — had been crushed from the legs to the ribcage beneath the front wheel of the wagon, and carrion birds had already begun to pick the softest flesh away from inside the helm. There were a great many footprints in the dirt, but no other bodies were found, nor was

there any sign of the oxen, though the wagon's harnesses had broken away. At first, the knight and his men thought that the travelers must have been taken hostage by bandits, but as they searched the wagon more thoroughly, they found within in it a small iron box that, though locked, by its sound revealed that it must contain the merchant's silver. From this and from the other rich goods left behind on the road, they realized that the only things the wagon had been robbed of were its occupants, which was not the usual practice of bandits.

Pandulf advised that they put the wagon back on its wheels and send it on to the abbey where it might be secured until the fate of its owner be discovered. None of Walter Lark-nose's party wished to grunt and sweat at such a brute task, and so someone went away and came back with some laborers from the nearest farm, but this showed poor judgment, as they would soon realize. With great effort and much shouting of commands, these at last righted the wagon. They loaded the sole corpse into it, along with what could be salvaged of the goods. As the wagon made its way along the road, one or another man would call out to the dwellings and fields near the road and show his neighbors the gruesome, broken body and tell tales that began near the truth but steadily wandered as far away from it as the miles that the wagon rolled down the road. And just as sometimes when a hunter drives a stag through a wood, the pounding of the beast's hooves and the clamor of its passing will cause smaller deer and rabbits and other creatures to dash behind it in turn, until a great throng of animals emerges from the other side of the wood as though fleeing fire or flood, so did the wagon accrue a larger and larger train of frightened and perturbed people. When it arrived at the abbey gates, it had become an enormous crowd, jostling and crying out to be let in for protection.

The abbey servants at the gate were no better than the people of the dale, and in their fear spread more and falser rumors, so that, indeed, some of the monks heard that an army of Danes had come up the road, killing and pillaging on its way, and was about to besiege the abbey. Then when they perceived the sound of the crowd at the gate, they thought the enemy had arrived and that they were soon to be slaughtered like their holy predecessors. Many years later, old monks who had been there at that time still spoke of this day with the same excitement as those who recount having actually gone forth into combat. It was said that monks spilled into the cloister bearing an array of weaponry that astounded all, even, it seems, the wielders. I do not refer to simple kitchen knives, hayforks, and staves — as the brethren of St. Saeric used — but to swords and spiked cudgels and war-axes that could in no way be mistaken for common tools. Some even had bucklers strapped to their arms and at least one wore a byrnie beneath his scapular. Afterwards, this unexpected manifestation of martial gear was a source of great embarrassment to the abbot, who had to explain how such a gross violation of the Rule had occurred. Some tried to pass it off as a miracle, and all said they had found the weapons by chance in odd locations as they looked for whatever might be ready to hand. But though the monks certainly believed that they were in imminent peril, it was determined after some debate that God would not have been deceived as readily as they had, and consequently would not have produced from nothing a motley assortment of weapons to defend against a fictitious army. This illicit property was later gathered up and put away to be sold, but when the next merchant arrived — this being some time distant, due to the disruptions on the road that I am now describing — it was found that

much of it had again disappeared, presumably once more secreted back within the fabric of the abbey.

But this prosecution of the Rule came later; in the moment of these battle preparations, Abbot Remelin, who had been summoned directly by another of the gatekeepers and had therefore received the least distorted news of what was at the gate, chastised the monks and tried to bring order to the situation. But I have seen the spirit of fear move through battle-hardened troops, who cannot always resist it even with their training and experience, and so I must imagine it afflicted these monks and common people with even greater force. Anyway, it took a considerable time and a multitude of blows from the abbey superiors within and from Walter Lark-nose's men without before both parties were free of the fear that they were about to be murdered — the people by the road-evil, and the monks by the people.

Nonetheless, it was still difficult to get the gate cleared of supplicants so that the wagon could be admitted, until Abbot Remelin opened up the doors of the abbey church and admitted most of the crowd, who rushed in eagerly. Then he commenced to deliver unto them a sermon on fear and the inexorable working of divine Providence, sown heavily with pearls of Latin phrases, for though he was a learned and eloquent man, his knowledge of English did not extend much beyond what was necessary to command the lay servants. I have heard it said that he often used the example of animals and their natures in his public speeches — as we find in his well-known Sermon of the Eels — for he knew well their English names from ordering his meals.

The effect of this oration — which continued long into the afternoon, for the abbot's lungs were capacious even if his storehouse of words was not — was to dull the

spirit of the crowd until what remained of their fear touched them less than the discomfort of being crowded into the church. And so, in twos and threes, they made their ways back to their homes.

Today we might smile at such foolish antics —though we are warned not to point at our father's nakedness — but even the present day gives us numerous examples of the dangers of a rabble, and this story reminds us that a rabble does not arise solely from the fields and markets, but can stir itself in cloisters and castles and courts alike. Certainly, Abbot Remelin and Walter Lark-nose did not laugh at this farce but proceeded with great seriousness, conferring on the problem until night had fallen, and though my sources do not say why the Norman knight declined to stay the evening in the guesthouse as custom dictates, I believe it was because the sight of armed English monks unsettled him. Instead, he, with his sons and companions, left to patrol the road until sunrise. The abbot sent Pandulf with them to represent the abbey's interests, but also as a punishment for having proposed the moving of the wagon which incited such chaos, even though it was not Pandulf but rather Walter Lark-nose's men who decided to summon peasant labor to carry out the deed. But there were no worse consequences for putting the blame on Pandulf than the discomfort of an undistinguished monk, and thus it was.

O miserable Pandulf! To go in one day from the pleasures of a feasting hall to spurring a stubborn palfry along a muddy road in a nighttime storm, and all the bread soaked through and ruined. The rain and the darkness put an end to any joviality the company might have expressed. No travelling songs or tales of adventure, but only shouts at the horses and muttered curses. They struggled to keep a light, and had they not travelled this same road earlier in the day, they could well have become lost and have

wandered into the bogland which grew deeper and denser as they approached the troubled spot.

They passed by the place without incident and continued until they reached the mill, which stood on the rocky ground a mile or so further. The injured miller had been taken to a farmhouse on the other side of the bog and his wife was there with him, so the mill was dark and shut up. Walter Lark-nose had his men open it and prepare a fire so that they might dry themselves. After a brief rest, the company divided in half, with one group led by Walter's sons and the other by the knight himself. Thus one might go out and walk the road while the other remained inside at the mill, and then when the first returned, the other could go out, and so they both might have some measure of rest and relief. The party led by the sons went on patrol first, while Pandulf remained with the knight inside, where they conversed for some time about the construction of the mill and the differences between English techniques and the Norman ones, which were then becoming more common.

After some time had passed, there came a great pounding upon the door. "Who is there?" called Walter.

"It is Hugh," came the answer. Hugh was the name of one of Walter Lark-nose's sons.

When they opened the door, this son collapsed upon the threshold. He was badly beaten, and blood streamed from his nose and lips. "What has happened?" asked Walter, but his son made no intelligible reply, having exhausted himself through running and through loss of blood. As they were tending to him, the door again rattled. "Who is there?" called Walter.

“It is Roger,” came the answer in a weak and rasping voice. Roger was the name of the other son.

Roger’s injuries were graver still, for his right arm had been broken at the shoulder and flopped lifelessly at his side, and his throat was a terrible color where it had been half crushed, so that his breathing came with a dreadful sound like wine being squeezed from a skin. And yet he did not find the peace of unconsciousness as his brother had, but trembled and convulsed in his father’s arms. He did not speak, but raised his left hand to point at the door. A third time, it shook in its frame — this time with more violence than ever before. “Who is there?” called Walter Lark-nose again, laying his son on the ground and drawing his sword.

“It is Ruma,” came the answer in a voice that resounded as though it came from within a cavern.

When Walter Lark-nose heard this reply, his warrior-fire flickered as though in a gust of wind, and he hesitated as his men looked to him. Had his silence continued a breath longer, they all surely would have been lost to fear, but the knight recovered his spirit and commanded them not to open the door, but to hold it.

Even with four shoulders against it, the door threatened to break its hinges under the onslaught that came from outside. When the door held, the blows began to fall all around the mill and upon its roof such that the attacks became indistinguishable from the booming thunder that shook the timbers all the way into their post holes. The buffeting continued until Pandulf, kneeling before the millstone, called out to Saints Pacca and Saeric and Romwenna and all the others he could think to name who might watch over that place. Then the battering abruptly ceased, and the men within the mill stood

benumbed as though they were inside a great iron bell whose mighty tones were only just fading into stillness. When they opened the door, they found nothing outside but the gentle sounds of early morning as the birds and flies began to awaken fill the air with their noises.

Then the men wept, for Roger the son of Walter Lark-nose stopped breathing and died, and his brother Hugh sat astride the wall that stands between life and death. Some of the remaining company took the two young men and bore them back to the hall at Muston, one to a bed and the other to a bier. The others, now a much smaller number than had originally set forth to pursue the threat, most bravely returned to the place on the road where the trouble arose, and found again traces of great violence, with weapons and saddles strewn about the wet and sucking mud, but no bodies to be seen.

At the hall, Pandulf assisted the wife of Walter Lark-nose, Ermengarde by name, in caring for Hugh, though this monk was better trained in the healing of souls rather than bodies. Furthermore, he was a skilled teller of tales — indeed, it was his tellings of this story over the years of his life that most preserved it from oblivion — and thus it was he who recounted the terrible events to all and sundry and spared the grieving knight the sting of repeating the disaster again and again. But as Pandulf told the story, adjusting his language to his different audiences and adding ornaments and digressions as suited the material, he realized that he could not expand on the one thing that all wished to know more about. And so he sought out Walter, who was keeping watch over his eldest son's body.

“Do you know who this Ruma is who has brought such sorrow upon not only this house but all the dale?” the monk asked.

“I can scarcely believe it,” said the knight, “but the voice was like to that of Ruma, son of Hrothwine. This Hrothwine, and his father, and his father’s father, had been lords in this district, but the family’s fortunes fell with those of the house of Godwin, for as a great tree falls, so does it take down with it many saplings and shrubs, as well as thick, ancient creepers. I was with the Conqueror’s army when he pressed the Saxon thanes of the North, before my eldest son who now lies here dead had even been born. Ruma and his two brothers, Oter and Raedel, were driven from their lands, but gathered loyal retainers as well as hireling brigands here in the deep woods and hidden, rocky paths. They then ravaged the estates they had once cultivated and committed such outrages on the people that the bishop excommunicated them in the hope that they might be thus humbled and brought to peace by fear of God, since they had no fear of the new and rightful king. But the effect was only to increase the brothers’ ferocity, for they now proclaimed that they had been foully betrayed by those high and low who ought to have supported their rights, and so they spared no one in their persecutions. Were it not for this pride, they might have found some harbor here, though in a diminished state, for the people here had no love for us or the king. But it was I who pursued the Hrothwinesons here, and it was the people who came to me and told me when and where I might catch the enemy unprepared. And so it happened. I had with me only a few other riders, but we came upon the brothers on the road, away from the larger part of their band. The fighting was brief, but intense. The renegades killed four of my companions, but Raedel was knocked down by a blow that cracked his shin, and Oter lost his right arm below the joint and was unable to continue to fight. I myself clashed with Ruma. He was one of the largest men I have ever faced, but ugly and lacking any refinement. Seeing his brothers

fallen, he rushed upon me in a blind rage and landed a blow with ax upon my shoulder, though the haft had twisted in his hand so that the flat of the blade struck me.

Nonetheless, it left me with a wound that — though bloodless — to this day pains me whenever the frost is on the ground. It made me drop my sword, and as Ruma came at me a second time, I believed that I was about to die. But as he twisted back to deliver a killing stroke, I pulled my dagger with my other hand and pierced him in the ribs, just below his heart.

“He dropped to one knee, but did not fall. He looked once at the hilt of my dagger standing out from his chest and then knocked me to the ground as he broke away and bounded into the overgrowth that lined the road. It took us a few moments to recover our strength, and when we followed his tracks, they disappeared into the bog. I was sure that I had delivered a fatal wound, and that Ruma must have at last expired as he waded through the mire and his body had been sucked down below, for we never found him.”

“What became of the brothers?” the monk asked.

The knight answered, “Oter did not die right away, but lived for several more days and received absolution before leaving this world. Raedel was taken to Lincoln, where he died a prisoner some winters later. As for Ruma, it seems that perhaps I have been mistaken about his fate all these years, and he has returned to get his revenge. But he would surely be old and feeble by now, for he was nearly old enough to have been my father when we fought.”

Pandulf considered this information for a time, and another explanation occurred to him. For as I have said, he had been raised up in the kinds of halls once held by men

like the Hrothwinesons before finding the refuge of monastic life, and he was well-versed in the old tales and songs used to keep the night at bay.

“If this Ruma died excommunicate and gave up his body to an unprepared grave, then it is possible that you are not at all mistaken, my lord,” he said. “I have heard many accounts of corpses improperly buried who returned to trouble their neighbors, such as that of the reeve of Skinburness, a man of great wickedness who was known for placing curses on his wife’s relatives and died of a lightning strike, and yet continued to visit their houses in the night for several years afterwards and outmatched all who faced him in strength, even though in life he had been thin and weak.”

Walter Lark-nose dismissed Pandulf so that he might once more be alone in his grief. But as the day turned to night and sleep at last came upon him — for he had not slept since departing the hall the morning before — his thoughts turned over and over in his chest. It is a power of the warrior heart — I do not say virtue — that though it be dampened by grief, it may yet rekindle itself with the lust for vengeance. He awoke the following day resolved to pursue his son’s killer, but he did not allow his anger to make him foolish. He would not rashly charge after this unknown evil that had overwhelmed so many already.

The morning saw Walter Lark-nose’s son Hugh much improved and able to say what had happened to him. His father sat beside his bed and learned what had befallen his sons and the other men. It seems that the company encountered nothing unusual until they reached the spot in the road where the trouble had been occurring. Then, as they crossed the place where the wagon had been overturned, one of the horses began not just to whinny but to scream. It reared up, throwing its rider to the ground. At first, they

thought that perhaps the horse had got one of its legs stuck in an animal burrow that had become obscured by the water and mud. But a marvelous and terrible thing happened. The horse was pulled down into the sodden earth, disappearing under it as completely as if it were deep water and leaving no trace upon the surface. The men were greatly confounded by what they had seen, and as they stood around the spot where the ground had swallowed up the beast, its rider began to scream. He, too, was in the earth up to waist and rapidly descending. The other men were afraid to approach him, but Hugh and Ralph ran to him, and each grabbed an arm. Yet though they pulled with all their strength, they could not resist the throat of the earth, which dragged him under so that his voice was choked out by the inrushing mud, and shortly thereafter his hands grew limp, and the brothers let him go.

The other two retainers — for the party numbered five when it left the mill — lost their heart in the face of such sorcery and began to run away down the road, abandoning their young masters. But they only made it a short distance before an enormous black figure charged out of the bogland and intercepted them on the road. It caught them both by their necks, one in each hand, and throttled them as one might a hen, and with as much ease.

All this Hugh recounted, though the swelling of his face and lips made his speech difficult at times to understand. His father then asked him to describe this man.

“I know not whether it was a man or a devil,” said Hugh. “He stood more than a head taller than Roger, my brother, and his skin was black as gall all over and glistened with the slime of the bog. He carried no weapon that I could see, but used his fingers like claws and swung his fists like clubs, as we soon learned. For after this apparition flung

our men lifeless to the ground, Roger drew his sword and engaged the fiend. But his strokes glanced off the skin as though it were armor and would not bite. I, too, attacked alongside my brother, but did no better. As Roger slashed, I tried to pierce him through the gut. And though my sword did go into the body, he seemed to show no pain and no blood came from the wound. Then with a blow that was as swift as a horse's kick and twice as strong, he knocked me through the air and against the trunk of a tree so that my spirit was nearly forced from my mouth. When I regained my wits, I perceived that Roger was calling to me and telling me to run to you and bring reinforcements. And so I did, though I had gone but a short way when I heard him begin to scream, and I did not know whether to follow a course of wisdom or one of valor, to summon you or to return immediately myself to defend my brother."

"It is good that you chose the course of wisdom," said Pandulf, "for you have saved your father and others from certain destruction and given us a greater chance of avenging your brother. For it is clear to us now that no direct strength or skill of arms will best this creature, for it is moved by an evil spirit and cannot be subdued as a mortal man might be."

"How does one destroy such a thing?" asked Walter Lark-nose.

Pandulf knew from the old songs that the restless and unhallowed dead were to be dispatched by cutting the head from the body. Many other things were also done, one in this tale and another in that, but decapitation remained common to all. However, the monk knew that these old songs were not sound doctrine and some told of times before the coming of Christianity into Britain and thus contained pagan foolishness instead of

Christian wisdom. And so he said to Walter that he would have to consult with the abbot about the true and holy method for returning this malefactor to Hell.

The telling of the tale of Ruma and Walter Lark-nose was interrupted here by the subcellarer Frano, who could not let pass by a question of uncertain theology. Why, he asked, should the severing of the head stop a spirit that could already animate dead flesh despite its other wounds and decay? Some answered him that it is because the soul is anchored in the body at the brain and at the heart, stretched like cobweb between the two through the neck. If that vital channel is broken, then the spirit cannot no longer hold itself to the body and is loosed to the air. Others said that it is well known that abominations like Ruma are flesh without spirit, animated by sorcery alone, and it is around the neck that the invisible enchantment is placed, collaring and binding the reluctant flesh, which can be shattered by the blade-stroke. We reached no resolution amongst ourselves on this matter as to whether Ruma was moved by his own vengeful and restless soul, released somehow from hell, or whether he was but the plaything of a spiteful relative who still possessed knowledge of the old heathen magic. But I settle the question thusly: what thing it was that moved within the blackened skin of Ruma matters not; whether it had his memories and his grudges because it retained them in itself or because it found them contained in the inner chambers of that body's brain matters not; what is true is that this brutal thing answered to the name of Ruma and spoke the words of Ruma and pursued the unfulfilled desires of Ruma. Of what concern is it of what substance it was or how it got there, whether it be transformation or imitation? Those who saw it and those who fought it beheld it as Ruma Hrothwineson.

And just as we consulted and disputed amongst ourselves, so too did the monks of the abbey when Pandulf returned. Abbot Remelin consulted with other older monks and examined what was said in the books they possessed, but could reach no agreement as to the proper procedure for dispatching such an evil. And so they wrote a letter to the bishop of Hereford, for he was known to have knowledge of such things. While they awaited a reply, it was concluded by them all that whatever specific method they ultimately would employ, it was necessary that the place where the unsettled corpse lay be discovered.

They had great difficulty recruiting a work gang, for now that it was well known that devilry was involved, the common people were frightened beyond all measure. They would only work on the road if a party of monks was present, singing prayers and blessing the ground with holy water and oil, along with Walter Lark-nose and a band of armed men. This was arranged, and so in that singular spot on the road, surrounded by the fetid bog, it was as though the whole of humanity were gathered, with the clerks praying, the knights in arms standing ready to fight, and the laborers delving in the muddy earth, all that they might root out the devil who made the path so difficult to travel.

And they found many bodies beneath the road — man, horse, and ox — where they had been entombed by foul magic. But they could not find the corpse which they sought, and furthermore the road now became completely impassable, for with all the digging it had become a pond, and to the present time you can see how the way diverts and curls around this odious pool. They worked without any difficulty during the day, but had to flee the place as the shadows grew longer, for Ruma would rush against them from the bog if they tarried too long. They were able to keep him at bay with the holy water

and prayers, and though this gave them some peace, it did not put an end to the creature's abuses. The workers dug channels to try to drain the bog, but Ruma would fill them in during the night so that they made no progress. As the days went on, he began to wander further and further in the night and ride the houses of terrified farmers, thundering his heels against their eaves. Sometimes he would catch a young man or woman sneaking out for an illicit meeting, and these he carried away screaming into the night. Other times he would molest the livestock, breaking the thick necks of oxen and flinging sheep into the topmost branches of trees, where they hung in the air like white clouds.

Finally, the bishop's reply came, and they learned that Pandulf had been right all along — much to his acclaim — and that when the body was found, the head must be completely severed by a blade anointed and blessed, an exorcism performed over it, and both parts of the remains placed in a new grave with the head put below the feet and the torso affixed to the earth by a spike or nail as a precaution.

This news reinforced their determination and gave them hope, but still they could not put it into effect until they had located the corpse. Then Walter Lark-nose, thinking as a hunter and not as a delver, devised a ploy to lead them to the place where Ruma lay. First, he instructed Ermengarde, his wife, to spin as long and fine a thread as she could, which she accomplished with great skill. Then he went to place where prisoners were held and found there a certain Stricca, who was a renowned archer and also a notorious poacher, soon to pay for his crimes with his life. Though the knight did not have the authority to pardon this Stricca, he could promise him a release from his bonds and a head start if he would help. Stricca agreed to this, for he had little other hope.

Walter then had a particularly deep ditch dug into the bog, as deep and long as the diggers could make it in a day. Then that night he took with him only Stricca, for his bow, and Pandulf, for his prayers, for he wanted to stalk his prey as silently as possible. So they found a place to conceal themselves beside the road and waited until night fell. Soon Ruma emerged from somewhere deeper in the bog and came to the drainage. He plunged his bony hands into the ground like spades and pulled up great clods of dirt, and in this way began to fill in the day's digging. When it was clear that Ruma was well occupied and unaware of the hunters, Walter tied one end of the thread to the shaft of an arrow whose head had already been blessed, and then gestured to Stricca to let it fly.

Despite the darkness of the night and the blackness of the figure and the distance across the bog, Stricca's aim, honed by years of night-hunting, was perfect, and the arrow bit deep into the thick flesh between Ruma's neck and shoulder. Though the fiend did not cry out, nor did he claw at the shaft of the arrow as a wounded man might, he clearly perceived that he was being attacked, though he did not know from where. He dropped his clods of dirt and began to range about the road, swinging his head this way and that.

Perhaps feeling that his duty was discharged, or perhaps from craven cowardice, the poacher turned and ran, and though his feet moved through the brush as softly as those of a fox, Ruma instantly turned towards their hiding place and charged, head down like a bull. Pandulf did not have time to finish pronouncing the first syllables of *Eripe me* before he was upon them. But the knight lunged forward and took the creature's weight. They wrestled on the ground, rolling about in the brush. Pandulf threw himself prostrate upon the road as though it were the aisle of a church and prayed to the Lord God to deliver them from this demon. Walter Lark-nose cried out once, and then there was

silence. When the monk raised his head, Ruma was no longer there. He then went to where the knight lay, and found him breathing wetly with a dagger gripped in his hand.

“Behold,” he said, “it is that same Ruma whom I killed so many years ago, for this is the dagger that I lodged between his ribs then and have just now drawn out again!” As the knight spoke, blood came from his mouth, for his own ribs were splintered and his chest softened like one trampled by a warhorse. He then raised his other hand, in which he still grasped one end of the thread, which was now stretched nearly taut, leading into the bog. And so, though Walter Lark-nose could not overcome the strength of the ancient enemy, he nonetheless did not succumb to weakness, and by maintaining his hold of the thread throughout the brutal onslaught had preserved their means of bringing this evil to an end.

Pandulf remained with the knight there on the side of the road and heard his confession. And as the morning sun emerged above the hills, Walter Lark-nose breathed his last. Though these events had given Pandulf opportunities to show his previously unknown qualities, bravery was not the strongest of these, and so he did not then follow the thread and dispatch the evil spirit himself, though it might be said that he, too, took the course of wisdom and returned to the abbey to summon a full party to finish the thing. They followed the thread into the bog, tracing it as it wound around trees and snagged in bracken, until at last they came to the place where it disappeared straight into the ground like a fisherman’s line. Here they dug and dug and when the hole was as deep as a man, they found the corpse of Ruma. It showed no signs of its malignant animation, for the sun overhead shown down upon it. The body had swelled to an inhuman size. The skin was indeed stained black and creased like leather, and one could not tell what had been skin

and what had been clothing. It took four men to haul the corpse from the hole in the ground, and Abbot Remelin himself blessed the blade of the ax they used to separate the head from the shoulders.

They performed all the other prescribed rites, and reburied the body at the junction of a crossroads at the insistence of the common people, though this had not been specified by the bishop of Hereford and was a custom of dubious origin. Before they filled up this new grave, Pandulf took the dagger that Walter Lark-nose had recovered and plunged it this time through the heart — or at least the slime within the ribs where that black heart had once been — and hammered the hilt until it pierced completely through the body and was driven firmly into the earth beneath.

And so ended the story both of one of the last English thanes to hold power in the dale and the first of the Norman knights to receive it after the Conqueror took the throne.

*Concerning the
Forms of Truth*



It is a marvelous thing how truth, which is said to be sweet and nurturing, can seem to be the bitterest poison. It is said by learned authorities that truth cannot change, and, indeed, that its defining trait is its eternal constancy. You know a thing to be truth by its immutability, by its inability to ever be other than itself. And yet in our mortal feebleness, we may perceive truth falsely. What is good may seem evil, and what is evil may seem good. That a truth can *seem* at all proves that truth appears to our fleshly minds only ever in guises, and never bare. My own master, Runfred, would often explain this with the following figure. To the foolish, it passes as a shadow behind a screen. To the ordinary intellect, truth may be clad in beautiful garments and admired, or it may be dressed in sackcloth and scorned, and thus

the common folk so often live lives in which wisdom and folly — and consequently virtue and vice — are confused and intermixed. The learned have seen truth bare of these costumes — and, indeed, it is the duty of learned preachers with their discourse to clothe the truth in beautiful phrases — and too many, in their pride, think they have thus seen the truth itself, and know and possess it as lovely young mistress. But what the wise understand is that even this beautiful body, a delight to the eyes of the spirit that arouses the intellect and spurs it on to the chase and even to dalliance, is itself closed in an integument of skin. Some may sharpen their knives with philosophy and flense this body and feel its hot blood between their fingers, but even these — noble hunters or cruel butchers as the case may be — find beneath the skin only further tissue, muscles clothing bone, bone clothing marrow, and despite one's skill, the more one works, the sooner one ends up with nothing but a heap of offal and umbles, and the animating truth escapes always in the dying breath.

And thus this figuration of the truth which was told to me so often as a novice, reminds me that while we live, we only ever have the truth in figures. And though I know it does not please some for me to say it, it seems to me that we cannot learn the truth with the intellect, as we might learn what lies inside a box, but only ever be beguiled by a figure of it, perhaps attracted to it by invisible forces that draw us like a lodestone. Faith may be the solid rock upon which one may build one's house, but truth is ever the liquid flame that warms and lights that house, immutable in its essence, but ever changeable in its visible presence. And likewise, while we celebrate the hearth fire for its heat and life-preserving qualities, we must be mindful that it can also burn and destroy. This can be

seen in a story that happened in my own days, whose sad result I beheld with my own eyes.

*The Dead Man's
Vision*



There was in the village of Scriveley a tanner. One day while he was at his work, he climbed upon a stool to draw some hides from out of the great drenching vat in which they had been soaking, such as is done to prepare them for their months resting in the bitter pits by which a traveler may nose that a tannery is nearby. As he leaned, one leg of the stool betrayed him — unfaithful servant! — and snapped in two. The tanner toppled forward and struck his head upon the edge of the vat, hard oak, and senseless he tumbled headfirst into the foul brew, which stank of piss and peat, for such was what he used in the preparation of his particular goods. Thus was he found some time afterwards by his sons, who came into the yard and saw only their father's feet and bare legs sticking up above the rim of the vat. And though it pained them to recall it later, their first reaction was to laugh at the sight and enjoy the humbling of their father who had so often upbraided them in their work, until they saw that his legs did not move or struggle. Then their merriment turned to cries and fear. As they pulled him out of the tub by his ankles, his limbs were as limp and lifeless as those same hides they had so often drawn out of it before. Seeking their father's life over his dignity, they held him up in their air by his calves, inverted like a newborn infant, and let the poisonous mixture drain from his mouth. And when he seemed emptied like a wineskin, they squeezed and shook and prodded him in their efforts to rekindle his spirit. For a short time it seemed that his throat gurgled and gasped with some small movements of air, but he did not stir nor did his body regain its warmth, and the blood which had at first poured from his scalp, which had been split open on the

vat, began only to seep and then stopped flowing entirely. At last it was plain to all that he was dead. The sons wept and beat their chests, and the tanner's daughters took the body and washed it and scented it with flowers, though the odor of the vat was never entirely absent. They laid him out on his bed to watch and pray over him throughout the coming night.

News quickly spread around the vill, and soon neighbors and kinsmen had filled the house. They came to look upon the body and also to look upon the vat that had been his fatal end and the wicked stool that had brought that end about. Sometime that evening, after the priest had come and anointed the body and left again, it seemed to those gathered there that the entire room filled with such a sweet and pleasant odor that it was as if it had become a noble garden enclosed about not with rough wooden walls but fitted stone wrapped in flowering vines. And many of the people marveled at this and remembered that such aromas were said to accompany the deaths of saints. And yet everyone agreed that though this tanner was much beloved by his family and his neighbors, it could not be said that he led a saintly life, being given to drinking in excess and throwing dice. Indeed, though the splintered wood of the leg of the stool testified to the cause of the deadly mishap, some still whispered that the tanner had likely been stuporous with the blackberry wine that he oftentimes made, and that this was the true reason for his tumble into the vat, as well as, perhaps, the floral scent that surrounded the body.

And so some debated while others wailed until the early dark hours, when quite suddenly the delightful incense was chased away by a smell fouler and more pungent than the contents of any tanner's vat, stronger even than the latrine within a besieged

fortress. I vividly recall one fellow I knew from the village who described it to me years later in his colorful rustic way — which I must break and mangle and stretch to render it into a gentler language than that which was his own, as brutally as a calf is broken and mangled and stretched so that one may write gospels upon his beautiful skin. This fellow said that the smell was like kissing the asshole of a goat who had been fed nothing but cheese until his guts burst and became putrid and killed the goat, who collapsed in the dung-mire of a cattle pasture, where it was left to rot and bloat for seven days before being coated in lime and turned into bait for a vulture trap.

As before, many thought the odor was some kind of marvelous portent while some dismissed it as deriving simply from the tanner's trade and the way he met his end and, possibly, the corpse fouling itself. After some time, this, too departed and the room smelled only of an ordinary admixture of perfumed oils and acrid brine. But then a wonder undisputable occurred. This tanner, who had lain dead for the better part of a day and a night, sat up and startled everyone in the room, so that there was great confusion between his children who wanted to rush to their father's side with cries of joy and those villagers who wanted to rush out of the house with cries of terror, for it was by no means clear yet what the source of this corpse-movement was, be it true resurrection or the deception of a malign spirit. Some of the braver villagers, with equal fear but greater resolve, restrained the tanner's arms and feet and held him down until the priest could be summoned, though they had to be shielded from the man's sons, who tried to wrest them away from their father. But from the tanner himself they met no resistance, for though he was returned to life he was not yet returned to strength and lay weak and trembling, which was at least some reassurance that his body was not occupied by an alien spirit.

This was confirmed when the priest arrived and again anointed and blessed the tanner, who remained alive and calm throughout. The villagers told the priest about the unusual smells and their arrival and departure, and the priest was greatly amazed. He asked the tanner directly what these things betokened. The tanner said, plainly in words that were widely reported afterwards, that he recalled only awakening upon the side of a grassy hill — for he remembered nothing of the broken stool or his plunge into the vat or anything at all of that morning, which had faded for him as though that had been a dream, while what he witnessed in the wanderings of his spirit he could recollect as clearly and as vividly as any other memory of his earthly life. But this was learned afterwards, when he was questioned further about the accident. At this time he told the priest that, as I have said, he had awakened on the side of a grassy hill on which he wandered for some time until he was met by a guide dressed all in white. Whether this guide was a saint or an angel he did not say at that time nor any time since to living witnesses. And speaking now not so much to the priest but to the air, like one recalling a very old story, he said that he had been shown the delights of the blessed and the torments of the damned and the true ending of the world, along with other secrets, great and profound. And as he said this, he seemed to awaken anew and looked from the priest to his children to the crowd of villagers with a terrible expression, and then he began to wail as one who has seen his child slain. And he continued wailing and rending his untimely shroud until the sun had risen and daylight came into the room. At last, exhausted, he grew quiet, and once more the people asked him to say what he had seen. But now he replied boldly that he would never speak of it.

And so for many years he held fast to this vow. He remained true to it, despite the teasing and later the insults he received from some of the villagers, who insisted that it was all a falsehood, or at best that the drunkard had been frightened by a bad dream brought on by the knock to his skull. For unlike others who came back from death to prophesy the deaths of others or even of themselves, this tanner, true to his word, said nothing more and thereby offered nothing by which the truth of his vision could be tested. But he also had many who supported him and believed he had been touched by the divine and that his return from death was indisputably a special blessing. And they believed in his vision and said that even if he could not offer in words any further proof of it, the miracle of the odors attested to his experience, for, they said, the sweet odor arose while he was being shown the gardens of the blessed and the foul odor as he passed through the prison of the damned.

Here I interrupt my story to insert an interruption by another that occurred when I recently had occasion to tell it at bloodletting time. Again hear the keening voice of Frano the subcellarer, that marauder who will let no narrative pass the way unmolested. And here he waylaid no mere fable that I was not merely remembering from a book or repeating from someone else, but a story in which I myself bore witness to at least some of its events, so that his assault felt as though it were upon my own cart of belongings and not on some goods destined for the market.

He asked if these odors were indeed emanating from the tanner's body as it seemed, then did that mean that the substance of his body was in some strange way mingled with the substance of the other world. One fellow immediately responded that this was nonsense and that the body could not pass into the other world before it was

ultimately purified or condemned in the resurrection on Judgment Day, for none may enter the kingdom of heaven until then. But another replied that while that was true in ordinary circumstances, there were several instances of holy men and women being carried bodily into heaven, and even some examples of the wicked dragged bodily into the mouth of hell. Thus, any such prohibition was by divine custom rather than divine law. And yet another quite reasonably pointed out that in those famous cases body and soul were taken wholly from this earth, but that this was not so in the tanner's case, for his spirit had departed but his body remained on earth.

Frano then asked whether it might be the case that his spirit had not fully left his body, but that some part of it clung there like cobwebs stretched so that though they are invisible, one may yet feel them on one's face. And perhaps the odors were transmitted in this way, that as the man's spirit breathed in the substance of those places through which it traveled — the spirit being a breathing thing, interwoven with the air — it exhaled them via that tenuous channel from the body, just as one may breathe in through one's nose and exhale through one's mouth. Those of us in the infirmary pondered this for some time and meditated upon the various veins by which the spirit moves through the body (as we had previously wondered in the case of Ruma and his severed head). On the face of it, this notion seemed entirely unsound, but without authorities at hand we could not settle the issue decisively, and some, it must be said, turned their arguments from questions of nature and doctrine to questions of character and education, attacking each other's learning, giving themselves over to hurling boulders in the longstanding battle waged between Oxford and Paris. And all the while, Frano delighted in the tumult he had caused, like a child delighting in disturbing the stillness of a pond by lobbing stones into

it. But whereas on other occasions I would despair at such an intrusion into my story, this time I, too, could sit and smile, for I conceived how I might use my story to pose a question of my own to this young monk. And I waited as the argument dragged on. But unlike on that day, I can now silence this dispute with but a phrase, by saying simply: I resumed by narrative.

For a long time the tanner was ill and could not be long out of his bed before growing short of breath — and, indeed, he was weak in his lungs and voice for the remainder of his life, though he very seldom spoke, but gestured with his hands when he needed something — somewhat like a monk at work or at table, though with none of our art or practiced signs. He was unable in body and unwilling in spirit to return to his old trade, which he left to his sons, but when he had recovered sufficiently that he might walk to and fro unassisted, he removed himself from his cottage and made a new dwelling at the edge of his tannery. He drained one of the tanning pits and roofed it with rough timbers covered in sod, so that it resembled not so much a human habitation as a barrow-mound. Some therefore said he resented his resurrection and wished only to return to the grave, and thus by the village children he was called the Dead Man, as though he had never regained life.

On one occasion, monks of the abbey invited him to come with them and live under the Rule as an anchorite — which, indeed, would be a lighter burden than living little better than a beast in a burrow. But he refused them and preferred his lonely life, nor would he accept the food that some of the monks brought to him from time to time. As I have said, he almost never spoke to any visitor, though he was often seen talking to the empty air as he walked about the fields and the edges of the forest, though he always

grew silent whenever anyone approached close enough to more clearly hear his words. He was an object of some debate, for though he voluntarily lived a life of solitude and silence and contempt for worldly pleasures, passing his days in prayer and contemplation, his holiness was questioned because of the scorn he seemed to show to the abbey and the church — for thus was how some construed his disinterest in us. Many stood by him and likened him to St. Anthony, but others saw the filthiness of his living and the oddness of his lonesome conversations and called him a demoniac instead.

It was a proper monastic argument, which lasted years and was bitterly contested, all the while remaining as cloistered as those who maintained it, never leaving our walls and never stirring anyone to any action other than continuing the argument itself. And so it may ever have been, had not a disputatious clerk arrived and taken note of it. For his honor, ill-gotten though it may be, I shall withhold his name. He had studied the queen of sciences, theology, and had then been taken into the household of the Bishop of Worcester to procure books for the cathedral library. He came to us to oversee the production of a copy of the *Testimony of Tatwulf*, which at that time was not much known outside our district, for little care had been taken with it. But this fellow was very curious concerning visions and holy dreams and had made a great study of them and their relationship to precepts of philosophy. I was at that time a novice, but not much younger than him, and I spent many hours in conversation with him, for I envied him his learning and wished myself to one day copy and ornament and gloss a small piece of knowledge that we possessed, so I tried to make a book in my mind of all that he said.

One day as we rode together to the aforementioned tannery to see what fresh skins they had there that might be suitable for making into vellum, I was put in mind of the

Dead Man's vision and asked this clerk what he thought of it. He answered with some puzzlement that he had never heard of this thing, and so I occupied the remaining portion of the journey telling him the story much as I have told it here, except for the digression concerning Frano, who could scarcely have been born at that time.

“Such occurrences are not to be treated lightly,” he said. “The preservation of such visions has been the work of our noblest historians” — here I record only what he said and make no claims about my own uncouth and provincial tale-telling — “and if you hill-monks are content to be so careless with God's holy revelations, then I shall reap what you let lay fallow.” These words wounded me on behalf of my brothers, for I believed it was a fair accusation, for in those days I lamented the poverty of learning that I thought afflicted our abbey. Though now I see (this I said to my brethren still flush from their dispute over Frano's questions) that excess of learning brings its own affliction. And so, without leave or consultation with my elders, I took him to the living grave of the Dead Man, which lay not far from the road at the edge of the tannery grounds beside the river.

I had only seen the Dead Man on a few occasions before, and then only at a distance. We found him sitting atop his barrow like pagan giant, murmuring phrases that could have been prayers or curses or disordered gibberish or a mixture of all three. His hair was long and grey and matted with dirt, and his skin was dark and stretched over his bones so that one might easily imagine that the lime of the tanning pit were still working on him. As he took notice of us, he stilled his purple lips, but did not greet us or look us up and down or otherwise acknowledge our presence in any way, but stared at something that seemed to be standing some ways behind us. I can tell you that I now understand

how one may not easily tell whether one is in the presence of a saint or a fiend; many of us know this well enough from the way that a fiend may wear a smiling face and holy vestments, but the uncertainty is perhaps even more unsettling for the saint who seemingly dwells in the dungheap.

“I have come to hear the truth of the revelation given to you, so that the message of the Lord will be remembered and celebrated,” said the scholar of visions. The Dead Man now fixed his unblinking eyes upon the clerk but still said nothing. “Will you not speak with me?” cried my companion. The Dead Man, it seemed, would not. I had apprised him of both the Dead Man’s vow and his general silence, but the clerk trusted in his authority to compel the man to speech.

“It is, of course, right and proper that you conceal divine mysteries from the foolish and lewd, who cannot perceive them correctly. But you can share them with men of wisdom and learning, and, indeed, it is your duty as a Christian to do so.” Still the Dead Man said nothing.

“I have sat at the feet of the greatest living Doctors of the Church and have heard such profound truths expressed such as will never be comprehended by the yokels of these mountains, though it echo down every vale and chasm and resound in every cave till Judgment Day. What science do you possess that can better unfold the truth of God’s words than mine? By what authority do you hold back what was shared with you for the profit of all?”

As the clerk made this proclamation, the Dead Man appeared to grow bored and turned away from us, and even before the speech was concluded, he descended from the turf roof of his burrow and crawled into the hole that was its entrance. My companion

stamped the ground and bellowed like a bull and took the path that authority so often treads, advancing from righteous persuasion to violent compulsion. He ordered me to go within and drag out the man so that he might be questioned even more intensely.

“Because,” he said, “if his refusal does not come from a peasant’s mulish obstinance, then perhaps he does not answer because there is a fiend within him that fears being discovered and expelled by one of Christ’s servants.”

Oh, how I trembled and quailed, being equally afraid of persecuting a saint and wrestling with a demon. Nor was I any less fearful of entering that dark and unwelcoming place, for small though it must by all evidence be within, the blackness of that hole seemed to me to be an endless abyss.

“Get in there and pull the creature out,” commanded the clerk, “so that we might prove whether he is an honest badger or a deceitful fox.”

To my shame, I confess that I complied, bowing to his barking, more through fear and the desire to earn his esteem than through any necessary obedience. And yet though I must bear what blame is due me for my decision, I am at least spared responsibility for any accomplishment, for I failed to fulfil his command. I had but thrust my head into the hole — seeing nothing — and taking a single breath within that place, I immediately began to empty my stomach upon the threshold. Whether this was caused by the smell or my fear or the action of some secret power I cannot now say. But the clerk was disgusted with me and heaped abuse upon me, and we rode with neither skins nor vision back to the abbey in silence.

I am not so well informed about what happened directly upon our arrival, for I hid myself away and did not wish to have to recount the day to anyone. But I know that the

clerk went straightaway to the abbot to solicit a group of monks to accompany him back to the Dead Man to make a fuller inquiry and perhaps perform an exorcism if the hermit remained blasphemously recalcitrant. The abbot, who I expect far better perceived the trouble such a spectacle would cause amongst the villagers, flatly refused this request and prohibited any monks from interacting with the Dead Man for the time being.

This seemed to confirm for the clerk the smallness of our minds and the dullness of our curiosity — nor, I expect, was he pleased to be denied the chance to be the first recorder and expounder of a novel vision rather than a rehearser of the expositions of the Doctors and historians before him. And so, under the cover of night, he left the abbey, taking with him his own servant and one of the lay brethren whom he could convince was not subject to the abbot's proscription. What happened then was, for a long time, known only to a few. In the early hours, shortly after I had risen from my first sleep to observe Nocturns, the lay servant came to me, knowing that I had become a friend to the clerk during his visit with us. He was half-crazed in his manner and insisted that I follow him to the Dead Man's hermitage. Full of concern, I went with him, even though I knew I would be sharply punished if my departure were discovered. As we traveled, he told me in disordered fragments what had happened, so that only with great difficulty could I reassemble the narrative.

They had arrived at the designated place, and the clerk's servant — a rough man as much a bodyguard as a steward — plunged without hesitation into the hole and pulled out the Dead Man by his ankles, much as he had once been pulled from his first place of death. In the beginning, the clerk once more applied honeyed words and flattery to try to win the man's full tale, but when this did not work, he attempted to wring it from him

instead. They lacked the artfully wrought tools of interrogation that one might find in a king's or bishop's dungeon, but instead they used the strength of the clerk's servant to bind the man's feet and bend back his arms, and our lay brother was given holy water to pour down his throat and into his ears and nose so that the holy truth or the infernal demon might be either washed out of him or drowned once and for all. At first, the brother told me, the hermit bore the abuse as silently and pliantly as a holy corpse. But once he began choking on the water, he thrashed and struggled as any mortal thing. When he seemed on the verge of a second death, the clerk asked him a final time, "Will you not now speak to me and unburden yourself of this knowledge that has stuck in your silent throat like bread in the throat of an infant not yet weaned from milk, as the Apostle says?" And then this Lazarus began to speak.

I could not elicit from the lay brother any account of his words. He would only say that they were terrible things, and that he only heard them for a moment before it seemed he became sick almost unto death and fled from the place like a man on fire. His only thought was to get to the abbey and bring someone who might stop it. I do not know why he thought this was in my power, except that being a friend to the clerk I might be able to draw him away.

When we came to the dreadful place, the clerk's servant was nowhere to be found, and was never heard from again, as far as I know. The Dead Man was unbound and sitting atop his hovel, as was his custom. From the blood that streamed from his mouth, we understood (as was later confirmed by his children) that his tongue was gone, though whether he had bitten it off in a raving fit or whether it had been cut out none could say.

The bishop's clerk we found a short distance away, hanging by his neck from the upper beam of one of the frames on which skins are dried and scraped.

The rest of the story I may pass over but briefly. The lay brother did not return with me to the abbey, but vanished down the road presumably in the same tracks as the clerk's servant, whether to go to his own perdition or a kind of resurrection into a new life elsewhere I do not know. I was left to convey to the abbot what had happened as best I understood it, steeling myself for the direst of penances. But the abbot asked nothing of me but my discretion — which perhaps I have not kept as well as I ought, but such time has passed (as has the abbot) that little harm may come from it. For the clerk was a man of noble family, and I learned that they told everyone else that he had been thrown from his horse in the dark and broken his neck, so that he might be buried in consecrated ground. Privately, the abbot instructed me to learn well the wiles of the devil, who with lies can lead even the wisest to mortal sin through the force of despair.

This lesson in no way do I repudiate, for I have stories aplenty of learned men deceived and ruined by devils and evil spirits. But this is not the lesson I take from the example of the Dead Man, for the story was not yet over when the abbot said these words to me. Not long after this, the Dead Man died again, this time to rise no more till Judgment Day. But at his death, I went to his dwelling and stood there with his children and neighbors and breathed in the wondrous, blessed smell that came from that pit which had never before been anything but nauseating. And so I do not believe that a devil spoke to the clerk; rather, it was a true mystery that scorched the mind of our lay brother and drove the scholar to quit this life by his own hand, whether it be sin or not. And so (I said to young Frano as the bloodletting was concluded), know that the unexplored mystery is

no toy puzzle to be trifled with, for meaning, like those unformed bear cubs, may at last take its shape and break one's neck in its jaws. For a time, this put an end to his games of questions, but curiosity is no easier to root out than a grapevine, which rises again from the ground seasons later to perturb the field. Now this Frano puts his talents to somewhat better use in composing Yuletide riddles that give us far greater pleasure, though not without the occasional disputation.

What more? Only this, that the Dead Man was not buried in his living grave as a poet might expect. We removed him and gave him proper burial in the churchyard near where his wife, too, had long lain. No shrine was made at his hermitage nor any relics gathered, and his sons tore it down and returned it to profit as the tanning pit it had formerly been. But time has shown that the skins that come from that pit have made the finest vellum and been rendered into the finest books our little scriptorium has ever produced.

So I say to you, my friend, that we must be wary of the marvels and mysteries we question. But lest you be left imagining that the winds of truth can leave nothing but a barren plain and a wasteland haunted by devils, let me conclude this little tract with the story of a dangerous inquiry that nonetheless comes to a happy end, and let it guide you as decide to what further trials you wish to subject my humble account of the holy life and miracles of Tatwulf, our spiritual protector and advocate.

*The Legend of the
Anchorite*



A certain keep stood on top of a rocky hill. This hill was renowned throughout the region as a holy place, for at its base among the fallen boulders and gravel there was a famous cave. In earlier times,

the cave was held to be a place of great evil, an abode of unclean spirits. But a knight, seeking a test of his courage and piety, adventured into the cave. Three days later, he emerged and told how he had done battle with a number of devils within who sorely tried and tempted him. At times he thought he was surely lost, but at each moment of fear he had but to call out the name of Christ our Lord, and the devils would retreat. At last, he knelt down in prayer, and an angel of heaven appeared to him, lighting up the cave with celestial radiance. The angel showed the knight many wonders, things known only to the saints and prophets. With the angel's blessing, the knight was able to cast the devils down into hell in our Savior's name. After the knight told this tale, he set down his martial life and was consecrated by the bishop. For some years he lived as a monk in a nearby abbey, but he desired a life of still greater devotion. He would often return to the cave to pray and was regularly visited with visions there. Eventually, he asked to be walled up in the cave, where he would live the rest of his life in prayer as an anchorite. Many years went by in which the anchorite lived in solitary communion with our Lord and his angels. Thus it passed until such time as there were none still alive who could recall the anchorite's face.

At this time, the keep and its lands experienced a season of unusual prosperity. The lord returned from a glorious campaign abroad, bearing riches. The crops and livestock flourished, providing an abundance for the lord's feast. As Fortune's wheel turned to the lord's favor, he brought to the keep many fine craftsmen and performers, distributing his wealth to those who might increase his renown.

One of these was a cook of great skill. He created marvelous dishes from the products of the land's plenitude and was much esteemed among all of the lord's servants.

One day, this cook decided to take some mincemeat pastries down to the anchorite beneath the keep to share with him God's generous bounty. He found the cave's entrance with difficulty, for it was overgrown with scrub and the path had not been swept clear of fallen rock in some time. In these days, the anchorite had few visitors besides the occasional pilgrim who would come seeking the wisdom of this holy man's visions.

The cave had a foul odor and little light came in beyond the entrance. The cook had to feel about himself as he made his way forward, carrying the pastries wrapped in cloth in one hand and groping along the cold stone with the other. When the cell was built, the monks had selected an alcove in the back of the cave and constructed a rough but sturdy wall from the broken rocks that littered the foot of the hill. When it was completed, it could hardly be distinguished from the natural stone around it. The anchorite communicated to the outside world through a narrow chink between two stones. This passage was small and angled, so that it was impossible to see into the cell; only sound could pass between. Originally there had been a small window here, though which he might receive the Eucharist, but this had been crushed long ago by the weight of the settling stones. It is said that the only sustenance this holy man required was the water that dripped constantly down the walls of his cell and the small, translucent insects that crept along the floor of the cave. This the cook did not know, being a newcomer in that region.

At first, the cook did not recognize the cell at all and called out to see if anyone was there. The cave seemed silent but for the small murmurs of wind and water. Then, though, he thought he heard a reply. Finding the chink, he put his ear to it, feeling the

cool draft that flowed out from within. He heard a voice that was little more than a whisper on the wind.

“Yes, my child,” it said, “what have you come seeking?”

“I seek nothing. I have brought you some of my pastries, which have brought delight to my master, and wished to share the delight with you. But I do not see how I can pass them to you through the wall.”

“You cannot; nothing can pass between us but words and blessings.”

The cook was disappointed, fearing his journey to this unpleasant cave had been for naught. To comfort himself, he sat beside the chink and began to eat the pastries. As he considered the cave and the wall of the cell, he was struck with wonder.

“What, if I may ask, do you eat and what do you drink?” he asked into the chink.

“The Lord provides. I lick the water from the walls: this is my honey. I eat the vermin that crawl between the stones: these are my locusts.”

“Surely for such privation you will be handsomely rewarded at heaven’s feast!” exclaimed the cook.

“Ah, child,” said the voice through the chink, “I have seen the joys of heaven; there is no feast. There is no food in heaven.”

“No food in heaven? But surely heaven must have the most perfect food! The finest meat, the most exquisite wines!” cried the cook.

“Our sustenance is but a product of this temporal world. Eternity has no death, no decay; likewise it has need of growth, no need of nourishment. Meat partakes of death, wine of decay. Digestion is a process of this changeable and material world. Heaven, eternal and unchanging, has no place for such crude consumption, nor need of cooks.”

Upon hearing this, the cook was sorely distressed. He returned to the keep where he paced the length of the hall, too agitated even to direct his servants in preparing the evening meal. In the hall there was a painter who was engaged in decorating the lord's chambers with scenes of hospitality and merry-making. This painter spoke to the cook from his scaffolding, asking what troubled him.

"I have just heard that they have no need of cooks in heaven, nor of the finest confection I could prepare," cried the cook.

"Ah, no doubt it is true," replied the painter. "Food is but a passing pleasure. Look how it rots away almost before your eyes." The painter then indicated a dish of apples and grapes and exotic fruits in the scene of a great feast which he was applying to the wall.

"But these," he said, "will remain here for all to enjoy without decay. With my brush and knife I have made them eternal, like the pleasures of heaven themselves."

The cook pouted and fluttered his hand. "No, no. Your paint will chip off and the wall behind it will crumble and all will be ruin. What need has heaven for painters? What celestial stone will tolerate a stain?"

The painter's confidence was shaken by the cook's sharp words and forlorn expression. He sat for a long time at the top of his scaffolding, until his pigments had all dried up.

After a time there entered into the hall a singer of tales. This creature had only recently arrived at the keep but had already received a fine new cloak trimmed with catskin in recognition of his poetic skill. He observed the painter's legs dangling from the top of the scaffold and greeted him cheerily. The painter made no reply.

“What has stricken you, friend?” called out the singer. “It seems to me that you have lost all your color!”

“Seems it so? Indeed, it is so. Tell me, do you think we will find paintings in heaven? The finest ever created?”

“What notion is this that perturbs you so?” replied the singer. “As I think on it, I see no reason why there should be paintings in heaven. What is a painting but a surface representation, a mere imitation of God’s creation. Heaven has no place for mere substitutes, and much less for distortions of line and tricks of shade.”

The painter, indignant, barked back. “Then I say what place does heaven have for the imitations of life and knowledge that you squawk every night? How could one stand before the throne of God with a throat full of nothing but lies and fantasies?”

“You are a right fool, for everyone knows that even Christ taught through parables,” cried the singer, though his heart was squeezed tight in his chest. He then left the painter and went to speak with the lord’s confessor.

The lord’s confessor was in the chapel, reading about the lives of the most holy martyrs from a marvelously ornamented volume that the lord of the keep had acquired in his campaigns. The singer knelt beside the priest and unburdened his troubled mind.

“Father, is it not true that in heaven, the choirs of saints and angels sing songs all day and all night?”

“Yes,” replied the lord’s confessor. “That is so.”

“Then shall I be able to sing my songs in Paradise?”

“What an idea!” cried the lord’s confessor. “First, you should be careful lest your pride and sinful life keep you from Paradise at all. And second, the saints and angels sing

to God only psalms of praise, songs composed by devout and holy men. What use has God for tales of this world? What use has God for words recalling the exploits of heathen warriors and earthly kings? The vision of the world that you can encompass with all your verse is not even a pinhole into the truth that God perceives of everything that has ever been or will be. God knows all endings before they even have beginnings, so how can your meager rhetoric hold His unbounded attention?"

The singer quaked, his mood twisting from the flames of anger to the ice of fear and back again, as one beset with fever. "If this is so," he said, "what use has God of words at all, holy or profane? If they cannot even express the truth about men, how can they express any truth about God? I have heard your tales of saints and your descriptions of Paradise; how is your rhetoric any less meager than mine?"

With this, the singer left the chapel before the lord's confessor could make reply, but even a long time later, when it had grown too dark to read any more from the book, the priest was still pondering what response he might have made.

That evening, the lord of the keep found his hall deprived of all its usual pleasures. No songs were being sung. There were no lamps on the scaffolding illuminating the painted images of his great beneficence. When the servants brought out only cold porridge to eat, the lord could bear no more. He turned to his confessor, who sat stooped in a dark mood, and asked what had wrought this dreadful change.

They first called out for the singer of tales, who was found engaged in most dissolute acts in one of the outbuildings of the keep, and brought him before the lord in a state of profound drunkenness. The lord's confessor asked the singer what had prompted his questions of the afternoon, to which the singer replied at length, though the only truly

intelligible response he made was to point to where the painter lay amidst his pigments and palettes at the top of the scaffolding.

“Come down from there,” said the lord’s confessor, “and tell us who has put these thoughts into your head, for scaffolding alone has surely not brought you any closer to heaven.”

In his turn, the painter rehearsed his conversation with the cook, and thereafter a search of the kitchen found the cook sitting utterly forlorn atop a sack of onions. Upon being pressed, the cook revealed his conversation with the anchorite, and shortly thereafter a torch-lit procession of the entire court wound down the path from the keep to the bottom of the hill, and a great crowd pressed into the dank and dripping cave.

In the cave, they compelled the cook to point out the chink in the wall, and the lord’s confessor approached and called within.

“Is it true,” he asked, “that you have said that there will be no food or appetite in Paradise?” All watched as the lord’s confessor pressed his ear to the chink, though none but he could hear the faint reply.

After a moment, the lord’s confessor nodded. “But if that is so, does it follow that there is no place for painted images and other creations of handicraft?” Again he pressed his ear to the wall, and those assembled barely breathed.

“And what of tales and other verbal arts? Do you say that these, too, are but earthly semblances, that have no place with the Divine?”

Once more the crowd watched the lord’s confessor in silence.

“But surely,” he said, after another long moment, “that cannot be true of the writings of monks and priests, who are dedicated to lives of the spirit. Such work is not perishable or corruptible. It is the very action of divinity on earth.”

After this question, the lord’s confessor remained attentive to whatever whispers he heard from the wall for a long time. When he at last withdrew his ear from the chink, he sank to the ground and sat with his eyes closed. As yet more time passed, the crowd in the cave began to grow restless. One complained of hunger. One of shorter stature complained loudly of being unable to see what was happening, while another, being somewhat deaf, complained even more loudly about not being able to hear what was said. The singer had vomited, and the atmosphere in the cave had become somewhat oppressive.

Finally, the lord’s confessor stood up and addressed them all, his hands raised above his ears and his voice quavering.

“A great and distressing truth has been revealed to me tonight,” he said, “and I see now how we have nearly succumbed to a terrible folly.” He lowered one of his hand and pointed with it towards the wall. “It is now plain that the most holy anchorite who removed himself from the world and into this cave is dead. His blessed soul went to heaven no doubt long ago, and without his holy guardianship, the devils have returned to this cave, to lead the souls of the weak and gullible into despair.”

With that, he ordered the chink in the wall sealed up. One of the lord’s masons attended to this task while all assembled sang a most devout hymn, composed, they say, by the lord’s confessor himself. Afterwards, all returned to the hall and rejoiced at their victory over the devil’s wiles. I, Aethelweg, learned this story from one who visited this

very keep and who saw this very cave, and who testified that the masonry was so miraculously skillful that none could tell where the anchorite's wall or the chink had been. Indeed, this vile abode looked like nothing so much as a natural cave, so that none might know how to seek out the devil's favors there again. And so I record this miracle, for the preservation of our works and the salvation of our souls. Amen.

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