

Stephen Gordon, *Supernatural Encounters: Demons and the Restless Dead in Medieval England, c. 1050-1450*; Studies in Medieval History and Culture (London & New York: Routledge, 2020) ebook, 231 pp., RRP USD 51.79; ISBN 9780429432491



Review

Born in part from Stephen Gordon's 2013 doctoral dissertation, though without its dual focus on archaeological and literary evidence, *Supernatural Encounters* promises to examine the form and development of the medieval English belief in revenants. These are essentially the reanimated corpses of dead people, often called the 'restless' or 'ambulant' dead, the 'undead', or even 'embodied ghosts' in secondary scholarship or translations. A modern ghost is the incorporeal spirit of a deceased person, but a medieval ghost could also have referred to a 're-energised' or 'demonically-activated' corpse. In contemporary popular culture, such phenomena might superficially be identified as zombies, except that these medieval revenants were not mindless, even when controlled by a demon, and were very much identifiable as their previously alive selves, through their personality, their actions, and most importantly, their speech.

The introduction to *Supernatural Encounters* begins with a useful, if brief, overview of recent and influential scholarship on medieval revenants as well as an examination of the idiosyncratic, ambiguous, and even obfuscatory, medieval terminology used to describe them. However, the subsequent chapters (excepting the last one) each take but a single text as their main focus, and through this literary

analysis, Gordon aims to show how 'the belief in – or, more precisely, the *acknowledgement* of the belief in – the walking corpse seems to have been an entrenched, if porous and malleable, socio-cultural 'text' of the medieval period in general' (p. 3).

Gordon opens chapter one with a literary analysis of the Witch of Berkeley from William of Malmesbury's early-twelfth century *Gesta regum Anglorum*, while the second half of this chapter is a reception history of this digression. The brevity and clear morality of the original allowed it to take on a life of its own outside of *Gesta* and become a universal text adaptable to any situation, flavoured by the specific eschatological fears contemporary to each author and illustrator from the thirteenth through to the nineteenth century. Where the Witch of Berkeley was an historical *prestigio*, having occurred in the 1040s, but recorded in the 1140s, in chapter two we have a literary analysis of recent ambulatory corpses reported in William of Newburgh's *Historia rerum Anglicarum* in the context of contemporary political upheaval with the absence of the king and popular revolt in London, as well as widespread crop failure and famine within written in the last decade of the twelfth century. This is because '[t]he macrocosm (monstrous kingship) and the microcosm (monstrous corpses) were inextricably linked' in contemporary attitudes (p. 87). Together, chapters one and two make a strong argument for reading the appearance of restless corpses within medieval literature as not just being a commentary upon the character of the dead person, but a meta-commentary upon society and political governance (or its lack) as a whole.

The next three chapters all take a more theological angle, beginning with Walter Map's *De nugis curialium*, a subversive and satirical commentary on contemporary society also written in the same period as *Historia* featuring four revenants and how to quell their restlessness. There is nothing novel about the actions of Walter Map's unquiet dead – itself a sign of how very commonplace the belief was – but he does present two different approaches to dealing with them. The traditional approach was for suspected corpses to be exhumed, dismembered, and decapitated, but Map also has one revenant who engages in conversation with their living kin advising them that though they had once been doomed to hell, through the intercession of prayer their soul was now free to ascend to heaven and their body was free to naturally decompose. This novel interaction paves the way for chapter four, which begins with an overview of the doctrine of Purgatory and the variation between official theological eschatology and popular belief in corporeal revenants between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. The primary literary subject of this chapter is the late fourteenth century *Festial* of John Mirk, a popular collection of lay sermons, specifically the burial sermon, which details the rites for how the body travels from the deathbed to the church to the grave, and which provided a template on how to avoid the return of the dead. With his analysis of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Friar's Prologue and Tale* in chapter five, Gordon continues this theological examination through a thorough literary analysis of the conversation between the Devil and a Summoner about the nature of demonic possession and whether in fact it was sometimes the literal possession of a (dead) body.

Chapter six takes a very different approach by examining the phenomena of the nightmare, firstly through a modern medical and psychological explanation, and secondly through an overview of the ancient and medieval medical and theological explanations, before finishing with a curious shift to early modern vampiric encounters. Finally, the epilogue shifts gear into a post-medieval discussion of how the belief in revenants persisted despite the Protestant reformations having effected a profound change in Christian eschatology. The removal of many layers of mediation between the individual and God – such as through the sudden denial of Purgatory as a concept, the rejection of the intercessory power of the saints, and the dissolution of the monasteries – also removed any ambiguity surrounding the agency and purpose of the revenant which became a purely devilish phenomenon.

Although it was Gordon's intention for each chapter to provide a 'close reading of a particular text ... [rather than] to evaluate the entire corpus of undead encounters from England c. 1050–1450' (pp. 13–14), and he acknowledges that this has made *Supernatural Encounters* 'a collection of essays' (p. 224), the structure of his book could have been more effective. Material is reiterated unnecessarily across chapters, such as with the reanalysis of William of Newburgh's *Historia* in chapter one, two, and six, or the outline of the doctrine of Purgatory in chapter three and four. The discussion of the terminology for revenants is spread unsatisfactorily throughout the book with the discussion of *prestigio* in chapter one, *miracula* and *mirabilia* in chapter two, and *spiritum* in chapter four, while other terms are discussed in the introduction. These issues are all arguably the result of chapters two, three, and six – almost half of

the whole book – having previously been published as individual journal articles. This leads to a sense of disjointedness, of the book being less a monograph and more an edited collected of single-author essays, which is emphasised by each chapter having an individual bibliography. Many of these issues could have been improved upon through more judicious editing of the main chapters and the expansion of the introduction, but especially through having chapter six as the sophomore chapter of this book. When chapter six is read first, many of the points Gordon makes in the previous chapters become more meaningful and the broader vision of the medieval English eschatological landscape becomes far clearer.

As it stands, *Supernatural Encounters* is an interesting book which has a number of excellent insights into medieval literature and society. The way in which the texts Gordon has chosen utilise revenants for various literary purposes demonstrate how very prevalent the belief in revenants was across these centuries. While *Supernatural Encounters* is by no means an introductory level text regarding the concept of medieval revenants, it should in fact be read widely by many different specialists to ensure that medieval revenants, alongside other supernatural phenomena, are not relegated to the fringes of modern scholarship, but are instead analysed as fundamental to medieval Christian thought and society.

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