Critical proposal

My research project aims to look at the medieval legend ‘The Three Living and the Three Dead’ and other *danse macabre* images and literature not only as manifestations of medieval anxiety about the plague and the judgment of God, but as an early form of ghost story, and to study the progression of that story from a Christian perspective to a secularization of fear of death.

Scholars have often cited the ravages of the plague as the root of the *danse macabre* motif,¹ but if one removes it from a specific historical context, it is no less frightening. It depicts, often in grisly detail, skeletons and decomposing corpses startling unsuspecting people out for a walk or a hunt. This reveals what I believe is an important aspect of its nature: it is an expression of fear. Fear of what is not the point. Indeed, it has since been noted that the motif appeared before the outbreak of plague²,³. It is fear that the patron who commissioned *danse macabre* art and the artists who painted it were trying to express. That fear – whether fear of the plague, or fear of the monster who lives in the woods – is at the bottom of every horror story ever told. As fears became more secular, so did horror stories.

I believe, then, that ‘The Three Living and the Three Dead’ motif and danse macabre in general can be looked at productively not only in historical terms but as expressions of fear of death, and of the need to neutralize such fears by dramatizing them in supernatural tales. I propose to examine the development of that literature and art from its earlier theological forms through its later secular forms, not in causative but rather in analogical terms.

Danse macabre has been inspiring artists and writers for hundreds of years. There is a large body of research on danse macabre images and literature, including critical analysis and studies on the motif’s historical and theological origins; and a more limited body of research on the origins of horror. I propose in my research to examine the scholarship of each and look for common themes.

As Robert Bartlett has noted, the term ‘supernatural’ appeared in the Middle Ages ‘as a significant tool for organizing thought’. To doubt supernatural events or miracles was to doubt the limits of God’s power. In medieval terms, fear of death meant fear of God or egesa:

...and a wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment.

Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.

For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?

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This fear gave the medieval imagination much incentive to roam. ‘The Three Living and the Three Dead’ seems to have first appeared in thirteenth century French poetry;\(^8\) countless images and woodcuts soon followed. It expressed very clearly a preoccupation with death. The medieval view of death was the Christian view, based on its message of triumph over death through eternal salvation. It represented a sea change from the pagan view of the dead as worthy of honour but also to be kept separate and feared,\(^9\) and the medieval preoccupation with it can be seen, among other places, in the Ars moriendi tradition.\(^10\)

Still, the medieval view of death was also shaped in part by the idea that non-corporeal forces had the power to influence human relations.\(^11\) This cultural view can be seen in a story, set down by a monk of Byland Abbey, of Snowball, a tailor who meets the disembodied spirit of an excommunicate in the woods in three separate corporeal forms.\(^12\) It can also perhaps be seen in a thirteenth century manuscript that tells of three Mesopotamian monks who journey through the wilderness to find ‘the place where heaven and earth join’.\(^13\)

--- Ecclesiastes 8. 5-7\(^7\)

\(^7\) Bible, King James Version, Bible Gateway.
Later, as belief in God ceased to be a universal view, fear of God mutated into a more general fear of death, and with that secularization of fear of death, we needed other ways in which to express that fear. The expression of fear of death can be seen in early pagan and Christian folk tales; in Grendel, who, after all, lives in a cave in the swamp near the castle; in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer’s *The Pardoner’s Tale* and the witches in Macbeth; and in the oft-used supernatural theme of meeting the bogeyman in the woods, whether that bogeyman comes in the form of the hag in *Hansel and Gretel*, the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, or Death itself in W. Somerset Maugham’s retelling of an old tale in ‘The Appointment in Samarra’.

The common theme running from the pre-Christian through the medieval to the modern is fear of death. ‘The Three Living and the Three Dead’, then, can be viewed as a stage in the development of expressing that fear.

My project will require a study of the iconographic and literary evolutions of the tale. I will begin my research by examining the theological origins of *egesa*, *Ars moriendi* and the medieval attitude toward death, beginning with the *Visio Pauli*. There may also be a connection to be made between the imagery of meeting death in the woods and the burgeoning interest, especially in Britain, in woodland burials and their possible relation to the concept of ‘Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’. I will then make studies of death and *danse macabre* motifs in literature, starting with Anglo-Saxon *Soul and Body* poetry, the *Blickling Homilies* (*Blickling 10*, in particular), *Judgment Day*, and ‘Erthe upon Erthe’; thence moving on to the French poem ‘Les Trois Mortes et les Trois Vifs’, poems by John Audelay and John Lydgate, Charles Baudelaire’s ‘corpse poems’, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s ‘Totentanz’, and

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Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. While my focus will be primarily literary, I would also like to make a brief study of the motif in art, including representations on church walls, in the woodcuts of Hans Holbein the Younger, and in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.

Finally, I will review the theological and literary scholarship for signs of common themes between theology, art and literature. Even if an absolute causal connection cannot be proved, there are enough corollaries to suggest a common emotional connection and set of concerns present in supernatural tales between the medieval mind and the present.

My research would benefit from the resources of the Institute of Mediaeval Studies at the University of St Andrews, and would also likely take me to the British Library, the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, and to several churches throughout the United Kingdom where notable depictions of The Three Living and The Three Dead survive on church walls, including the Holy Trinity Church, Wensley, North Yorkshire.

The critical dissertation will complement my creative dissertation. As I uncover preoccupations and themes present in medieval theology and art, I can draw on those to inform the creative portion of my dissertation.

It may be, as Manuel Aguirre posits, that scholars do not view any aspect of horror literature as worthy of study. But if we believe the argument put forth by Aristotle in *Poetics*, that we learn through contemplating the reproduction of ‘objects which in themselves we view with pain’, and that tragedy helps us purge emotions such as fear by imitating them; and if supernatural tales themselves can be considered to be

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serious fiction worthy of study – *The Turn of the Screw*, for example – then an
examination of the origin and development of such stories and what needs they fulfil
is not only legitimate, but a valuable step in understanding human nature.

Creative proposal

Three princes go hawking in the woods. They halt in fear, confronted with three
corpses standing in the path. The princes fear the corpses are devils sent to torment
them, but the corpses have come on an even more frightening mission: a reminder
that the three princes will die.

‘As you are, we once were,’ one corpse says. ‘As we are, so shall you be.’

The story is the legend of The Three Living and the Three Dead, a medieval *memento
dori* reminding the living to be prepared for death at all times.

The novel I propose to write will rewrite the tale for modern times. Part
supernatural tale, part tragedy, part darkly comic, it will focus on three men who are
so miserable -- discouraged by the daily struggle to provide for their families, trying
to find some meaning to life amid the money- and possessions-worshipping modern
world, and heartbroken at the shattering of the bedrock idea that if you work hard
you will succeed -- that they are willing to exchange bodies with three phantoms they
meet one night coming home from a pub.

Harry, a high school history teacher, has been brought low by financial troubles. He
owes $50,000 in student loans, the state is freezing wages and cutting pensions for
teachers, and he’s struggling to hang onto the family home in which he grew up and
now lives with his wife and children. Cold Spring, a postcard village in upstate New
York, was a working-class community when his father bought the house in 1960.
Now the town has gone upmarket, and rising property values have left Harry owing
much more in property taxes than his teacher’s salary can cover.
Machlown (he’s gone by his last name since he was old enough to reject ‘Alvin’) has end-stage pancreatic cancer and can’t get treatment because he has no health insurance.

A.J. has been financing his lavish lifestyle with credit cards and loans from loan sharks. Now the bills are coming due, and he is overwhelmed with dunning calls and letters, and dodging the loan sharks.

The three friends get together one night to drown their sorrows at McGuire’s pub, and, stumbling home, they meet the three dead. The three dead propose a temporary switch. They want to live again for a little while. Harry, A.J. and Machlown think it would be a relief to be dead, so why not?

After a while, some parties find themselves regretting the deal, but when some try to trade back, others aren’t so willing.

The phantom inhabiting A.J.’s body is all too anxious to ditch the identity that has him being pursued by bill collectors and loan sharks, but A.J. is happy to sit back and watch as the enforcers pursue the phantom instead of him. Machlown’s phantom, too, is ready to give back the body he borrowed as he writhes under the pain of the cancer rotting it from the inside out. Machlown is satisfied to be done with the pain and already dead.

As for Harry, he finds he’s exchanged one hell for another. He’s forced to watch as his phantom has sex with his wife, neglects his kids and stops paying the mortgage, forcing his wife to take a second job to try to feed the family and hold on to the house. He tries to switch bodies, but the phantom isn’t giving his up. The final straw comes when he watches helplessly through a window as the phantom hits his wife. Harry thinks at first to find the phantom another body by killing some stranger and offering that body instead, but he can’t bring himself to do it. He realizes the only
way he’s going to get his body back is to take it -- by killing himself, or, rather, the body that used to be his.

The nature of the subject matter naturally means there will be macabre humour, but this will not be a campy comedy. It will essentially be a dark tale, like the original legend. The problems of modern people are not so very different from those of their Medieval predecessors -- poor wages, no recourse in time of illness, a disregard for the welfare of working people by the powerful, and the exalting of money and possessions. In a sense, though, perhaps because of the lack of a universal belief in God and the comfort that provided, the scale of the problems have changed what we fear. We develop our religious systems, like all our other social systems, based on needs, but also based on emotions, including fear. This is the mechanics of belief. In the Middle Ages, the greatest fear was death, because then one faced the judgment of God. So we developed a belief system that sought to explain how we could survive that judgment. Thus *memento mori*. ‘Remember that you will die.’ If we reminded ourselves of this constantly, and did good works to compensate for our sins, we could survive the judgment of God. That provided comfort.

For many people now, the fear is of living; but we lack a universal belief system to allay that fear. Without it, modern life for many feels empty. The god of money has not filled the void, neither has the god of more money, or the god of credit-default swaps, or of Facebook or Twitter. That is why I chose this legend. In the novel, the dead fear their position, but so do the living. By flipping the folk tale on its head, I can explore the nature of fear and suffering within the modern paradigm.

I will use research from the critical portion of my thesis to develop and inform the themes of the novel. Fear of death expresses itself in certain figurations and symbols. In my critical research, I will be examining the iconography and themes of *danse*
Dancing With Death: Following the trail of supernatural tales to *danse macabre* in art, literature and poetry. Finding those themes – accessing the primary sources of that fear, if you like – will help me develop themes I can use in the novel.
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