

Spring 2014

What a Bunch of Tools: Zombie Saints and Their Use Within Medieval Communities

Ciera Baur

University of Colorado Boulder

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

Recommended Citation

Baur, Ciera, "What a Bunch of Tools: Zombie Saints and Their Use Within Medieval Communities" (2014). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 41.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.

What A Bunch of Tools:
Zombie Saints and Their Use Within Medieval Communities

By Ciera Yvonne Baur
English Departmental Honors Thesis
University of Colorado at Boulder

Defended April 8, 2014

Thesis Advisor
Tiffany Beechy, Department of English

Defense Committee
Jane Garrity, Department of English
Rolf Norgaard, Program of Writing and Rhetoric

Abstract

As though interwoven through the threads of our very being, humans have always obsessed over death, what lies beyond, and ways to escape its inevitable grasp. Possessed by this need to understand and conquer death, we have created stories and characters that serve as mediums through which we attempt to explain, and incorporate, death peacefully into our communities and daily lives. This thesis focuses on this phenomenon through the scope of the living dead saints of the Middle Ages, concentrating directly on instances of undead saints found in the most widely disseminated, read, and recounted collection of saints lives of the time, *The Golden Legend*.

Looking at these tales, this thesis will consider the original context for the word “zombi” (found in 18th century Haiti) and how these instances of the living dead relate to the undead saints of the Middle Ages, in that they both order the community and mediate between a fallen world and desired transcendence. By closely examining these tales of living dead saints and their relics, this thesis uncovers how the medieval community utilized the undead saint’s liminal status as a tool through which the community mitigated and alleviated the anxieties and problems of death, as well as offered hope for what lay beyond. Finally, this thesis considers major cultural responses and critiques of this veneration of living dead saints through the scope of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Prioress’ Tale*, which serves as a cultural representation of dissent found against the usage of the undead saint in the Middle Ages.

Section I: When The Dead Come Marching In

“You keep adding many corpses newly dead to the corpse of long ago.... You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchers”- Julian the Apostate (Brown 7).

The zombie takeover has already begun. Zombies are more prevalent in today's society than ever before. Every household across America, and debatably across the world, has a connection to the essential living dead idea in some way shape or form; whether it be through television, movies, New York Times bestselling novels, or rambunctious zombie crawls going on down the street, there are few places one can hide in today's world society that has not been touched by the ghoulish hands of the undead. The concept of the living dead, however, extends far past today's 21st century interpretations. As this thesis discovers, prominent representations of the resurrected dead existed within the literature and cultural sphere of the Middle Ages. Frequently pointed out to me by those interested in my topic, Jesus himself was a living dead character of sorts. He is, after all, the most famed man to have risen from the grave—but he is not the only one. Frequently overlooked are the men and women who followed in the centuries after Jesus' grandiose resurrection, who preached the teachings of Christianity, and in their immense holiness, rose from the grave, in some way, after their demise: saints.

There exists a long history before and throughout the Middle Ages of saints coming back to life in various forms after their publicly witnessed deaths. Recorded accounts and folkloric Christian tales of saints have endured from as early as Late Antiquity in 300 CE. They take multiple forms, such as that of a ghost of a martyr who visits believers in moral crisis, to appearances in the dreams of those who visit their shrines. They appear, also, as physical, raised corpses, untouched and enduring through God's grace. The instance of relics can even be seen as a form of eternal existence for saints because they act as metonymies, representing the entire holiness and spirit of the deceased through some tiny portion of their corpse as though they had

never departed. These examples all exhibit in some way or another the saint's ability to persist through death and exist forevermore as the living dead. They may not be the shambling, flesh eating zombies of today's modern day media, but these saints continue to live, physically, past death, through their relics and representation in the community, acting as contributing members and role models well past their deaths.

In their interaction and contributions to the community past death, living dead saints acted as crucial communal tools utilized by the community to solve community crisis outside of death. When one looks at the broad usage of living dead saints, one sees that the community exploited these saintly corpses as tools for various means. Saints prevailed as channels that the community utilized to solve various issues, from issues dealing solely with the mitigation of death (i.e. how Christianity and death intermingled, to how these saints offered means of hope, coping, and explanation through which community members could understand and live through death), to problems dealing with obscure situations (such as moral quandaries and aid in environmental crises). The medieval community, in these applications, used the undead saint in ways that morphed them into two sided tools: as a tool to mediate death and its consequences for the community and as a tool to aid the individual in their own experience with death. This thesis will explore these two broad categories of the saint-as-tool, articulating in sections II, III, and IV, the distinct micro-usages of the saint under these two categories. Additionally, in the exploration of these particular micro-usages, this thesis will study how the undead saint helped, through Christian discourse, to soothe the anxiety and pain of death and how they were exploited consistently by the community for means outside their original religious purpose.

Surprisingly, the living dead saint is not contained to one specific medium. There exist a variety of zombie saints who manifest differently depending on the task at hand. In this thesis I

will explore only a particular selection of these undead saints. While each type of these living dead martyrs—ghost, dream, physical, and figurative undead—has their own value, I am choosing to focus only on the physical instances, separated into the two categories of “whole” and “part.” By whole physical instances I mean, literally, stories of the corporally living dead; saints who, after being killed, reanimate and continue with life as though they were never slain in the first place. Alternatively, when I speak of partial physical instances I mean specifically that of relics. I label these examples as the “partial” living dead because these relics do not make up, nor are completely analogous to, the whole, risen saint. Otherwise put, these relics are merely parts and pieces of the dead saint that become, in themselves, undead because of the cultural meaning and significance attached to them, not because they themselves are the consciously, corporally alive saint. Therefore, I label these undead instances as partial because their symbolic *and* metaphorical meanings, and cultural attachments that result from such meanings, are what essentially transform the relic into the undead. Both are physical manifestations of a saint’s ability to surpass death, the partial relic, however, is metonymic, symbolizing the physically dead whole through its small part.

Having said this, one could argue that choosing these two types of living dead saints rather than the others is inconsequential. I disagree with this; the part and whole physically living dead saints harbor the most cultural and historical value and are ultimately more significant than that of the ghost or dream undead saint. I feel that the physical undead saints most clearly exemplify what it means to be the living dead, to linger in a liminal stasis between life and death. Secondly, these particular examples of the saintly undead interact with the community and culture of the Middle Ages in ways that the ghost and dream-state living dead do not. The physical undead illuminate certain facets of public interaction, religious fervor, and communal

bonding with the dead that the instances of ghosts and dream-state living dead ultimately fail to highlight. The physical undead elucidate, specifically, on the usage of the saint as a communal tool and are therefore essential to understand—in both their entirety and fragmented state—how the undead saint interacts with the culture of medieval England.

To understand more thoroughly how the living dead saint functioned in terms of medieval community and death, I have chosen to observe these living dead saints using a cultural anthropological approach. Looking specifically at saint stories taken from Jacobus De Voragine's *The Golden Legend* that include some element of the physically part or whole undead, I will observe particular historical, cultural, and religious elements of the medieval period that apply to the particular story. From here, I will then investigate each story in order to connect the undead elements to a deeper cultural, metaphysical, or religious meaning related to the Middle Ages.

Lastly, I would like to take a brief moment here to explain that the work I mention above, *The Golden Legend*, will be the only source from which I will gather my information regarding specific instances of undead saints as a whole or as a relic. *The Golden Legend* was the sole informing text about various saints' lives in the Middle Ages. From its completion in 1266 until the end of the Middle Ages, *The Golden Legend* was the most widely copied and read book of the medieval period (Hamer xi). Written by Dominican friar Jacobus De Voragine (born 1229 near Genoa), *The Golden Legend* was originally intended as a detailed, formal account for the friars of the Dominican order on the saints most celebrated throughout the calendar year. The work, however, quickly outgrew its original intended audience and rapidly spread through the educated, elite medieval populace; it “became easily the dominant collection of saints’ Lives [in the Middle Ages]” (Hamer xxi). As such a widely disseminated text, *The Golden Legend* exists

as a clear informant of what exactly was being said about these undead saints in the general medieval populace. Otherwise put, *The Golden Legend* is an untouched work of sorts that directly relates what exactly would have been known specifically at the time of the Middle Ages about each saint. *The Golden Legend* stands as the text that the majority of medieval culture turned to for their information about saints, and therefore, the cultural responses to the undead saints that circulated throughout the majority of the medieval era will have been created directly from this text.

Before continuing, I must first explain this thesis's choice to include the labeling of these undead saints as "zombies." It is necessary to acknowledge that for some, the usage of the word "zombie" to describe the medieval living dead compromises the integrity of the word and the African-Haitian culture from which the word stems. Furthermore, the usage of "zombie" insinuates to the modern reader familiar with the zombie and its history, a mindless corpse completely lacking in agency, spirit, and mental cognition that, ultimately, does not align with the fully functional living dead saints of the Middle Ages. However, though the ways that these living dead characters physically manifest themselves are different, the purpose, utility, and symbolic significance they hold remains entirely the same.

It may come as a surprise to some that Africa, and by the disbursement of the slave trade, Haiti, bore some of the first instances of the word "zombi." Found first in the Oxford English dictionary in 1819, "zombie" exclusively means, "A soulless corpse said to have been revived by witchcraft; formerly, the name of a snake-deity in voodoo cults of or deriving from West Africa and Haiti" ("Zombie"). For Haitians, the zombie was not one that feasted on human flesh or traveled in hordes, but was rather the physical manifestation of what they believed hell to be: a never ending eternity of slavery to one's master in a decaying, ever living body. Resurrected by

vodun sorcerers who held “the power to raise innocent individuals from their graves to sell them as slaves” (Davis 26), Haitian zombies manifested the fear of forever being trapped with the promise of freedom just in sight, yet damned to be dead and remain a slave for eternity; they were creatures literally born from a nightmare (Clark-Estes).

Reflecting on the origin and original context of “zombi,” one might still find it hard to see legitimate similarities between the Haitian zombie and medieval living dead. Where the two converge lays not in their cultural similarities, but rather in the analogous ways their communities used them to mediate certain community problems. As English scholar Sarah Juliet Lauro explores, both zombie types “defy the border between life and death” and in their shared liminal existence, reflect as “inverse image[s]” of one another (Lauro 160). Moreover, the two share “a bizarre commonality of trait[s],” each reflecting “metaphors of colonization and contamination” such as an “invocation of contagious disease... and a play upon fears of invasion” (Lauro 160- 161). Lauro invokes here ideas that will later be explored in this thesis, such as the frenzy surrounding saint relics (which were said to lead to mass instances of healing or devastation if used incorrectly) as well as ideas of invasion surrounding the threat of paganism in medieval times.

For example, Lauro describes how saint’s bodies after death resist decay, emit fragrance, and “cures rather than causes illness” (163); like a zombie, saints’ bodies continue to work after death. Additionally, Lauro argues that a saint’s body has the same “viral power” as that of a zombie, comparing the fervent spread of Christian values through witnessing miracles, saint’s relics, and the retelling of saint’s stories, to the same infecting, power of a zombie virus (163). As Lauro states, in a saint’s tale “what becomes infectious is not a virus or the zombie state, but religious fervor and miraculous power” (165). Lauro then proceeds to explain, within the context

of Christianity, how the existence of zombie saints operates and what it means for Christianity as a whole. Lauro concludes that zombie saints come about because “Christian rhetoric is infused with imagery of plague and contamination” and that throughout Christian rhetoric, contagion acts as “a model for God’s instrument” (166, 167). Lauro’s argument asserts that the Christian religion and its dominant narrative lends itself to the existence of zombie saints. As God’s servants, the saints are “subject to no mortal law,” they become a vessel “for the divine” that allows them to transcend the boundaries of death into the living dead (165, 167).

Building from Lauro’s argument, I believe there exists striking resemblances between zombies and living dead saints in the ways in which their separate communities utilized their corpses for the purposes of the living. Similar to how vodun sorcerers raised Haitian zombies to serve as laborers of plantations, the resurrected saints of the Middle Ages were often times recalled back to the world of the living to either serve God’s purpose (i.e. the spread of Christian ideology), or the community’s purposes (i.e. provide miracles and resolution). Alternately put, the communities of the Haitian zombie and the medieval undead saint transformed each into tools, exploiting their living dead state to achieve tasks otherwise hindered by the limitations of life.

As ethnobotanist and anthropologist Wade Davis explains, all that makes a zombie is “a body without character, without will” which the community interacts with in some way (Davis 30). The medieval saint, after their resurrection, embodied both of these traits. When exploring the specific saint stories, one begins to notice that the characteristics and personages of these saints are repeated again and again so that from one story to the next there exists little to no fluctuation in personality between them. Reflecting the first part of Davis’ definition (“a body without character”), these living dead saints blend together into one homogenous mass of

resurrected bodies, void of distinction and running into one another until they create one general, saintly personage. Furthermore, through God's resurrection of their corpse, these saints additionally lose their personal will, becoming slaves, if you will, to the purposes of Christianity. Similar to the Haitian slave zombie who, drained of all agency, was destined to work without interference for eternity, the living dead saint lost all personal will and intention in their undead state, becoming (to borrow from Lauro) an undead vessel for God's intentions. In their resurrection, identical to that of the Haitian zombie, the medieval community destined the resurrected saint to become a utilitarian worker whose lack of individual will and consciousness allowed them to purport the will of Christianity without hindrance.

The way in which the undead were used to conciliate community order further emphasizes how communities utilized the undead as tools. In both contexts, these zombie characters represent a view by each community that the physical world is a "fallen" realm from which people desire deliverance. The Haitian zombie and medieval undead, however, represent inversely this tension between condemnation in the physical and transcendence to salvation. In the instance of the Haitian zombie, to be the undead signified to be forever trapped in the physical, fallen world with the looming, unattainable promise of transcendence always in sight; to exist as a Haitian zombie signified to be forever a slave to the attachments of the fallen world, in want of community, but forever estranged. For the zombie saint of the Middle Ages, however, being undead represented a triumph over that realm and in that triumph, a way to stay forever involved with the community.

These two types of zombies address this thematic conflict within their social orders, but do so in ways appropriate to their differing cultures. Both serve as communal tools through which their respective societies negotiated this tension between the fallen realm and divine

release (or lack thereof in the case of the Haitian zombie). For example, the Haitian zombie's eternal damnation to slavery represented the dual choice in the Haitian slave community to either remain a part of the community and therefore continue the bondage of slavery in their zombie form; or achieve freedom through death and therefore break free of their slave bondage, but then no longer belong to a community. Contrastingly, the medieval living dead saint, via the structure of the medieval societal structure, is able to resolve this tension. As undead saints they are able to transcend the fallen world, break the bondage of physical life, and then return to the public, forever retaining their bonds to the community.

Considering these similarities in the Haitian zombie and living dead medieval saint, it appears that the only true difference between the two is in their physical actions and appearances. Though their origin cultures differ, their usages by their individual communities and the tensions they uncover in their communal cultures between this "fallen" world and transcendence from it align in strikingly similar ways. Both reflect similar lack of individual agency and inhabit roles in their communities as mediums through which specific purposes were accomplished. Looking at the culmination of these similarities, then, I believe it is entirely fair and within a logical scope of reasoning to be able to call the living dead of the Middle Ages zombies.

With all this said, and without further delay, let us begin an exploration into the grave. Starting with an examination of the whole, physical risen corpses of the saintly undead, this section will explore four different medieval Christian saints who challenged the laws of physical nature and defied death: Saint Sebastian, Saint John the Almsgiver, Saint Paul, Saint Dionysius. While each of these saints act as patrons of different realms and all have differing personal backgrounds, they all share an ability to challenge death through their devotion to God.

Section II: Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down: The Physical Undead Saints

*“There ain't no grave can hold my body down
 There ain't no grave can hold my body down
 When I hear that trumpet sound I'm gonna rise right out of the ground
 Ain't no grave can hold my body down.”
 – Johnny Cash*

Medieval saints stand in their own class. They are not gods, yet they are not entirely human; they exist in a plane of space that lingers between physical reality and the mystical realm of the heavenly beyond. Indeed, they are human and, as such, share many of the same traits as their lay followers but, alternatively, they do not have to follow any of the rules of human reality, physicality, or mortality; they are God's immortal chosen few. This ability to resist and triumph over the throes of death is truly the only aspect that set saints apart from the rest of humanity. As such, the immortality of saints served as a reminder in the medieval community to every layperson of what they themselves could be, what they themselves could achieve, if only they believed and worked hard enough for God. Not only do they serve as a beacon of devotional integrity and aspiration for all of the Christian faith, but these saints, to every person, religious or not, serve as a source of communal encouragement for all of humanity. The position of these undead saints seems to encourage people to view death not as an ending place, but merely as a holding spot until the time comes to spring back to life. They encourage people to no longer fear death and to no longer see it as a definitive end; they encourage people to have hope that they too can conquer death and not have to succumb to the weakness of their own morality. Undead saints did not just work for the Christians – they worked for the entire community.

Indubitably the previous statement is a pretty large one to make considering the fact that the saint is, first and foremost, a creation of the Christian religion. But using a perspective on medieval history that blends the Christian and the popular/lay tradition into one singular belief

system, I believe the stories of these resurrected, undead saints circulated and served a multitude of purposes for all in the medieval community, faithful or not. The meaning they hold engrained in the fiber of their tales entails something much grander and something much more basely human than a mere religious purpose. These examples of undead saints act as more than religious icons; they signify something much larger, in my opinion, and something much more true than simply what good behavior and devotion can get you in heaven – they embody what death essentially meant to the people of Middle England and how they then dealt with it.

Encapsulated in the stories of these zombie saints lingers the subtle undertones of a culture. Further elaborated, situated within the stories of these saints' resurrections lives the cultural meaning of death in the Middle Ages for the community as a whole. Death is a very stressful thing and one can see within the fibers of these living dead saint stories how exactly those in the medieval community coped, explained, and dealt with death. Through this encapsulation of cultural meaning, the stories of these living dead saints become perfect examples of the blending between the religious and non-religious sectors of medieval life. Though these saints are religious on the outside, and indeed created to support a primarily religious purpose, the meaning they came to embody and exemplify was something that all of the medieval community could join in, believe, and espouse. Those who saw the saints as representations for the meaning of death, and the importance for us as mortal creatures to avoid death, did not necessarily have to believe in the Christian purpose of the saints to benefit from the saints' truly secular, universally human message: death is a scary thing but hopes live in it.

The living dead saint of the medieval community existed as an extremely peculiar entity. As saints, the chosen select of God, they could not, technically, relate themselves to the lay community; likewise, as resurrected living dead saints, they could not count themselves as dead,

and therefore a part of God's deceased community, nor could they entirely count themselves as a part of the living community they worked within. Rather, living dead saints fall into an uncomfortable liminal stasis between the two categories. They exist, isolated, in a plane between the physical living and ecclesial dead, working as interceders to resolve the issues of the living, while still locked within a liminally dead body. Branded famously by Peter Brown as "the very special dead," Geary explains that living dead saints, though disassociated from both worlds of the living and dead, still existed as crucial components and members of the living community.

He explains:

Saints by their physical presence were a primary means of social integration, identity, protection, and economic support for the communities in which they were found. The religious communities living around the tomb of the saint... made up the "family" of the saint... the saint assured the prosperity of the family both by guaranteeing the fruitfulness ... and by attracting pilgrims, an importance source of income (Geary 171).

These living dead saints, in their ability to mitigate between both worlds, became essential protectors of the community. They became, literally, the living dead extended family of the community and "owed, to their faithful, services that varied with the nature of the particular community... they [the saints] were obliged to defend [the community] in their lives and in their property" (Geary 120). As such, these undead saints endured as important components and instigators essential to any part of successful living in the Middle Ages.

As the instigators and mediators of the medieval community, the living dead saints existed as a shared tool to turn to when help of any sort, beyond the capabilities of the living, was needed. They held an "intermediary position between the community and the Lord" allowing them to vie on the behalf of the living for the divine intervention of an unreachable God (Geary 110). They were the "intercessors" of God, the "protector[s] and patron[s] of the human community," acting on the behalf of the living to "continue to aid, to warn or admonish them,

even to chastise them” when obligations of devotion were not met successfully (Geary 2, 95).

They represented guardian figures of sorts, their eternal undead status creating them into an immutable protector and teacher that existed solely to aid the community in any way possible.

In the same way that these saints’ interactions with the community surpassed normal expectations, the way in which these saints interacted with death exceeded normality as well. Reiterating Brown, zombie medieval saints were, indeed, the “very special dead.” They were utterly exempt from the laws of death and were not seen by the community as in a permanent state of death, but rather as being in a deep sleep, resting before their ultimate resurrection before Christ (Brown 76). The saintly living dead body, in its inability to be broken, decayed, or pushed to the other side was a “sign of triumph,” the ultimate manifestation of these saints’ inability to cohere to any one state and their permanent liminality (Binski 18).

In fact, one could argue that in their liminally undead state, these resurrected saints do not ever truly die. They have never completely died, nor are completely dead, therefore excluding them from being able to say that they have fully experience death. As Brown states when exploring the specialness of the holy dead:

Whatever might be the condition of vulgar souls in the long interval between the dissolution and resurrection of their bodies, it was evident that superior spirits of the saints and martyrs did not consume that portion of their existence in silent and inglorious sleep (Brown 75).

Rather, these saints show that death can be suppressed, stopped, and reworked. They live on through death and in their undead state, offered themselves as an eternal, essential tool to solving communal problems and offering hope for what death brings. As Brown implies, these saints do not indulge in the “silent inglorious sleep” of death; instead, they live on, gloriously, constantly working and moving in the community while others pass quietly into a static death. Examples of this can be seen throughout the living dead saints’ stories of *The Golden Legend*. While the tales’

of *The Golden Legend* insinuate the social context of saints highlighted above (i.e. saints as communal mediators, saints as family, etc.), what *The Golden Legend* is best at highlighting is the un-deadness of these saints and how this resurrected state lends to the saint's usage and ability as a social tool. The living dead saints of *The Golden Legend* serve as representations of how the community not only saw these undead saints, but, similarly, how these undead saints interacted between the community of the living and the community of heaven.

The saint stories highlighted in this section portray the two different categories of the saint-as-tool utilization: the saint as a tool for the community and the saint as a tool for the individual. The stories of Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul embody the usage of the saint as an interceding tool between the community, the frightening "other," and death. In the instances of these tales, Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul are used as tools through which the fear of paganism (a fear of the uncontainable "other") was mollified and the power of Christ, in all things, reassured within medieval society. Contrastingly, the stories of Saint John the Almsgiver and Saint Dionysius represent how the saint was used as a tool for the medieval individual to negotiate death. In the tale of Saint John the Almsgiver, Saint John is utilized as a tool through which individuals alleviate the fear of death and the holy consequences that follow. While, additionally, both the tales of Saint John and Saint Dionysius represent a hope for an individual's own control, and retention of individuality and power, through death. This collection of saint's stories represent the two major categories of zombie saint usage, accentuating, differently, particular facts within these two categories of how exactly the saint mitigated death in the medieval community or in the medieval individual.

The tales of Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul, to begin, reflect an essential usage of the saint as a tool: that of the saint as a tool to ward off the evils of paganism. Paganism,

unsurprisingly, presented many threats and uncomfortable facets to the Christian community. Christianity labeled paganism as the frightening “other,” titling it an unbridled, “godless” religion that often ran contrary to the beliefs the Christian community held and espoused. Take for example, these two-belief systems’ view of the dead: paganism found the proximity of the Christian community to the saintly dead “profoundly disturbing,” whereas, in contrast, Christians centered their community and rituals on the corpses and living dead representations of these holy men/women (Brown 9). Christian clergy feared a paganistic influence on the practice and belief of the veneration of living dead saints and made it a point to warn, constantly, of the heresy that would follow allowing pagan “magic” beliefs into the veneration of saints. These fears encompassing the pagans of the Middle Ages seeped into the stories of Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul, both of which portray the medieval community’s fear of paganism through the successful demolition of it by these living dead saints resurrections.

The story of Saint Sebastian begins with his movement into sainthood not as a clergy member of the church, but rather as a devoutly Christian soldier who charged himself with taking care of the Christians who were caught and tortured by the heathen emperor. Upon discovering that Sebastian himself is a Christian, and offering condolence and strength to the Christians the emperor has sentenced to death, the emperor orders that Sebastian be tied to a tree and that a fleet of archers shall use him as target practice. Voragine notes that “They hit him with so many arrows that he looked like a hedgehog, and they left him there for dead” (Voragine 53). Sebastian, resurrected and healed from his death, returns to the gates of the emperor, telling the flabbergasted soldiers, who had thought him dead, that “The Lord saw it to bring me to life again so that I could confront you and reproach you with all the atrocities you are committing against the servants of Christ” (Voragine 53). It is only then that the emperor orders Sebastian to be

beaten with clubs until the soldiers are sure they have seen him breathe his last breath. Saint Sebastian was martyred in 287 CE. This story, and the story of Saint Paul to follow, emphasizes the dominance of Christian power over all other ideological forms and illuminates one way in which the undead saint was used as a tool by (and for) the community.

Saint Paul, like Saint Sebastian and many medieval martyred saints, did not get along with Nero, the pagan emperor of his town. Infuriated at Saint Paul's display of Christianity, Nero ordered that Saint Paul be brought to him and decapitated before the court. Faced before the raging emperor with death looming on the near horizon, Saint Paul responded "So that you may know that I am still alive after death of my body, when my head has been cut off... I will appear to you alive, and then you will know that Christ is the God of life, not of death" (155). Days later Paul was executed, as the executioner left, however, Paul rose and departed. When the executioner returned, puzzled at the disappearance of the corpse he had just rendered, a devout woman who had witnessed the event explained that she had seen Paul get up, and walk through the city in gleaming, golden robes. Charging into Nero's conference room, Paul declared, "Here I am, Caesar...I am not dead but alive..." and then disappeared (157).

These two tales construct clear divisionary lines between Christianity and paganism; the non-believing emperors are construed as a threat to the Christian community, villains that the courageous saint must conquer in order to protect the Christian community. In this same way, these tales create a paradigm in which the pagans visibly fear the power of Christianity. In this construction, Christianity evolves into a powerful religion, inflicted by these undead saints, to be feared and accommodated to by non-believers. In the tale of Saint Sebastian, for example, the pagan emperor sentences Sebastian to death only after learning of his Christian faith. In this same way, Nero, in the tale of Saint Paul, only orders the capture of Paul when he learns of his

propagation of Christianity. In both these examples it is insinuated that the emperors' hasty decisions to kill the saints stems from their relation to, and dissemination of, Christianity; the saints only become something to be feared when the emperors learn that they have Christianity on their side. This structure of these stories, therefore, uses these living dead saints to frame Christianity as the dominant, just religion and paganism as the lesser, immoral religion to be conquered.

With Christianity on their side, furthermore, Saint Paul and Saint Sebastian become the downfall of these pagan emperors and are utilized as tools through which the power of God to conquer the threat of paganism was emphasized. Specifically, with the might of God, these saints transcend the death dealt to them by these pagan emperors, and in their resurrection, prove the strength of God over all.¹ In the tale of Saint Sebastian, for example, Sebastian, after returning from death and to the gate of the emperor declares God's power to the pagans: "The Lord saw it to bring me to life again so that I could confront you and reproach you with all the atrocities you are committing against the servants of Christ" (Voragine 53). Similarly, even before his resurrection, Saint Paul directly challenges the emperor with his ability to resurrect through his Christian faith: "So that you may know that I am still alive after death of my body, when my head has been cut off... I will appear to you alive, and then you will know that Christ is the God of life, not of death" (Voragine 155). In both these examples, the act of resurrecting and defying the permanence of the emperor's murder acts as a direct dismissal of the pagan's power and reaffirmation of Christ's power. Murdering these saints remains the only power the pagan

¹ The tales of Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul emphasize the strength of Christianity through the defiance of their deaths, not through the conversion of pagans to Christianity. These tales, unlike others to be explored later in this thesis, do not touch upon the conversional power of Christianity over paganism, but rather emphasize strictly the power of Christ through the saint's resurrection.

emperors have over the saints and their diffusion of the Christian doctrine; if the emperors cannot successfully keep the saints dead, then, there is no way to kill them or stop Christianity. Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul used as tools in this way, therefore, emphasis dually the unstopability of Christianity as well as the superior power of Christ to other, heretical sources of religion and power.

Saint John the Almsgiver and Saint Dionysius stray from the Christ as superior, pagan-punishing representations portrayed through Saint Paul and Saint Sebastian. Rather these two tales finely tune into the individual portrayal of death and represent how individuals in the community used saints for their own, singular purposes involving death. For example, Saint John the Almsgiver, unlike many saints who were killed savagely and made martyr, died from a raging fever. Before dying, however, Saint John met a woman “who had committed a sin so terrible that she dared not confess it to anyone” and to resolve her sin, told her to write her confession down, bring it to him, and he would, consequently, pray for her sin (Voragine 66). The woman did not make it to Saint John’s deathbed, however, before she passed. Distraught at the thought of her eternal damnation, the woman cried ““Ah me! I thought I could avoid my disgrace, but now I am disgraced before the world!”” (67) Suddenly Saint John “came forth from his tomb” and told the woman she had been absolved of her sin, before retuning to his tomb, and likewise, into death (68). Saint Dionysius, in his tale, after being beheaded by yet another challenged, infuriated pagan emperor, “Instantly... stood up, took his head in his arms, and ... walked two miles, from the place called Martyrs Hill to the spot where” he decided to lie himself in a grave (Voragine 278).

These two tales emphasize the individual’s retained agency through death, emphasizing, strongly, the medieval fear of lost, personal agency. During the Middle Ages, the medieval

individual feared death and bodily decomposition, more than most other fears because to the medieval individual, bodily rot after death meant a direct loss of individual agency. The fear was that through losing one's body to rot one would lose one's soul, and therefore, their ability to remain themselves and retain control. Saint John and Saint Dionysius reaffirm this fear through their ability to surpass it in their own, individual control through death. Saint John, for example, is able to conjure himself from his grave at his own volition; while Saint Dionysius, alternatively, has the ability to pick up his own head and then walk to a grave of his choice. Both of these saints do not have to rely on the agency of others after death, but rather enact their own efficacy and control aspects of the body otherwise lost after death. This ability held by these two saints, then, acts as a tool that reassures the living community that they too will retain similar control past death. These acts of self-volition provide hope to the community that they will not have to suffer through the estrangement of self from body; the community utilizes these living dead saints as illustrations to look to for hope through death, and hope that when they pass they will keep their own control.

The various facets of hope these saints present to the community of the living about death is additionally reflected in the story of Saint John, specifically in his forgiveness of the sinner woman who comes to his tomb. The woman, lost of all other hope, believes that because Saint John has died that she no longer has chance at forgiveness and, as such, will be forever disgraced. The act of Saint John rising from his grave to resolve her of her sin, however, presents an essential facet of communal hope that the people of the Middle Ages needed to be reassured of in death. Otherwise put, the story of Saint John represents hopes that even when the community's saint has technically died, absolution of sin could still be found. The ability of Saint John to rise from his grave, to persist as the living dead, offered this woman salvation

otherwise lost. Reflected onto the community as a whole, the living dead saint signified optimism that not all was lost with death—the saint would still be there for the living, and the living could still resolve their otherwise unresolvable problems.

One must also consider the wider, cultural implications of these saint stories outside of a religious setting and apart from the saints-as-tools/community-as-tool-welders binary that forms in these tales. Otherwise put, pushing aside any and all ideas that have to do with the saint as a living dead tool, we must observe what we can gather from these stories in the context of what they mean, culturally and socially, for the community of the Middle Ages. In a way, one could look at these stories and the interactions of the undead with the living as a way through which the community “flushed out [its] body and soul” (Binski 18). The community came to these living dead saints to be purged of sin, purged of fear, and wiped clean of the looming threats of paganism. As such, these stories (and their high circulation through the Middle Ages) offered people throughout the community a means to flush their religious doubt and be refreshed with religious fervor.

Alternatively, one could see these saint’s tales as small parts creating one larger ritual. The term “ritual” denotes an established religious practice and within this definitional framework, these stories make up one large ritual of Christian practices interacting with saintly resurrections for the betterment of the community. If one is to consider these instances as rituals then, one might consider Emile Durkheim’s (a founder of the field of sociology) theory that rituals act as “a form of social control: they express and reinforce ideas of group coherence” (Binski 50). These stories expressed and reinforced, explicitly, the Christian ideal. Stories such as that of Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul showed what would happen if one deviated from the Christian spectrum of thought, while Saint Dionysius and Saint John, simultaneously,

strengthened the perks that could be found with a Christian belief. Considering *The Golden Legends* high circulation through the Middle Ages, it seems entirely accurate to look at the stories of the living dead saint as a form of social control. These stories asserted a subtle pressure on the community, building a growing social cohesion to one faith, and, therefore, pressing an overwhelming social pressure on those who defied the normative Christian ideal. The tales of the living dead saint, therefore, were not only positive tools used for the benefit of the Christian community, but they were also tools used for social conformity and social shaming.

This practice of using saints as a means of forcing communal pressure and social shame on deviant groups in society is further expressed in the medieval cultural practice of humiliating saints. The humiliation of saints existed as a common practiced ritual from the eleventh to twelfth century (extending so far as from the third to thirteenth century), centered on ceremonies that consisted of humiliating and degrading actions directed at deceased saints as though they were alive and feeling through their shrines and representations (Geary, "Humiliation of Saints" 125). Instigated by a distressed community in need of something from particular patron saints, the humiliation of a saint consisted of doing every possible humiliating action to the tomb of the dead saint with the belief that the saint, being not dead but merely sleeping, could feel embarrassed and therefore compelled into action. These humiliating actions often times included screaming profanities at the tomb, the physical beating/lashing of the tomb itself, or beating/lashing of representations of the saint him/herself. Patrick Geary best describes the humiliation of saints as:

An act of coercion and of punishment directed against the saint himself...for allowing the offense to happen... Thus, while the human offender was at fault for abusing the community, the saint was also at fault for allowing the abuse to have happened in the first place (Geary 111).

Without a doubt, it is hard for the modern day person, who lives in a society today so dedicated

to the honoring and polite respect of the dead, to imagine such a bizarre practice; but to the men and women of the Middle Ages, the daily disrespecting of the saintly corpse until their communal problem was resolved existed as a commonplace aspect of life. The saints, though they were technically, physically dead, were still held to certain responsibilities and standards in the community. If it was felt that a saint was lacking in their contribution or protection of a community, it was a necessary, and acceptable, action to beat the physical representation of the saint as an act of coercion towards the saint. Otherwise put, if the community felt that the saint was sleeping on the job, it was up to the community to beat and humiliate them back into working for the benefit of the living.

The humiliation of the saint, additionally, extended past the purpose of solely shaming the saint and was utilized, also, as a way to humiliate certain members of the community through association. For example, if a member of the community failed to repent for their wrong doing despite the outcry of the community, monks would forcefully stop their protection of the saint from all humiliation rituals, “caus[ing] enough disturbance in society... [that] their opponent [was] forced to the bargaining table” (Geary, “Humiliation of Saints” 133). As Geary explains in his article, “Humiliation of Saints”:

If the humiliation did not directly appeal to the alleged wrongdoer, it did act on others and helped to force public opinion on the issue... Thus the ritual of humiliation, while directed at the evil doer was actually most effective in gaining support and sympathy, or at least concern from third parties who could put pressure on the offender to negotiate (Geary, “Humiliation of Saints” 133).

In these instances, the humiliation of saints was enacted as a means to force non-conforming individuals into re-conforming to communal norms. If the individual could not be brought to the terms of the community, the humiliation of the saint allowed for the community outside the wrongdoer to come together and work as a mass against the individual. Thus, when the

humiliation of saints was instigated and the community brought together in “support and sympathy” for the saint, there was no way for the individual offender to resist the community’s influence to conform. This repetition of saintly humiliation again and again, physically and emotionally upset the community to a point where the offenders could no longer experience normal life without the community’s constant reminding of their distress. The offender, therefore, had to give in to the demands of the community because it was the only way to return social normalcy (Geary, “Humiliation of Saints” 133).

Similar to the saint stories of Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul, then, the humiliation of saints further expresses Durkheim’s idea that rituals, such as these stories of saints and humiliation of their graves and representations, thrived as forms of social control in the Middle Ages. The humiliation of saints worked in a tangible way the saint’s stories could not, serving as an unavoidable, physical stimulus before the eyes of the community to achieve social coercion and unity. The community, through its utilization of saintly humiliation, used the power of saints and their representations in the community to inflate the agency of those in the Christian normative while excluding and shaming those who dared to defy it.

One finds, then, in the tales of these saints who are able to avoid death through their own volition, embedded veins of cultural meaning. With closer examination, these living dead saints become more than just men who lifted themselves from the grave—they become exemplifications of the way in which these saints were used in communal issues dealing with death, crisis, and the Christian ideal. Saint Sebastian, Saint Paul, Saint John the Almsgiver, and Saint Dionysius represent how the medieval community employed the emblem of the undead saint to solve community crisis otherwise unsolvable, and to shame those outside the community normative into repentance and conformity. The society of the Middle Ages, however, used more

than just undead saints for the resolutions community issues. The following section explores this idea, uncovering how the community of the medieval era, likewise, utilized the saint's ability to resurrect to create living dead laypeople through which personal issues left after death could be corrected.

Section III: Saints Who Raise the Dead

"I know you want to keep on living. You do not want to die. And you want to pass from this life to another in such a way that you will not rise again as a dead man, but fully alive and transformed. This is what you desire. This is the deepest of human feeling; mysteriously, the soul itself wishes and instinctively desires it" (Brown 77).

In the way that zombie saints provided closure for the community as a whole, saints who are able to raise the dead provided closure for the community centered on an individual basis. Otherwise put, saints who retain the power to resurrect the dead of the community do so because these individuals hold some crucial key to resolving community strife; whereas with the saints who themselves are the living dead, they are resurrected to aid the community as one, whole unit. Saint Martin and Saint John the Apostle reveal this communal aid through the individual, reflecting, also, how the community explicitly used the saint to deal with the individualized death of its community members.

Death, unsurprisingly, is not an easy concept to grapple with. As Geary states, death taunts us as a reminder of our failure as a technological society, "our medical system, of our quest for personal fulfillment. Death is the ultimate evil, the supreme indictment of our inability to control the universe or even ourselves" (Geary 1). Furthermore, death is viewed as a lapse of control of the person who dies; it serves almost as a reminder to those who linger behind of the failures "of diet, character, or caution which caused them [the person who died] to falter" (Geary 1). The living dead saints of the Middle Ages reformulate this view of failure completely. Speaking from a purely developed, Western aesthetic, we do not see death on a common basis;

death is a fairly uncommon thing that pops up in our lives at the most unexpected of times. Death for the people of the Middle Ages, however, was omnipresent (Geary 2). In that way, the approach with which the community of the Middle Ages formulated their view of the failure of death endured as ultimately different than the way we see that failure today.

This difference is most readily seen in the example of medieval saints who are not themselves the living dead, but can make those around them as such. Saints such as Saint Martin and Saint John the Apostle who themselves never rose, undead, from the grave, but rather have the ability to bring those in the community back and inflict upon them a renewed life as the walking dead. The ability of these saints to raise the community's dead creates the saint into an embodiment of hope; hope that death is not a permanent banishment from this world or one's community, nor that death is a permanent state of failure at all. In the specific cases of necromancers Saint Martin and Saint John the Apostle, the living dead became instruments through which the saints intermingled and served the Christian living community. For the saints and communities of the Middle Ages, the living dead did not represent something that went bump in the night, but rather exemplified a medium through which community failures could be fixed and a normal state of life could be achieved again after death.

These saint stories reflect, through their usage of the community's dead, how the saints of the Middle Ages were used as mediums to portray the communal ideal of death. In the medieval community death was never an end to the story; rather it was a transitional stage into a different status (Geary 2). The living were seen as those who will eventually die, and the dead as those who will live again (Geary 73). This ability to move fluidly between states reflected the overall transitional condition of the medieval era as a time period. The involvement and role of the dead had not yet been fixed within society so "as the ritual of death evolved in the early Middle Ages"

so too did its emphasis on the expressed continuity and “unity of the living and the dead” (86-87 Geary).

Looking at the living dead examples considered in this section, one might question how those who are clearly resurrected back to life can be considered as the living dead, a term that denotes a clear liminal stasis between life and death. While it is true that the living dead in these stories are clearly revived back into the world of the living, it is never shown in these tales that they are actually incorporated back into the community of the living. These stories, never give any further explanation on how these living dead individuals reincorporate back into society after their usage by the living community. Resultantly, after their resurrection, these individuals can no longer claim to be dead, yet they have been truly abandoned by the living community, and cannot claim themselves as genuinely living.

This point, furthermore, can be applied beyond the resurrected laypeople highlighted above and applies to the entirety of the self-resurrected living dead saints focused on in this thesis. Though the text states that each zombie saint returns to life, the story ends shortly after their resurrection, failing to show how exactly these saints cope in their new resurrected status, or if the living community fully reincorporates the undead saint back into its workings. Living dead saints are tricky, however, because unlike the undead lay characters who clearly do not rejoin the living, living dead saints do rejoin society in that they continue to be powerful, working members of the community. However, though these saints were welcomed back into society as tools to moderate death in the community and individuals, they were welcomed in under the condition that they be the living dead; for it was only in their living dead stasis that these particular undead saints could serve the purposes needed of them by the community. Therefore, though these individuals and saints could technically be considered physically living

through their resurrection, the ways in which they are treated by the living places them in a concrete liminal state between life and death.

These instances of resurrection differ from the examples of Saint John, Saint Dionysius, and Saint Paul in that these three saints retain volition in their resurrections. In the examples detailed above of the resurrected laypeople, they are resurrected in accord to the community's wishes and the saint's ability to raise the dead. Saint John, Saint Dionysius, and Saint Paul, however, stand free of others subjugations and resurrect themselves on their own accord, for their own determined purpose, free of the interference of others. The difference, then, between those resurrected by saints and saints that resurrect themselves is that those resurrected by saints come back because the community says so; saints who resurrect themselves do so because they choose to come back for the community and choose to relinquish themselves, thereafter, to the needs of the community. The difference in these two instances, then, is whether the resurrected subject retains or not their agency: the living dead saint retains all agency.

While the living could wish and choose which dead to resurrect, they themselves did not have the power to create the living dead and therefore needed the saint's ability of resurgence to get the result they wanted, and it was the exact job of the saint to obey and bend to the wishes of their community. The saints may have been powerful members of society who "commanded reverence, honor, respect, and devotion" but it was only by serving their "enthusiastic cult" that these saints were able to earn their respect in the community (Geary 120). Therefore, it was only by endowing their community with protection, services, and the full assistance and dedication of their lives, that the saints were able to gain any agency in the communities they functioned within (Geary 120). Raising the dead existed as one of these services which saints were expected to perform, and in this way, the saints acted as tools of a sort to the medieval community; tools

through which the community solved their failures, smoothed out the kinks left behind by death, and eventually returned to a normal state of living.

There exist there exist only a recorded few saints who were known widely through the medieval era as necromancers of the community and therefore able to resolve the problems left by death. Two of these such saints, recorded as resurrectors of the dead in the most widely disseminated text of the Middle Ages, *The Golden Legend*, are Saint Martin and Saint John the Apostle. These two saints reflect not only the role of the saint as one who raises the dead, but additionally reflect the decisive influence of the community over the saint in dictating who shall, and shall not, be revived. In the accounts of both saints, for example, each resurgence of the living dead occurs only at the bequest of people in the community.

In the tale of Saint Martin, for example, all three instances of resurrection occur because someone from the community approached Martin about the matter. The first account of Martin's reinstating the dead tells of Martin's revival of his departed catechumen². At the request of the monks from whom the catechumen was taking his lessons, Saint Martin takes the corpse into a room, stretches the body over a bed and, through the power of prayer, revives the man from death. The man, after returning from death, relates that when he died he had been condemned to a land of darkness before two angels had come to bring him back to the world of the living. Later in the same account of Saint Martin's life, the saint is said to have revived a young pagan youth, at the request of his distraught mother, before the mass of his pagan community (Voragine 296).

The telling of Saint John's tale is similarly situated as that of Saint Martin's and emphasizes, likewise, the same stride by community to resurrect particular individuals for particular reasons. For example, upon the complaints of his Christian community of a band of

² A follower of Christianity who has not yet been baptized but is still receiving the teachings of Christ.

pagans at the outskirts of town, Saint John resurrects two non-believers of a pagan congregation as a show of God's power. As the story goes, after approaching the pagan priest about the power of Christ, the priest demands that two of his followers ingest poison as a sign of their devotion to paganism. After doing so they, unsurprisingly, die; after which the priest challenges Saint John to, too, drink the poison and see if his powerful Christ can save him. Saint John picks up the same vial of poison and drinks it, unaffected, and then proceeds to resurrect the previously deceased believers before the entire pagan congregation (Voragine 36). The high priest and his entire church were speechless, and in their awe, asked Saint John to convert them immediately to Christianity (Voragine 36). Saint John, additionally resurrects a devout believer of his doctrine named Drusiana, after religious clergy in the area preach to him of her intense devotion. Saint John ordered that her corpse be uncovered, and upon its uncovering, began to pray over the body. Immediately the body "rose and hurried away to do as the apostle had told her [to literally get up and make him a meal], and clearly she believed she had merely been woken from sleep, not dead and brought to life from the dead" (Voragine 33).

These two tales exemplify not only the power of resurgence in these saints' abilities, but also emphasizes the idea that the community picked particular dead to resurrect and did so for very specific reasons central to aiding the community in some way. In these tales it becomes clear that the dead enter the world of living only through strict restrictions created by those still dwelling in the physical world. The persistence of the dead in the living community was not on the request of the dead, but rather on the terms of those still living. They needed the dead's presence to reassure them that failures could be redeemed, and community was enduring. The people of the medieval world, consequentially, ensured that the dead were "conjured as spirits to serve the interests of the dominant survivors...enter[ing] the transcendent world only on terms

set by the living” (Gilbert 193). The choice of who became the resurrected, then, depended entirely on the terms and requests of the living, and was not exceedingly concerned with the actual dead. It is not the choice of the dead that they are once again living; rather, it is their community’s choice, and by the power and purpose of that choice, the dead are returned.

Looking at the catechumen in Saint Martin’s tale, as well as the two poisoned pagans in Saint John’s, there emerges a theme of the community choosing people to reanimate who have certain social and moral failings. Particularly, the community chooses the dead who passed with their failures unresolved, therefore causing a moral shadow to be reflected upon the community as a whole. Saint Martin’s catechumen, for instance, relates that he had been condemned to a land of darkness after his death. The fact that this man neither went to heaven, nor condemned to hell, but merely lingered in darkness, insinuates he was locked within the intermediary state of purgatory. While it initially seems that his lingering state reflects as a solely individual failing, brought about by his lack of baptism, when one reflects upon how closely linked the catechumen was to Saint Martin himself, the failing becomes one of the entire community. It was the sole duty of Saint Martin and the members of his monastery to convert this one individual to Christianity; as reflected in the catechumen’s stasis in purgatory, they failed at this point and, essentially, doomed this individual to his current state. Additionally, medievalist Paul Binski assigns the task of helping the dead escape purgatory to the living, stating:

the period between death and judgment [purgatory] became negotiable... a grey area of joint jurisdiction between God and the Church, which presided over sinners who were neither especially good nor especially bad, and who could eventually, with the help of the living, escape (Binski 182).

As such, what had started as one individual’s failing, turned into a failing of the entire community; a failing that reflects the community’s inability to help its members, and a failure to enact their job as protectors of those locked in purgatory.

Considering how this one catechumen's failing suddenly became the fault of an entire community, it is clear, then, that the community's choice to resurrect him was not one of selfless compassion, but rather stemmed from a communal self-interest to improve the blemish the catechumen had left upon his death. Saint Martin's requested resurrection fixes this failing and offers the catechumen another chance at baptism, and therefore a chance to rise from purgatory and remedy his previous misstep. Saint Martin, like a reset button for the medieval era, turns into a medium through which the community can remedy their past failures. Through Saint Martin's resurrection, the community gains a second chance at restoring their identity, morale, and like the catechumen, a chance to start anew.

The two revivals exhibited in Saint John's tale, on the other hand, represent two differing facets of the medieval communal view of death: one of the moral failure spoken of previously, and the second of a dire need for a return to normality in the community following a death. The two pagans revived by Saint John before the emperor represent the later, serving as an additional example of how the community—in this case the Christian community encircling the pagans—chose to resurrect individuals as a solution to a larger moral failing; the larger moral failing in this situation being that of the pagan community in its entirety. Looking strictly through the lens of the Christian perspective from which these saints stories were told and propagated, the pagan community itself represented a large cultural eye sore, if you will, upon the larger Christian community. The story of Saint John resurrecting the two poisoned pagans works to remedy this failure in the eyes of the Christian community by mass converting all of the dead's previous pagan community. Whereas the Christian community exploited the resurrection of the catechumen to right their own communal failure, Saint John utilizes the deceased pagans as his medium through which to correct his presumption of a collective moral failure in the pagan

community. Saint John essentially utilizes the deaths and revivals of these two men in the exact same way the community used the death of the catechumen: to serve a self-interested purpose of converting the pagans and therefore resolving their presupposed communal sin, as well as the potential risk of imposition of sin they pose for his neighboring Christian community.

Similarly, both these cases exemplify, also, the community's need to return to normality after the unsettling change left behind by death. The immediate return of Drusiana to everyday activities, for example, reflects this need. Upon her resurrection Drusiana literally rises from death as though she were "waking from a dream," continuing on with her life as though nothing had ever passed. In doing so, Drusiana institutes a state of returned regularity that was previously lost with her death. By acting in the same way she would as though waking from sleep, Drusiana restarts the normal cycle of life that was interrupted by her death and, therefore, starts the process of the community returning to normal.

The tale of the young pagan boy similarly stresses the same restoration of normality via the saint's ability to create a zombie layperson. What is different about the pagan boy's return, however, compared to Drusiana's, is that the return to normality for his community does not happen through the boy; rather, the return of regularity in this community comes from its singular, mass conversion to a new regularized Christian ideal. When Saint Martin resurrects the boy he does so in a highly public setting, bringing the boy back from death in a field where the entirety of the boy's pagan community can watch. As a result, when Saint Martin revives the boy, it is not only the child that is converted to Christianity, but the entirety of his pagan community that bore witness. This conversation creates, therefore, a new sense of normality to which the entirety of the boy's community can return to as a one.

The resurrection of the corpse was a highly public, communal event that not only

reinforced the ties and strengths of the existing community, but also incorporated pagans from outside into the established Christian community. These highly witnessed miracles emphasized the importance of the community in death, and how it was not experienced singularly, but rather as a group. Christianity, therefore, and the mass conversion it creates in Saint Martin's tale, consequentially constructs a medium through which the normalcy craved in the community following the unsettling nature of death could be achieved. In this particular case of the resurrected dead, it is only possible for the pagan community to reach normality again through a mass change to a new normal. If after his revival, the young boy's community did not follow him to his new Christian faith, there would be no return to normality. Rather the boy would be left isolated in his newly found liminality between life and death, while his pagan community would be isolated, as well, estranged by the boy's liminal space and still healing from his death which they had yet to resolve. By experiencing this event as a community, though, both the pagan boy and his community are all able to be converted and, therefore, as one mass experienced unit, return together to a new state of converted, Christian normal.

Especially true for the deaths of those who had failed the community, the saints exemplified in these stories provided not just the return of the dead, but also the return of a communal bond, and the strength found in those bonds, that had been leeched following death. Allowing the dead to disappear after death was never an option for the community of the Middle Ages. Death was everywhere and, as such, there existed no other way for the community to cope other than to embrace and incorporate, literally, the dead into every facet of society. The living dead became, then, solutions to unsolved community failures, tools used by saints for mass conversion, and ways through which a regulated state of living was once again found after death. As such, in their liminal stasis, no longer a part of the living yet no longer able to claim

themselves as dead, the living dead lost their agency and therefore became pieces, moved and used at will, for the saints and the living. The living dead acted as the offerings saints could contribute to the communities they worked in, and vehicles through which these saints added and interacted with the needs and desires of the communities. Saints utilized these raised corpses to in ways surpassing any other use found for the dead, showing that when it came to the medieval dead, ain't no grave going hold their bodies down.

Section IV: You Want a Piece of Me?: Relics and the Saintly Undead

“For how better to suppress the fact of death, than to remove part of the dead from its original context in the all too cluttered grave?” (Brown 78)

The whole physical dead saints explored previously and the partial, physically dead saints (which will be explored in this section) exist as entirely different yet very much the same.

Similar in that they both thrive as the living dead, the partial physically undead saints exist, also, as dramatically different in that they are, technically, not the saint but rather fragments and relics of the saint. Knuckles, toes, clumps of hair, and preserved teeth – these bits and pieces of the dead saint lived on forever in the community as metonyms for the saint themselves, therefore allowing the saint a medium through which they could exist, whole, forever. It may be hard for the reader of the 21st Century to fully comprehend, but the relics of saints *were* the saints (Geary 118). They were not thought of as isolated enchanted, inanimate pieces; but, rather, relics gained their enchantment and influence through their representation as, literally, the saint her/himself.

As Geary states, “Relics *were* the saints, continuing to live among men” (Geary 202). Their “bodily division” enacted triumph over death, allowing the saintly body to be completely represented by one, singular fragment (Binski 14). Echoing the same communal idea found in the physically living dead, the relic living dead embodied death in such a way that it was seen as more a transformation, rather than “a fundamental break in the relationship between the dead

person and his or her community” (Geary 86). The relic existed on in the medieval community as the saints themselves, figuratively continuing to serve and protect the community in the same way as they did when living. Furthermore, the relic living dead saint worked in ways applicable to both the community and individual; unlike the whole physically dead saints observed previously, the partial physically dead saint stories found in *The Golden Legend* slip fluidly back and forth between helping the community and helping the individual with death.

Before continuing on, let us take a step back and explore first what exactly these relics existed as. Saintry relics break down into two separate categories: bodily relics and contact relics. Body relics consisted of actual body parts and pieces of the saint’s corpse while contact relics entailed objects that had been close to, or even touched by the saint during their life such as pieces of cloth, silverware, even flowers that were reportedly touched by the saint (Geary 186 & Bynum 132). These relics were, as Geary states:

almost universally understood to be important sources of personal supernatural power and formed the primary focus of religious devotion throughout Europe from the eighth through the twelfth centuries... like slaves, relics belonged to that category... of objects that are both persons and things (Geary 194)³.

Emphasizing Geary’s statement, saint relics were very much treated as both sides of the binary person/thing. They emphasized the saint, taking on their identity and name as though they were a complete version of the corpse. Believers would attempt to touch the corpse and nip pieces from the skeleton to insure contact and keepsakes of the sacred; people often time “passed the night sleeping or keeping watch near the shrine, calling upon the name of the saint” (Geary 118). In

³ Note here the reference to the saintly relic as analogous to that of the slave, which recirculates the idea that the Haitian zombie and medieval zombie were used in very similar communal ways. Both were used and transformed by their communities from sentient people to material things with substantiated wealth attached to them, creating yet another underlying connection bringing together the Haitian context and usage of the zombie to the usage of the medieval saint as a zombie.

these instances the community literally saw the pieces of the saint as the saint themselves, calling upon them as though it was the body as a whole.

Yet, like a lucky rabbit's foot, these relics were frequently also used throughout the community as menial physical objects to treat "physical cures, help in finding lost property, and protection from human or natural threats" (Geary 118). In this case, the saint was still thought to be the object, yet they were treated less like a complete human and more as a thing to be utilized. As Bynum reiterates, "So important did bodily relics become that the faithful sometimes found it hard to observe a proper mourning period before they eviscerated the bodies of holy people to make relics" (Bynum 132). Additionally, there thrived a booming relic trade in the Middle Ages composed of fragments and pieces that were not truly what they were said to be, creating a paradigm where the majority of circulated relics were false. "Fragments" of saints were sold and circulated as "true" pieces of the saint, when in reality many of these relics were bones stolen from robbed graves, animal bones, or simply ordinary objects purported to be something they were not. Thus, any bit of matter could be labeled a relic and connected to the saint, and though it may not have been literally genuine, the figurative importance attached to the relic was the same as if it had been a true piece of the saint. This treatment of the saint as a bounty, from which a harvest of relics was the primary focus, thereby reaffirms the exploitation of the "thing" side of the person/thing binary while loosely clinging to the idea of personhood in the object.

This heavy emphasis on relics resonates throughout the text of *The Golden Legend*; however, these tales are composed differently than that of the physically, living dead saint tales in that they do not have a story arch. The examples of relic saints found in *The Golden Legend*, rather, are stated off-hand at the end of the saint's tales, often in response to the martyred death of the saint in question. Whereas the tales of a whole physically living dead saint end with the

resurrection of the saint, these relic undead tales end with a short comment about the magical properties of the saint's body after their death; often times these tales highlighted the mass healing affects, lack of rot, and continuous production of miracle oil being produced emitted by the saintly corpse. Several saints transcend past the finality of their physical death in *The Golden Legend* through the usage of relics, portraying, furthermore, the saint's continuation as constant protector of the community, additionally supplying hope to the public that even past death, the body could be preserved and the saint would be there for protection and power.

The story of Saint Andrew, apostle (as dictated from *The Golden Legend*), for example, states that after the apostle's death his tomb was filled with a "flower-like manna" and that from his tomb oozed "fragrant oil" (Voragine 9). From this oil emitted from Saint Andrew's corpse, the village within which Saint Andrew lived and died was able to predict when harvest would be poor or plentiful for the town: "If there was only a trickle, the harvest would be poor; if it was plentiful, then the harvest, too, was plentiful (Voragine 9, 10). Similarly, oil was said to have flown from the head of the marble tomb of Saint Nicholas and Saint Catherine, healing for years all sick people who traveled to their resting place (Voragine 15, 338). Alternatively, the tombs and corpses of Saint Gervase, Saint Protase, Saint Quentin and Saint Alexia are said to be untouched by rot and instead emit a glorious, "exquisite sweetness" as though "they had been put there that very hour" (Voragine 144); all who are touched by the sweetness of the smell and the sight of the saints' tombs are cured of any physical illness, disability, or demonic possession (Voragine 161). Likewise, *The Golden Legend* vaguely refers to "many miracles" occurring at the tombs of saints Barlaam and Josaphat (Voragine 357). Bynum even adds to this collection of relic saints, stating how the hairs of holy woman Mary of Oignies supposedly came alive for an hour and cured the sick, and the foot of Agnes of Montepulciano rose from her tomb to salute

visitors and emitted manna (a miraculous healing oil) “to fall from the heaven” whenever it arose (Bynum 139).

These instances of the relic undead saint, carried on through death by the existence of their relics, are not to be analyzed as individual instances. Unlike the stories of physically undead saints which each showcase, individually, different usages and meaning of the living dead saints, the power of the partial, physical undead saint’s tale stems from these stories as a group. Alternately put, these stories exhibit, as a mass, the same interpretive meaning: that the saint, through their relics, embodied protection from the uncontrollable aspects of nature, and hope, both in that this saintly protection extended past the saint’s death and that the decay of the body could be stopped. Additionally, though it is the physical relic of the saint doing the work, it was the saint who was attributed with the glory and praise of the miracle. Otherwise put, when the healing oil of Saint Andrew predicted and forewarned of the upcoming harvest; or the miraculous manna of Saint Quentin or Saint Alexia touched and healed the ill, it was not the oil that was thanked for its properties, but rather the deceased saints themselves. This dynamic between fragmented relic and whole saint, created a relationship that allowed for the saint to live through their relic and, resultantly, be credited for whatever protection or contribution it imparted on the community.

The relics showcased in *The Golden Legend* very clearly exemplify how the relic undead saint was utilized frequently as a protector of the community and supplied confidence that the saint continued to protect the community long after their physical passing. Each example of the relic undead saint in the selection of tales showcased above serve a protective purpose, one that involves guarding the well-being of the community as a whole, generally through the healing of an ill community member. These relics provided much needed miracles to the needy of the

community: for the community of Saint Andrew, his relic provided forewarning to bad harvests, protecting his community from unforeseen hardship and allowing them time to prepare in advance; the relics of Saint Nicholas, Saint Catherine, Saint Gervase, Saint Protase, Saint Quentin, Saint Alexia, Mary of Oignies, and Agnes of Montepulciano, cured the community's sick of their ailments, allowing them to return not only to their families, but back to being productive members of society. These relics, and therefore, metonymically, the living dead saints they carried through their existence, provided essential support to the community for problems otherwise unfixed. Similarly, these stories of the physical, metonymic undead saints, through the existence of their relics, illustrates their perseverance in the community beyond death, bestowing hope upon the medieval community that even after their death, through their relics, the saint would still be there to protect and contribute to their community.

Yet another essential representation and utilization of the partial, physical living dead was as an image of hope that the human body could resist decay after death. Admittedly, this usage of the saint seems a little out of left field considering that the relic undead saint's previous usage was as a very clear protector of the medieval community; no where do the instances found in *The Golden Legend* explicitly point to the importance in the Middle Ages of avoiding bodily decomposition. The threat of losing one's corpse to disintegration, however, thrived as a very real fear for the medieval community. In fact, for the people of the Middle Ages, bodily rot after death was more horrifying than death itself; there prospered the very "palpable anxiety about the corruption and slime immediately attendant upon death" (Bynum 186). For the people of the Middle Ages, this fear of decay flourished and stemmed from the anxiety that if one's body rotted after death, then at the coming of Christ they would return in their less than pristine form. Moreover, the medieval belief of the connection between body and soul was that the two were

tied together as one. To lose one's body, then, was to also lose one's soul; the corruption of the physical body inevitably led to the dissolution of the soul. The relic saint, then, in the perfect preservation of their corpse, offered an appeasement of this medieval fear. Saints such as Saint Gervase, Saint Protase, Saint Quentin, and Saint Alexia, whom were untouched by rot and emitted sweet smells, showed that decay could be resisted with enough Christian devotion. By resisting in their own corpses and relics the power of decay, these relic living dead saints presented hope to the medieval community that they too, after death, could avoid the degeneration of their bodies and souls.

The living dead saints-as-relics (exhibited in these tales found in *The Golden Legend*) were protectors and alleviators of fear. They existed as tools used by the medieval community to help protect it from causes unsolvable any other way, and tools through which the fear of a disembodied soul after death was lessened. These living dead saints were tools used for the continuation of the betterment of the community long after the saint's passing, influencing the community for the better rather than for the worse. However, this usage of the living dead saint as a tool, at the disposal of the community's every issue, was not one revered by all in the medieval community. As it will be explored in the next section through the major medieval cultural work, *The Canterbury Tales*, there existed dissent within the medieval community of society's excessive usage of the living dead saint, many seeing it as a divergence from God's intended purpose for the saint.

Section V: Chaucer and the "Little Idiot": The Living Dead in "The Prioress' Tale"

Having investigated the monumental historical and cultural importance these living dead saints played within the context of the Middle Ages and medieval community, it seems to only make sense that they would also be involved in one of the most monumental works of fiction of

the Middle Ages: *The Canterbury Tales*. Looking at *The Prioress' Tale* of Geoffrey Chaucer's prodigious work, one indeed finds the living dead thriving within the text, serving as a vessel for some of Chaucer's most stinging satire of the Christian religion. Widely known for its satirical approach to the society and culture of the Middle Ages, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* served as a medium through which Chaucer distanced and examined society, creating a “therapy of distance” through which his characters “identif[ied] and narrat[ed] the shortcomings of their own society” (Binski 14). I disagree with C. David Benson's idea that *The Prioress' Tale* is “a work of celebration and prayer,” and that rather this work acts as criticism (Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style*). Specifically, I believe that the larger satirical meaning of *The Prioress' Tale* interacts with an observation, and mocking, of what Chaucer saw as a “mindless,” acquiescent following of Christianity in the Middle Ages principally exhibited by the worship and utilization of saints and their relics. Otherwise put, *The Prioress' Tale* directly mimics the same basic form, thematic format, and plot line of a traditional martyred, living dead saint's tale in order to critic the frenzied worship of saints and their relics that then stemmed from these tales.

My usage of mindless here means a lack of recognizable connection between religion, and the acts of religion, by the people who practice. Otherwise put, I use the term mindless to insinuate a lack of thoughtfulness, or purposeful meaning, behind the religious actions of the characters in *The Prioress' Tale* and the Prioress herself. Rather, the religious acts perpetrated in the text are merely done for the sake of going through the motions of Christian belief and hold meaning for the actor outside of the Christian normative. Through this representation of “mindlessness,” Chaucer critiques the potential within Christianity, and within the veneration of living dead saints, for mindless, uncritical faith that places a heavy emphasis on the observance of ritual rather than the true understanding behind religious principles and truths. *The Prioress'*

Tale acts as Chaucer's emblem of this, serving as his medium through which he critiques such practices by directly replicating them.

Here, one finds that the living dead acts as not a societal tool, but rather a tool used by Chaucer through which he is able to critic the very practice of the saintly living dead. Chaucer's usage of *The Prioress' Tale* as a critique of the veneration of living dead saints illuminates a major cultural response to the major cultural happening of undead saints. Otherwise put, it is important here to look at Chaucer's work, and to understand the criticism he places on the acquiescent veneration of saints, because his tale serves as a potential window into which we can view a similarly spread criticism throughout the medieval community and to understand major cultural reactions to the living dead saint.

The twelfth tale in Chaucer's collection, *The Prioress' Tale* depicts the heinous death of a young Christian boy at the request of an offended Jewish mob. In the tale, the Prioress describes the young, seven-year old son of a widow who, after hearing the Alma Redemptoris Mater ("O Gracious mother of the Redeemer") recited at school, begs an older classmate to teach him the song. After learning the song, the young boy recites the song "wel and boldely," twice a day, "To scoleward and homward whan he wente" (Chaucer 6). While he passes "scoleward and homeward," however, the young boy must travel through a "Jewerye" (a Jewish ghetto), through which he continues to sing his song "Ful murily than wolde he synge and crie/ O Alma redemptoris everemo" (Chaucer 6).

As a result of his insistent singing of the Alma Redemptoris Mater, Satan, who the Prioress describes as having "in Jues herte his waspes nest," riles the Jews into hiring an assassin, who upon the boy's next passage through, drags the boy into an alley, slits his throat, and throws him into a pit of excrement. When the mother of the boy comes looking for him,

Jesus directs her to the pit where his body lies, and almost instantly upon looking on him, the young boy, despite his slit throat, begins to sing the Alma Redemptoris Mater “So loude that al the place gan to ryng” (Chaucer 6). At the sound of his ringing voice, the other Christian people of the village begin to gather round, including the Magistrate, who upon hearing of the Jews actions against the small boy, orders for them all to be killed, quartered, and then hung. While this massacre occurs, the town carries the boy to the local church where the abbot engages in a conversation with the “zombie” clergeon boy on why he sings despite his slit throat. The clergeon boy answers that because he sang the Alma Redemptoris Mater, and because of “[God’s] Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde,” the virgin Mary came to the clergeon boy in death and placed a grain upon his tongue, telling him to keep singing until the grain was removed and she would come claim him (Chaucer 6). At this discovery, the abbot reaches into the boys mouth and removes the grain; after which the boy ceases his singing and is revered in martyrdom, buried in a coffin of clear marble and left in the church for all to see and praise.

The Prioress’ adherence to a mindless faith can be seen as early as the first introductory sentences of her description in “The General Prologue.” Chaucer states that the Prioress’ “gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy” (Chaucer 6). At first glance this dedication of the Prioress to a saint seems appropriate for a member of the religious order; however, upon closer investigation, one discovers that Saint Eligius⁴, the saint in which the Prioress gives her “grette ste ooth” to, is not a saint of great charitable work, but rather the patron saint of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, and metal workers. Known only for his beautiful metal working creations and his success at converting pagan groups to Christianity, Saint Eligius symbolizes the splendor of material objects, rather than the brilliance of the human spirit or glory of Christian, charitable

⁴ “Saint Loy,” as he is referred to in the Prioress’s description, is an abbreviation for the colloquial name of Saint Eligius, “Saint Eloy.” All three names refer to the same saint.

acts (Van der Essen). Stating that the Prioress' greatest oath was to that of Saint Eligius signifies that the Prioress associates herself, and therefore her own personal conception of her religious practice, with that of Saint Eligius. Otherwise put, by giving her greatest oath to Saint Eligius, the Prioress is stating that she vows to follow his footsteps and mimic his religious practice in her own exertion of the Christian faith. Furthermore, the Prioress' association with Saint Eligius signifies the importance of materiality for the Prioress. Rather than linking herself with a saint of highly charitable acts, she conjoins her name and religious ideals with a saint venerated for his material gifts to the religious and legal royalty of the 6th century (Van der Essen). This, by extension, shows that the Prioress' placement of importance lies not with the charitable acts afforded by Christianity, but rather in the material acts and gains of faith. This, resultantly, shows in the Prioress that she works within Christianity not for the sake of bettering her fellow laity or non-believers, but rather she abides in Christian practices for the sake of material gains and concrete rewards in reality.

Medievalist James J. Lynch disagrees with this reading, however, stating that to "ascribe to the Prioress a special devotion to St. Eligius ... is to speculate on evidence that is more tenuous than cogent" (Lynch 245). Lynch argues that Saint Eligius was known widely throughout Chaucer's time as a patron of goldsmiths and, therefore, Chaucer's allusion to him acts as a reference point for readers to stop and recognize the saint of which Chaucer alludes. Lynch argues, furthermore, that to speculate that the Prioress is swearing by Saint Eligius acts as "a tentative guess...[and] seem[s] somewhat far-fetched to do so" (Lynch 245). He argues that her reference to Eligius serves as an "oath to... appeal to the artisan rather than the courtier," insinuating that the Prioress does so to prove her allegiance to the lower class to her compatriots of the Canterbury group, rather than confirm an allegiance to the courtesan class she tends to

mimic in her actions. Lynch furthers this argument by offering the idea that the Prioress' appeal to Saint Eligius stems from her stance as a "lover of beautiful objects" and that Chaucer's description of her lavish medallions and coral beads act as "object[s] described ... as necessary a part of her religious habit" (Lynch 245). If the appeal had stemmed from anything less straightforward, Lynch contends, "Chaucer, usually straightforward in his descriptive accounts [would not have waited] almost forty lines before he introduces the substantiating evidence" (Lynch 245). Ultimately, I disagree with Lynch's claims on the basis that Lynch himself seems to found his arguments on evidence that, itself, is also "more tenuous than cogent." Lynch offers no contextual proof to supplement his claim and rather skirts around the reason why a prioress would need to have an abundance of "beautiful objects" as a necessary part of her religious garb, if it not for vain and nonreligious motivations. Though Lynch offers an interesting contrary view of the Prioress, I find it hard to validate his argument when his own speculation of the Prioress' plea seems based on assumption rather than close analysis of the text.

Continuing on, Chaucer's materialistic placement of importance in the practice of the Prioress' religious duties extends to the description the Prioress' mannerisms and physical attributes (i.e. dress, physical stature, etc.). For example, the Prioress' description lacks any mention of her religious actions or tendencies, and rather spends a disproportionate amount of time detailing the way and manner in which the Prioress eats. In just the first part of the lengthy description Chaucer gives, particularizing the way the Prioress eats, Chaucer states:

"At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;/ She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,/ Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;/ Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe/ That no drope ne fille upon hire brest./ In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest" (Chaucer 6). The charitable acts or Christianly manner of the Prioress are not emphasized here, but rather the focus lies on her

courtly manners and perfect way of eating. Additionally, the usage of “wel ytaught” to describe the Prioress in her manners stands out as odd considering that, as a Prioress, she should be best taught in the ways of God, not in table manners. In this same realm of thought, Chaucer describes the Prioress’ greatest pleasure (“In curteisie was set ful”) as being in her manners (“muchel hir lest”). Once more, as a member of the church, the general expectation would be that the Prioress’ greatest pleasure would be in the duties and rewards of the church. Contrary to this, her courtly manners and well behaved eating habits bring the Prioress the greatest joy; elaborating, once more, the Prioress’ emphasis on materialistic gains (i.e. being a well behaved lady mimicking and invoking images of the equally well behaved court) over the gains and pleasures of practicing the Christian faith.

Chaucer continues in his description of the Prioress’ eating, stressing further at the end of his description, the Prioress’ preference of the court over the religious: “And peyned hire to countrefete cheere/ Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,/ And to ben holden digne of reverence” (Chaucer 6). The Prioress does not come by her good manners by coincidence, but rather deliberately strives, even goes so far as to “peyned” (take pains), to “countrefete” (imitate) the manners of the court. Instead of taking pains to be the best Christian example she can be, or taking pains to imitate Christ or follow the will of the Lord, the Prioress instead exerts all her effort into imitating the court, insinuating that the Prioress has no true desire for, or to better herself through, the Christian faith. This implication that the Prioress cares more for the court than for the religious, suggests that the Prioress has no real connections to her religious post and rather mindlessly goes through the motions for the sake of upholding her position, while in actuality her heart and intent lies with the court. The last two lines support this thought, pointing out that the Prioress, additionally, takes pains to “been estatlich of manere/ And to ben holden

digne of reverence.” These lines reiterate again the Prioress’ desire for the courtly over the religious by illuminating the effort the Prioress exerts in order to be considered worthy of reverence and dignified by the court she is painstakingly imitating. Her worthiness and dignity in the eyes of God does not matter to the Prioress; she strives not to be considered “holden digne of reverence” in her pursuits for God, but rather only works for the approval of the court.

It is also worth briefly noting the physical appearance of the Prioress. Rather than wearing the modest clothing, or even rags, of a truly devoted, pious nun, the Prioress’ description depicts her in a well-made cloak, with “small coral aboute hire arm she bar” and “a brooch of gold ful sheene” (Chaucer 6). The Prioress is not only dressed well, but is adorned in expensive “gold ful sheene” and coral beads. What is further, the brooch, which the Prioress wears, is engraved with the anthem, “Amor vincit omnia” meaning “Love Conquers All,” which is not only a saying found in tales of courtly love, but acts as a bizarre token for a nun, a woman dedicated to the chastity of her body and mind for God, to wear (Chaucer 6). This is all to say that the court has entirely replaced God and the Christian faith for the Prioress. No longer does the Prioress work for the Christian faith she represents; she strives to please and represent the court as though it was a religion in itself, which, in its consumption of the Prioress’ faith, has become her sole religion and religious duty. Yet, the Prioress still keeps her position within the Christian church. Accentuating, once more, the mindless actions of the Prioress as she continues to go through the motions of the Christian religion while her true intent, devotion, and faith is directed elsewhere.

It is not only in her manners and physical appearance that the Prioress reflects her disinterest in Christianity, but also in the ways, and things, in which she places her concern and charitable actions. As Chaucer describes in the last half of the Prioress’ description,

She was so charitable and so pitous/ She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous/ Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde./ Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde/ With rosted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed./ But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,/ Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte (Chaucer 6).

While described as “charitable and so pitous [compassionate],” the recipients of the Prioress’ charity and compassion are not even human; instead, the recipients of the Prioress’ Christianly actions are animals. This concern of the Prioress’ for the animals she comes across, but not for the humans she is supposed to help through her faith, shows, once again, a complete lack of embodied Christian ideals on the Prioress’ behalf. Though she carries the principles of Christianity with her in her title, and supposedly acts as an embodiment of the Christian ideal, the Prioress lacks any true Christian characteristic. She simply acts the part of the Prioress, hiding under the façade of her title, while acting in ways completely contradictory (i.e. desiring and striving for the court’s approval, placing her charity in animals over humans) to the Christian faith.

The Prioress’ tale mimics, almost exactly, this absence of genuine religion, yet maintaining of a religious persona for the sake of appearances, that the Prioress displays in “The General Prologue.” Interestingly in the beginning prologue to her tale, the Prioress cries that she herself is like a small baby, and beseeches the Virgin Mary to fill her with the right words to say, in order to tell the tale effectively. Invoking, in turn, the idea that in order to tell her tale, the Prioress must be filled with the words, praise, and religious fervor of the Virgin Mary herself because she, herself, a high up representative of the Christian faith, is as unintelligible as a infant. The Prioress pleads:

My konnyng is so wayk, O blisful Queene./ For to declare thy grete worthynesse/ That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;/ But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,/ That kan unnethes any word expresse,/ Right so fare I, and therfore I yow preye (Chaucer 249).

Though the Prioress acts as a representation of the Lord, and of Christianity as a whole, she

declares that her ability to speak of the Virgin Mary's greatness stands "so wayk" and that in the face of such "grete worthynesse," she feels like a child of "twelf month oold, or lesse." The Prioress is stating that she is a tiny infant and, therefore, needs the Virgin's help to tell her tale correctly and to fill her with words.

There are two things odd about the Prioress' declaration. Firstly, the Prioress' inability to speak, on her own, without the aid of the Virgin Mary filling her with words, stands out as bizarre for a person whose sole occupation is to praise the Lord and other Christian idols. Secondly, the Prioress' likening of herself to an infant, unable to speak, emphasizes a strange emptiness on the Prioress' behalf of religious understanding. Otherwise put, an infant of twelve months old or less lacks the ability to understand complex concepts, such as that of religion; they cannot know what happens around them, nor effectively express concepts or feelings. By admitting that she is in this frame of mind, the Prioress essentially admits that she is in a complete state of obliviousness, to a point where she cannot effectively speak of religion, nor understand it, without the Virgin Mary taking control and speaking for her, through her. Her plea for the Virgin Mary to fill her with words and that she herself is inept to do so, stands as an admittance that she cannot speak of the greatness of the Virgin Mary. The Prioress shows, therefore, once more, that she exists outside Christianity, and that her existence as a Prioress comes solely from her rehearsing of set ideals she fails to believe in.

Further emphasizing the submissive following of the Prioress, scholar Lisa Weston's article "Suffer the Little Children, or, A Ruminant on the Faith of Zombies" (2012), expresses similar ideas of the Prioress' "mindless" faith. Weston makes the argument that the Clergeon boy found within Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale* exists as a zombie character and, as such, the Prioress' adoration of the little boy is an idolization of mindless existence. Weston argues that we all truly

aspire to “the faith of zombies” and that the Prioress’ aspirations for a faith as “pure” and “innocent” as the little Clergeon’s represents her own aspiration to a zombie like faith and existence. Weston states that the Prioress’ acclaim of the Clergeon boy’s faith equates to seeking an existence “untroubled by moral responsibilities of thought” (190, 185). The Prioress praises the little Clergeon’s usage of “emotional over rational behavior” (exemplified in his foolish singing of the *Alma* throughout the Jewish ghetto, despite assumingly knowing the consequences of such actions) and in doing so, implies that “perfect faith requires... perfect (mindless) victimhood” (185).

I agree with Weston’s argument and see her point most prominently in the prologue of the Prioress’ tale, in which she praises children for sometimes being the best of God’s followers, because they can begin to praise him while they still suckle at the breast, stating, “For noght oonly thy laude precious/ Parfourned is by men of dignitee,/ But by the mouth of children thy bountee/ Parfourned is, for on the brest soukyng/ Somtyme shewen they thyn heriynge” (Chaucer 249). Once again, the Prioress admires the child’s ability to wholeheartedly praise the lord, despite the fact that a child, as young as still having to “brest soukyng,” has no understanding or comprehension of what praise entails. As Weston articulates, the Prioress seems “untroubled” by the responsibilities of thought and, rather, her appraisal only advocates mindless faith. For the Prioress, performing praise to the Lord, even without understanding, and therefore true devotion behind said praise, stands worthy of recognition and aspiration by the Christian laity. Analogous to Weston’s argument, by admiring the zombie like faith and dedication to God of children, the Prioress’ own mindless following of religion is progressed to advocating, through this tale and its prologue, for the mindless following of all of Christianity.

The entirety of this tale, however, does not center solely on the Prioress; rather, in order

to have a complete view of this tale and the critique of Chaucer's it embodies, one must also observe the clergeon boy and his own mindless manners. By viewing the clergeon boy specifically through the medium of the replicated resurrected saint's tale in which his story occurs, Chaucer highlights aspects of the reverence of saint's lives and stories that encourage acquiescent worship. Through this lens Chaucer focuses on the lack of agent thinking and motivation behind the boy's religious actions, and uses the boy as a symbol representing the undemanding compliance of medieval Christian community as a whole.

The story of resurrected saints existed as a very specific subset of stories in the Middle Ages. These tales consisted of almost identical story arcs and plotlines, often times mimicking the events and endings of their sister tales so that, as a genre, each story blends into the other, practically indistinguishable from the next. Generally a resurrected saint's tale consists of three distinct stages: displays of exemplary belief, a horrible death, followed by a resurrection. Picked out by God for saintly greatness, a devout follower, exemplary in their following more so than others, is murdered viciously by heathens for their belief; but, by the power of their faith and grace of God, they are resurrected and, as such, inflate the faith of their community and destroy the pagans in some way, whether it be through mass conversion (and therefore the mass destroying of their pagan belief), widespread shaming, or mass slaughter of the pagan community. The tale, then, becomes propagated widely through the community, either through word of mouth, communal story telling, or written transcription (much like the tales found in *The Golden Legend*). Take, for example—among many others—the saint's story of Saint Paul previously covered. Destined since he was a small child with great faith, Saint Paul is brutally murdered by the pagan leader of his town. Days after his murder, however, Saint Paul rises from his grave, storms into the conference room of the pagan leader, and through his mighty display of

the power of God, discredits the Emperor's power and rule in the community while simultaneously bolstering the faith of the Christian minority.

Holding this tale in comparison to that of the living dead boy in *The Prioress' Tale*, one sees striking similarities between the two. Chaucer uses the exact same format of a saint's tales—like that of Saint Paul—in *The Prioress' Tale* as a medium through which he is able to comment on the fervent frenzy occurring around the worship of saints and their relics. In *The Prioress' Tale* the living dead clergeon boy, around whom the story takes place, follows the same steps as Saint Paul, and other resurrected saints, throughout the tale. He is first marked for his extreme “devotion” to the Virgin Mary and compared by the Prioress to that of Saint Nicholas “For he so yong to Crist did reverence” (Line 515)⁵. As an offshoot of his extreme allegiance, the young boy takes up learning the *Alma redemptoris*, and, resultantly, suffers a heinous murder at the hands of the offended, neighboring Jewish ghetto. Identical to that of Saint Paul who is murdered by the pagan emperor for his offensive Christian ideals, the clergeon boy is seized by a henchman of the Jewish community (similar to the pagans in that the Jewish community was likewise viewed as a heretic group by Christians in the Middle Ages) and has “kitte his throte, and in a pit him caste,” suffering an untimely death for the sake of his Christian beliefs (Lines 569-571). Yet like Saint Paul who too rises from the dead, the young clergeon boy, “with throte y-corven lay upright,/ Her *Alma redemptoris* gan to singe/ So loude that al the place gan to ringe” (Lines 611-613). As a result of his resurrection, like that of every other resurrected saint's tale, the Jews who killed the boy are punished for their takes drawn in quarters by wild horses “after that he heng hem by the lawe,” while the believers of the Christian community

⁵ Saint Nicholas was revered as a saint for having developed an intense faithfulness to Christianity at an extremely early age. He is said to “have fasted even as an infant; he took the breast only once on Wednesdays and Fridays” (Page 250).

weep in blissful amazement “herying Cristes moder dere” for the miracle of their Christian belief (Lines 632-634, 678).

In its copying of a revived saint’s tale, *The Prioress’ Tale* establishes a lens through which the meaning of mindlessness in Chaucer’s story is to be viewed and interpreted. Unable to be viewed in a vacuum as isolated incidents of complacent Christian behavior, Chaucer explicitly frames the mechanical actions and uncritical ideals of the clergeon boy in the context of saint’s tale to critique the actual, same mindless behavior surrounding the veneration of saints in the Middle Ages. A meaning that, I believe, overtly points at the routine unmindful worship of undead saints that occurred prevalently throughout the Middle Ages, spurred on by works such as *The Golden Legend* that made popular saint’s tales like that of Saint Paul. In this setting, the resurrected clergeon boy plays the part of the worshipped resurrected saint, and, coupled with Chaucer’s structural matching of a saint’s-life trajectory, serves as a critique of the whole discourse and culture surrounding the cult of saints in the Middle Ages.

There are clues scattered throughout *The Prioress’ Tale* hinting repetitively to the living dead boy’s lack of devotional intent. The instances most repeated, however, are those pointing to the idea that the little clergeon chooses the Christian religion, and inhabits a state of fidelity, not out of choice, but out of habit. Continually Chaucer references facets of cultural, societal, and familial inculcation as the site from which the child’s devotion sprouts, not his personal choice or interest in the Christian religion. For example, Chaucer describes the school children of the town (of which the clergeon boy is apart of) as “Childrenn...of Cristen blood” (line 497). Chaucer’s primary description of these children is that they are born of “Cristen blood,” The phrase lacks any sign of a relation between personal choice and Christianity, rather the relation found in Chaucer’s description is one between Christianity and blood. This implies that the clergeon boy,

along with the rest of the school children, is born into his Christian belief rather than he has chosen it by personal will—his Christianity occurs as happenstance from his Christian blood. Blood is not something one chooses, or has any control over at all; rather, it exists as a natural, undeniable and unchangeable state of life. By stating that the boy's belief comes from his immutable blood, Chaucer implies that the child's belief happens not as a result of free choice, but rather occurs as a result of something he was born into and continues to inhabit out of nature.

What is more, when one considers the mass of the children represented in this story, there appears a lack of understanding on all their parts, not just solely on the part of the clergeon boy. Primarily, when the boy asks his elder counterpart to explain the *Alma redemptoris* to him, the older boy replies, ““This song, I have herd seye”” (Line 531). This older boy, from whom the clergeon boy learns the song for which he is later slain for, and praised for continuing to sing, cannot say for sure, nor seems to know, what the *Alma redemptoris* means. The older boy only knows the song and its meaning through hearsay, though Chaucer makes the point to emphasize how the song was sung in the school, loud enough for the clergeon boy to hear, the older boy who is supposed to have had the most experience with the song, cannot say for sure what meaning it holds. This quotation calls into question not only the clergeon boy's faith, but also the faith of the community as a whole. These children, onto which the religion is being passed, and spread onto other generations through, cannot even say for sure what these religious tenants mean, or the significance they hold. They seem to go along with this simply as though going through the motions, abiding by these Christian tenets (such as the reciting of the *Alma redemptoris*) because it is what they are being told to do, almost on the same level as following the order to do household chores because it is what is being asked of them. Emphasizing, once more, how the practices of Christianity showcased in this tale continually are accomplished

without conscious thought present; the characters of this tale, and the Christian community within which they function, act without understanding what they are doing, and act without showing any clear, personal choice as to why they are doing so.

This absence of cognizant understanding of one's religious actions once again arises in the clergeon's boy choice in song, and it arises in a monumental way that essentially questions whether the little clergeon boy understood, truly, what he was doing, and therefore if the saintly renown applied to him remains valid. Otherwise put, Chaucer notes in the tale that the *Alma redemptoris* "Hire to salve, and eek hire for to preye/ To been oure help and socour when we dye" (Lines 533-534). Literally translated, this song is used whenever one needs to ask the Virgin Mary for help through death. While this comes in handy later when the child, in fact, dies, singing it when he remains alive reflects a lack of mindful religious purpose in his thoughts and actions. The boy's singing of this prayer, day and night, is entirely inappropriate considering its intended purpose (to be sung in times of death) and actual usage (the boy singing it whenever, wherever). The boy has no actual concept of what the song is about; if he did, one would assume that he would cease to sing it until the necessary timing, or until he needed it later in the tale when he is murdered. It is entirely bizarre that the clergeon boy constantly sings to Mary to help him through death when, up until the end of the tale, he is singing alive and well⁶.

Alongside these examples of active choice, Chaucer twice uses the word "custom" in two different forms to describe the clergeon boy's actions in relation to his religion; once when describing the boy's walk to school each day ("That day by day to scole was his wone") and the second when describing the boy's relation to the Virgin Mary ("Of Cristes moder, hadde he in

⁶ Of course, it exists as entirely possible that the clergeon boy sings the *Alma redemptoris* as sign of his blessedness, and therefore, sings the song because he has a foreknowledge of his impending doom. Looking at the additional analysis of Chaucer's description of the clergeon boy as mindless, however, I find this improbable.

usage”) (Lines 504 & 506). In the first instance, the word choice and usage of “wone” (translated into modern English as “custom”) implies once more that the boy’s devotion—later applauded in the tale as the source of his resurrected miracle—occurs not by choice, but as a consequence of cultural following. The boy’s reason for being in this school of Christian faith stems not from his desire to be there and to learn the Christian doctrine, but rather his attendance at the school originates as a result of the tradition and custom that tells him to do so.

In the same vein of thought, the second phrase, “Of Cristes moder, hadde he in usage,” similarly stresses the boy’s Christian faith and agency as a result of choices and influences beyond his control and surpassing his choice. Translated into modern English, the later phrase translates into, literally, “Of Christ’s mother, he was accustomed.” The usage of “accustomed” implies the same cultural inculcation as the previous usage of “wone.” Rather than describing the boy as wildly dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Chaucer describes the boy as simply “accustomed” to her, a word that denotes habit, and actions that take place mindlessly after repeating the same action again and again. One does not put much conscious thought into a habit, hence the reason why nasty habits such as biting one’s nails or forgetting to flush the toilet, happen again and again despite the person’s not wanting it to. Habits occur as actions one takes when operating on autopilot, tuned off from the world and agent, conscious thought. Applying this connotation to the clergeon boy’s actions, one sees again a noticeable lack of active choice; unthinking habitual actions, instead, take the place and occupy his sense of faith in the Virgin Mary, and by extension Christianity as a whole. He praises the Virgin Mary out of habit, not out of choice; therefore calling into question the conscious agency this boy is putting into the praise he is later acclaimed for in the tale. Considering that the Virgin Mary later acts as the one to resurrect the boy from the dead, and that the boy continually sings to her, abandoning all other work to do so,

it is interesting that his relationship to the Virgin Mary exists as one of “accustom” rather than extreme fervor.

One finds when closely observing the living dead boy’s choice to continually recite the *Alma redemptoris*, that the boy chose the song for its aesthetic value, rather than for its religious merit or importance. The clergeon boy does not choose to recite this chant because he appreciates the devotion it portrays or the message it sends, rather he has no idea of its message when choosing it, or continuing to sing it; he chooses this chant solely on its physical attributes and aesthetically pleasing nature to him. In relation to this idea, one must consider that the community venerates the boy as a hero of sorts for his bravery in singing his song through the Jewish ghetto. The community applauds him—marks him as a martyr for singing his song in front of the heretic enemy—when, in actuality, nothing in the text alludes to the idea that the boy was singing the song for any particular reason, and certainly not as a way to prove his religion to the Jews. Rather, the only explanation Chaucer gives for why the zombie boy continues to sing his song is as stated above: because he thought it sounded nice and wanted to learn it by heart. There is no indication in the text that the zombie boy had any motivation or mindful reason as to why he sang the song. Rather it seems that his reason may have very well been because he was a “little idiot” (Beechy).

This is all to say that the devotion and mindfulness his community place on him is entirely asinine. The boy had no intention or concept of what he was singing or doing. His recitation of the song was akin to children today who repeat obscene lyrics to rap songs; they have no concept of what they are saying, nor what they are doing—they are merely parroting something back that caught their ear. The living dead clergeon boy then, though his community applauds him as a beautiful, young, devote follower of Christianity, inevitably shows that his

show of devout Christian practice came as an unintended consequence to a unconscious practice of religion. Chaucer continually points to this idea, referencing again and again through his usage of the word “custom,” “Cristen Blood,” and displays of lack of intent in the other children, how the little clergeon boy performed his “miracle” with no active agency behind his purpose. He was in the religious school because that was where his mother and society deemed socially acceptable for him to be; he sang the song because he saw others doing so and liked the tune; none of the living dead boy’s action in this text are of his own agency and are, rather, him simply going through the steps, mimicking what he sees being done around him.

Chaucer, interestingly, also mimics the usage of saints-as-tools that has been previously explored in this thesis, to challenge the validity of the clergeon boy’s miraculous nature and, by extension, challenges also the miraculous nature of all resurrected saints. Otherwise put, similar to how we previously explored resurrected saint’s used as tools through which problems were solved and Christianity spread, one can see that the living dead boy, too, reflects this usage and is used as a tool by the Virgin Mary to spread the faith to the community in this tale. Explicitly seen in the final moments of the boy’s existence, when he explains to the head of his church how he reanimated, the boy states: ““Me thought she leyde a greyn upon my tonge./ Wherefore I singe, and singe moot certeyn,/ In honour of that blissful mayden free,/ Till fro my tonge of tqken is the greyn”” (Lines 662-665).

Looking at the essentials of what the clergeon boy is stating—that the Virgin Mary placed a grain on his tongue that now compels him as the undead to continue singing until someone removes the grain from his mouth—it appears that the boy is cursed. The state the clergeon boy describes cannot be seen exclusively as a blessing; a blessing connotes a state that is desired, wanted, and inhabited with pleasure. The state the clergeon boy describes himself as

in, is explicitly forced upon him by the Virgin Mary. He does not ask the Virgin Mary to put this grain into his mouth and therefore compel him to sing forever until someone does something to stop it; the Virgin Mary, rather, pushes the boy into this state, creating a his current undeadness into something much more like a curse than a blessing.

The little clergeon boy gains nothing from his resurrected state. He is only able to sing the *Alma* and speak of why and who brought him to this state. In the end, he personally gains nothing from the Virgin Mary bringing him back. The Virgin Mary, however, has much to gain from his resurrection and exploits the undead boy, in his cursed state, as a means through which she can spread the wonder of Christianity and therefore reaffirm the faith of the believers in the boy's community. Alternately put, had the Virgin Mary not bound the boy to his undead state, he would have passed silently onto death and the community would continue on, un-affirmed and untouched by Christianity's miraculous powers. Instead, the Virgin Mary brings the undead boy into his resurrected stasis and holds him there for all to see, hear, and witness Christ's power, utilizing him as a tool through which she can spread the message and greatness of her religion. Amid the representations of mindlessness and imperfect religiosity, Chaucer creates this interaction between the clergeon boy and Virgin Mary to portray a saint's original purpose: to serve God and act as his servant on earth who exists, solely, to support and spread the doctrine of Christianity. The Virgin Mary uses the clergeon boy in this way, bringing him back to life to support the original duty the living dead saint was created for. As such, Chaucer uses this interaction between the two to offer an example of what a saint should do, versus how the actual community of the Middle Ages was using them.

Balancing his exemplification of how a living dead saint should be utilized, Chaucer utilizes the structure of the saint's story to create a vehicle through which he lays forth an

explicit critique of the mindless worship of saints in the Middle Ages. It is not, however, that Chaucer uses this tale to critique, or support, solely, the way in which this saintly worship was practiced. Rather, Chaucer uses *The Prioress' Tale* as a critique of the medieval community's praise of the undead saint as a whole, criticizing them not for their belief in the saint, but rather for the assentive way in which the community praised the saint fanatically, and turned to them for the most menial of problems. It is not that the saints of the medieval era did not deserve the praise they acquired; instead, Chaucer attempts to address in this tale how this the consumption of saintly worship ran rampant throughout the Middle Ages in ways that were often counterintuitive, and sometimes heretical, to their original, saintly, Christian purpose.

Take, for example, the usage of saint relics and saintly humiliation/harassment explored in the previous section. In these instances mal-use of the saint was profusely abundant; as stated before, "relics" of saints (often times pig bones or other non-saint corpse parts) were passed around from city to city, utilized by the community to bless wells for farming, cure ailments, or invoke miracles. Used, literally, as the living saint him/herself would be used, these relics were widely spread and utilized stand-ins in the community for all the same tasks and usages performed usually by the saint themselves. Likewise, the humiliation of saints existed as a practice that community members would travel hundreds of miles to perform. Though the saint was deceased, the opportunity to beat the saint into coercion, into accomplishing some desperately needed miracle, was something people would risk everything to accomplish.

These practices tended to push the boundary between religious and superstitious, often times creating tension in the Christian community. As Brown states,

popular opinion had forced on all but a discontented few the frank acceptance of pagan forms of ceremonial and/or potentially 'superstitious' views on the localization of the soul at the grave in the case of the cult of relics and of the tombs of the saints (Brown 27).

Chaucer addresses these modes of worship by using *The Prioress' Tale* as a mirror through which he reflects these exact practices back onto the community for review. He puts before the people of the Middle Ages (to whom this tale is directed) the clergeon boy and the Prioress as reflections of how inactive the community's consumption of saintly worship had become. From Chaucer's exceedingly learned point of view, the medieval community had slipped in their usage of the saint into a dangerously, indolent heretical area. Through the acquiescent worship and faith portrayed by the Prioress and clergeon boy, Chaucer highlights not a strengthening bond with the saint, but an obsession with the saintly that had blinded the medieval community—blinded them to the fact that the relics and tombs they worshipped were as empty of true religious value and intent as the clergeon boy and Prioress in this tale.

Similar to how the false relics and saintly humiliation worked in a way that required unthinking acts of worship, the clergeon boy of this tale was worshipped unquestionably by the community as an idol of devotion, when in actuality, every facet of the boy's faith exists as questionable acts of agent faith and reflecting choices not his own. The clergeon boy did not, essentially, deserve the praise the community gave him at the end of his death; he was mindless in his actions, used as a cursed tool through which the Virgin Mary achieved her means, and questionably did not even understand the song that he was praised for singing. Yet, because he was marked as a resurrected saint, despite the validity of his devotion or sincerity of his faith, the community applauded him as an idol and placed him in a tomb for all to see and worship for years to pass. By framing the clergeon boy in this way, *The Prioress' Tale* accentuates the slippery slope and progressively degrading nature of saintly practices in the middle ages; pointing out that what began as a worship of God's most devoted followers, diminished into a practice of worship that required little volitional religious thinking.

Section VI: Looking to the Zombie Apocalypse

“This is the way the world ends; not with a bang or a whimper, but with zombies breaking down the back door.”

— *Amanda Hocking, Hollowland*

This thesis has sought to understand the unique occurrence of zombie saints in the Middle Ages and how the manifestations of these living dead martyrs interacted as multi-faceted tools within the medieval community, resolving unsolvable moral quandaries and conquering the medieval fear of death. As Geary states, living dead saints, as an extension of Christianity, acted “as an expression of a perception of the world” (Geary 124). These saints existed not just as religious interpretations, nor solely as magical figures, but as interpretations of real world strife. These particular saints represented particular fears in the medieval community; they acted as the embodied root of the medieval fear of death, the epitome of how this society questioned the process, outcome, and lingering results after death.

Yet, as with all fears that must eventually be conquered, these saints also stood for the ways in which people in the Middle Ages came to terms with death and all its unknowns. While these saints did signify one’s fear of the finality of death, they also served as coping mechanisms through which the community’s fear of death was defeated. Similarly, undead saints acted as intermediaries between the world of the living and the world of the already dead (i.e. those passed to heaven, God, etc.), mediating between the medieval populace and those beyond the grave, allowing the medieval community a reassuring glance at what lay beyond the pale veil.

As seen through Chaucer’s work, however, not all in the medieval community agreed with the usage of the living dead saint as a communal tool. Chaucer, a major literary representative of the cultural atmosphere of the time, portrays a facet of the living dead saint that insinuates a tension between the intended Christian purpose of saints and the communal usage

they commonly operated within. His work reflects the ideal held by some in the medieval community that the existence of the living dead saint as a exploited tool was an ideal lingering between a heresy and devoted Christian practice. As Caroline Bynum states when speaking of the relic, undead saint, the usage of the zombie saint in the medieval community worked under constant “radical suspicion,” often times treading a fine line between “superstitious, dissident, [and] heretical” usage (Bynum 165). Yet, as one can see in the continuance of the undead saint throughout the culture of the Middle Ages, the exploitation of the saint still thrived at the “very core” of Christian practice. It became, then, something that, as Bynum explains, “everyone condemned everyone else for misunderstanding how the divine intersected with the material, but no one denied it did” (Bynum 165). Chaucer’s critiques this finely treaded usage of the community. He uses *The Prioress’ Tale* and the structure of the popular saint’s tale to show to the people their own zombie like consumption of the living dead saint, revealing to the community just how far their usage and veneration of the living dead saint had strayed.

Considering the prevalence of the undead saint in the Middle Ages and their absence from society today, one may wonder what the relevance of this thesis to today. Why observe something like the undead saint that has died in the past? The answer to this lies in what their name implies: the living dead do not ever die. The Haitians in the 18th century created the “zombi” to help mediate between the horrors of slavery and the release of death, highlighting an inability to transcend from this fallen world; today, five percent of the American population watches *The Walking Dead* and have revived the zombie to a prevalence unseen before in human history (Collis). This goes to show that despite the wishful thinking by every generation to think that they are unique from the past, we as a human society fail to truly evolve away from our coping mechanisms for death. Just as the medieval community used living dead saints as tools to

alleviate the fear of death, modern day society utilizes the modern zombie as our replacement saint, using the shambling dead's presence as the tool through which we find solace about the hereafter.

In fact, similar to how the usage of the original Haitian zombi mapped correspondingly onto the usage of the living dead saint, modern society's utilization of the zombie runs parallel in many ways to the application of the medieval undead saint. It is true, yes, that the two differ drastically in their physical forms and manifestations. They both, however, share the same communal purpose and help humans understand and cope with death in some way. The living dead saint, for example, provided hope that divine help continued past the saint's death, that the community was never alone, and that individual agency could be retained through death, and a regained salvation always found. Today's zombies, contrastingly, facilitate a confrontation of death and as tools, assuage our fear of death by forcing us to, literally, face its decaying face.

Unlike the Middle Ages, death is not omnipresent in modern society. Death is now hidden away and kept in the private confines of funeral homes and graveyards at the edge of town. Zombies exist as a paradox to this cultural trend to shield the public from death; they act as a medium through which modern society can confront, face to face, the idea of death, decay, and mental extinguishment. Through the zombie one can corporally experience the effects of death—to see a corpse and the rot that comes with death, to see the effects when the light behind the eyes is extinguished—and in that way, come to no longer fear it. Through this experience, the zombie transforms into a tool through which modern society can face the fears and anxieties of not knowing death. Otherwise put, the modern community uses the zombie as a way to understand and confront the facets of death that have otherwise been hidden from us in the privatization of death.

Furthermore, in much the same way that living dead saints signified a triumphant over death for the medieval community, zombies, too, symbolize modernity's wish to supersede death. For the today's community, the modern zombie acts as a physical embodiment of death and its effects. The point of the zombie genre, then, to extinguish the zombies, to survive the zombie apocalypse, and to live to see the light of a new dawn, performs as a metaphor for today's community's desire to surpass death. In the same way that Saint Martin's resurrection from the grave presented hope to the community that death could be beat, the human race's defeat of the zombie represents a defeat of death and offers today's community hope that death, and the fear within it, can be defeated by sheer, human will.

Yet, the medieval saint did not represent only the defeat of death; the medieval saint, additionally, represented a medium through which communal issues could be fixed. The resurrection of the dead by the saint acted as a way to solve community issues left behind by the dead, while relics could be used to solve environmental and domestic emergencies. In this same vein, zombies today embody a similar usage by the community. In their usage in today's popular culture, zombies represent more than just an anxiety over death; they represent a mélange of societal anxieties ranging from environmental collapse to the recent world economic breakdown. A zombie infestation acts as a solution to all the world issues at hand—corrupt capitalism, environmental carelessness, overpopulation and use—because it completely breakdowns the societal system and allows for a new, more cohesive society to be built. New York Times journalist Terrence Rafferty further explores this manifestation of the zombie as a vessel of world worry, stating:

In the case of zombie fiction, you have to wonder whether our 21st-century fascination with these hungry hordes has something to do with a general anxiety, particularly in the West, about the planet's dwindling resources: a sense that there are too many people out there, with too many urgent needs, and that eventually these encroaching masses...will

simply consume us. At this awful, pinched moment of history we look into the future and see a tsunami of want bearing down on us, darkening the sky. The zombie is clearly the right monster for this glum mood (Rafferty, “The State of Zombie Literature”).

Like the medieval living dead, though, the zombie, by bringing about and representing the worst ways this world could collapse, operates as a communal tool that forces modern society to look at the dire condition of the world and, through facing the fear of ruin head on, begin to work towards action. In Rafferty’s words, “...if you take the time to see and feel and think, the world, dire as it is, can lose some of its terrors” (Rafferty, “The State of Zombie Literature”). In the same way, to face the zombie head on is to eliminate all the terrors of communal struggle and death. It does not matter what century the zombie lives in—Haitian zombies, flesh eating 21st century zombies, the medieval living dead saint—they all are used in the same way by their communities to alleviate a universal human anxiety over all that surrounds death. In the end, the living dead are all just a bunch of tools.

Works Cited

- Ames, Christine Caldwell. "Medieval Religious, Religions, Religion." *History Compass*. 10.4 (2012): 334-352. Web. 29 Sept. 2013.
- Beechy, Tiffany. Personal interview. 7 Oct. 2013.
- Benson, David C. *Chaucer's Drama of Style*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. Print.
- Binski, Paul. *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996. Print.
- Brown, Peter. *The Cult of Saints*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981. Print.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Culture*. New York: Zone Books, 2011. Print.
- Cash, Johnny. "Ain't No Grave." *American VI: Ain't No Grave*. American Recordings and Lost Highway Records, Feb. 2010. MP3.
- Christie, Deborah and Sarah Juliet Lauro, eds. *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*. USA: Fordham University Press, 2011. Print.
- Clark-Estes, Adam. "A Brief History of Zombies." *The Atlantic Wire*. Yahoo! News. 31 October 2012. 11 March 2013.
- Collis, Clark. "'Night of the Living Dead': How a 42-year-old zombie movie refuses to die." *Entertainment Weekly*. Entertainment Weekly Magazine., 28 Oct. 2010. Web. 8 December 2013.
- Davis, Wade. *The Serpent and The Rainbow*. New York City: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1985. Print.

- Geary, Patrick. "Humiliation of Saints." *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*. Wilson, Stephen ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. 123-140. Electronic.
- Geary, Patrick J. *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. Print
- Gilbert, Jane. *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature*. United Kingdom: The University of Cambridge Press, 2011. Print
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet. "The Zombie Saints: The Contagious Spirit of Christian Conversion Narratives A Zombie Martyr." *Oxford Journals* 26.2 (2012): 160-178. Web. 4 Oct 2013.
- Lynch, James J. "The Prioress's Greatest Oath, Once More." John Hopkins University Press, *Modern Language Notes* 72.4 (1957): pp. 242-249. April 1957.
- McIntosh, Shawn and Marc Leverette, eds. *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2008. Print.
- Rafferty, Terrence. "The State of Zombie Literature: An Autopsy." *Boo Review: The New York Times*. The New York Times, 5 Aug. 2011. Web. 31 March 2014.
- Voragine, Jacobus De. *The Golden Legend: Selections*. London: The Penguin Group, 1998. Print.
- Watkins, Carl. "'Folklore' and 'Popular Religion' in Britain during the Middle Ages." *The Folklore Society*. 115 (2004): 140-150. Web. 29 Sept. 2013.
- Weston, Lisa. "Suffer the Little Children, or, A Ruminant on the Faith of Zombies." *Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*. Joy, Eileen A., Nicola Masciandro, and Myra Seaman, eds. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2012. 181-190. Electronic.

