

## Death

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Death was a much more frightening and insistent presence in Henry VIII's England than it has become in our modern world, or at least the western and industrialised parts of it. Average life expectancy in the early sixteenth century was barely thirty, a figure determined largely by heart-breaking levels of infant mortality: 25% of children died before their first birthday, and 50% before their tenth. Marriages were ended by death as often as they are by divorce today, and remarriage was common and expected (though not quite on the scale Henry practised it). In a society without antibiotics or effective sanitation, epidemic diseases of various kinds were major killers – typhoid, dysentery, smallpox – not to mention the periodic visitations of plague, and the mysterious, deadly ailment (new to Tudor England) known as the 'sweating sickness'. Henry himself, despite his physical valour, was terrified of the remorseless, indiscriminate capacity of disease to take life, and fled from court during outbreaks of plague or the sweat.

One of the reasons plague and other diseases were so widely feared was that they caused sudden, unexpected death. Early Tudor people were taught to believe that death was something for which they needed carefully to prepare, precisely because death was neither the end nor the worst. There was, quite literally, a fate worse than death – the prospect of eternal damnation. For late medieval Christians, the (official) aim of life was to prepare for life eternal with God in heaven, and the ability to make a 'good death' was essential to this. A good death was not, as we might think today, a painless, peaceful passing, but a fully conscious, hard spiritual effort to repent of sins and affirm belief and trust in God. One of the reasons why this was hard was because of an unwanted, but expected presence around the deathbeds of Christians – that of the devil. When human beings were at their weakest – in pain, perhaps delirious – that was when Satan saw his best chance to lure them into despairing of God's love and losing their souls. The deathbed was thus imagined as a place of spiritual struggle, with angels and demons battling for the ultimate prize of an immortal soul, unseen by all except perhaps the dying persons

themselves. Death was a challenge and an ordeal. But the late medieval Catholic Church had mechanisms for helping people to get through it. An elaborate sequence of 'last rites' was prescribed for the comfort of the dying and to help them resist the devil's temptations. A crucifix would be held before them, and a lighted candle placed in their hands. Three of the Church's sacraments – ritual means of administering the saving grace of God – were offered to the sick and dying by the clergyman attending their final hours. There was a last opportunity to confess sins, and receive absolution from Christ's representative, the priest. After this, the dying person would be strengthened by receiving the consecrated bread of communion, called here the *viaticum* (meaning, 'take with you on the journey'). There was also a last anointing of the body, or 'extreme unction', with sacred oils. Deathbeds could be busy places. In addition to the priest, kinsfolk and neighbours would be gathered round to encourage the efforts of the soon-to-be-deceased. When a London woman, dying in 1538 with a ruptured tumour on her neck, was unable to receive the viaticum or even look upon it, her women friends called out 'what, will ye die like a hellhound and a beast, not remembering your maker?' Fortunately, she was able to make a sign with her hands, and her friends were satisfied that she had made a good death.

The last rites helped the dying make the transition from this world to the next. But they also had another, if often unspoken, purpose: they helped to ensure the dead would remain dead, and not return to haunt the living. Belief in ghosts was widespread in Tudor England (though the notion that the ghost of Henry's fifth wife, Catherine Howard, wanders through Hampton Court seems, sadly, to be of more modern vintage). Medieval and Tudor ghost stories varied in their details, but they often had a common thread: the restless spirit was of someone who had failed to make a good death – a victim of violence, or a suicide, or someone who had been prevented from performing the proper deathbed rituals. (The ghost of Hamlet's father in the play by Shakespeare is a famous, if fictional, case in point).

There was, however, one group in early Tudor society who did not believe in ghosts: the small but growing band of English Protestants. In 1543, the year of Henry's marriage to Kateryn Parr at Hampton Court, one such sceptic, the reformer Robert Wisdom, was reported as saying that the

'souls departed do not come again and play boo-peep with us'. Protestants did not deny the possibility of ghosts because they were on the road to becoming modern rationalists. They did so because of their horror at what ghosts were often reported to do – ask for the prayers of the living. This brings us to one of the key features of medieval teaching about death, and one which the Reformation sought utterly to overturn: the doctrine of purgatory.

Purgatory was one of the greatest imaginative achievements of the medieval religious mind. It was (as Protestants loved to point out) a doctrine that had little explicit sanction in the Bible, but it was one that answered a popular need, and developed, as it were, from the grass-roots up. Early Christianity offered a stark choice for the destination of souls in the next life – salvation in heaven or eternal damnation in hell. The elite of the Christian world – saints, martyrs and pious monks – could reliably expect the reward of the former, but what about the rest of society? Common sense suggested that most people were neither holy enough to demand immediate entry into heaven, nor wicked enough to deserve unending punishment in hell. Hence, the teaching on purgatory developed as a way of making it possible for the mediocre mass of humanity to be saved. The moderately good would go to heaven, but only after they had first passed through the 'third place' of purgatory. There was a coherent theological rationale for the teaching, which had achieved a fully developed form by at least the eleventh century. To be eligible for salvation, it was necessary that all the 'mortal' sins committed by a Christian during their life had been forgiven, and this was achieved by the absolution that followed confession to a priest. But the medieval sense of justice demanded that even after sins had been forgiven, there was a 'penalty' due for them to God. Some of this penalty could be paid off in penances and good works in this life, but most people could expect to die with a debit in their spiritual balance-sheet. Purgatory was the place where the balance would be extracted.

It followed that the experience would not be a pleasant one. In countless sermons and religious books purgatory was imagined as a place of horror and pain, whose principal punishment would be a purging fire. In fact, it was hard to tell the difference between purgatory and hell itself. The Church never officially pronounced on where purgatory was to be found,

but conventional wisdom held it was under the earth, right next door to hell, and some authorities believed that Satan's demons nipped across to administer the torments. There was, of course, a crucial difference: hell was for ever, while purgatory was a temporary destination on the route to heaven. But it was still a prospect to be feared. Although official theology was cautious about concepts of 'time' in the next world, popular preaching spread the idea that souls might deserve to spend hundreds, if not thousands of years trapped in purgatory.

The news was not all bad, for the dead in purgatory were not left entirely to their own devices. One of the central (and rather attractive) ideas of medieval Catholicism was that all Christians, living and dead, formed a single society, a 'communion of saints'. It was conventional teaching that a single Church was divided into the 'Church Militant' on earth, the 'Church Suffering' in purgatory, and the 'Church Triumphant' in heaven. Lines of assistance and communication between the three branches were not broken. The saints in heaven listened to the prayers of petitioners on earth, and interceded with Christ on their behalf. Conversely, the prayers of the living benefited the souls in purgatory, and helped to shorten their stay there. Particularly powerful in this respect was the saying of the mass - understood theologically as a re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice on the cross - and masses could be designated for the benefit of specific souls in purgatory. This helps explain why purgatory was such an important idea for the social and religious life of pre-Reformation society. To pass easily through purgatory, it was vital to secure the efforts of those left behind in this world, and for that to happen it was essential to be remembered. Tombs and monuments were plastered with the injunction 'ora pro anima...', 'pray for the soul of...'. The prospect of purgatory was also the stimulus for a great deal of gift-giving at the time of death. People left money to the upkeep of churches so that their names would be entered on the 'bede roll' of parish benefactors, and read out to the congregation with instructions to 'remember' their souls. The dying might donate vestments, chalices or stained-glass windows with their names inscribed, so that their generosity would be recalled and rewarded with prayers. Or they might directly arrange for masses and other services to be performed on their behalf, either for a distinct period of time or even in perpetuity. The institutions performing these intercessions were known as chantries, which might be elaborate free-standing chapels, or, more commonly, an altar within the

main parish church. An entire army of chantry priests (paid for and controlled by the laity) serviced the purgatory 'industry' of late medieval England.

The whole system undoubtedly had an appealing side: it was the spur for a considerable amount of charitable activity, especially gifts to the poor, whose prayers were regarded as a particularly effective form of intercession. It also powerfully conveyed the idea that bonds between the living and the dead were not broken, and it allowed the survivors constructively to work through their grief by doing something that could actually benefit the dead. But like all arrangements involving financial transactions, the system was open to abuse. Looked at unsympathetically, it appeared to imply that the rich could buy their way into heaven, or that the forgiveness of God was somehow for sale. This was particularly the case with the trade in indulgences – official church certificates that a certain quantity of the punishment due in purgatory had been remitted in return for a financial contribution to a specified 'good cause'. Martin Luther famously protested against the theology of indulgences in his 95 Theses of 1517, an event that, in retrospect, proved the starting point of the Protestant Reformation.

Protestants had a real antipathy to purgatory. Because they could not find evidence for the doctrine in scripture, they characterised it as a fiction and as a kind of con-trick, through which avaricious clergy made a living out of people's fears. The catch-phrase 'purgatory pick-purse' appears repeatedly in English Protestant propaganda of Henry VIII's reign. Purgatory was also inimical to the central Protestant principle of 'justification by faith alone'. Human effort was irrelevant to salvation – nothing other than Christ's willing sacrifice on the cross 'justified' men and women before God. But purgatory implied that humanity participated actively in the process. Another line of attack was that purgatory was socially unjust, diverting revenues that should have gone to the poor. One of the earliest English Protestant tracts was the lawyer Simon Fish's *Supplication of the Beggars*, a purported complaint from the poor to the king about the amount of money the clergy were hoovering up through their teachings on purgatory. Sir Thomas More countered in 1529 with a *Supplication of Souls*, in which he imagined the dead crying out piteously for their accustomed alms and remembrances from the living, and fearing the proverb 'out of sight, out of

mind.’ Talk and preaching against purgatory became increasingly common in England in the years around Henry VIII’s break with Rome, and some of Henry’s closest advisors, like Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, were clearly sceptical about the doctrine.

What of Henry’s own views about all of this? It is a commonplace to observe that, despite his rupture with Rome, Henry was theologically conservative in all sorts of ways, deeply attached to confession, clerical celibacy and the Latin mass, and that his preferred religious outlook was a kind of ‘Catholicism without the Pope’. But Henry’s attitude towards purgatory should make us question this stereotype, for he seems to have been deeply ambivalent about the doctrine. In 1536, for example, he issued a proclamation effectively banning indulgences. There may have been a political angle here, for indulgences were particularly associated with the authority of the pope. In the same year, the first official doctrinal statement of Henry’s new Church, the Ten Articles, insisted that praying for the souls of the departed was a charitable act, but pointedly noted that the place of those souls, the appropriate name for it, and the nature of pains suffered there, were all ‘uncertain to us by scripture’. A later doctrinal statement, for which Henry took direct responsibility, the *King’s Book* of 1543, returned to the theme. The *King’s Book* is usually seen as a ‘conservative’ document, and 1543 – centrepiece of the current Hampton Court exhibition – as a year of religious reaction. But on purgatory the document departed radically from traditional Catholic teaching, maintaining that we could not know how the dead benefited from prayers or masses, and insisting that people forthwith ‘abstain from the name of purgatory’. Meanwhile, the dissolution of the monasteries had swept away a great deal of prayer for the dead, and in 1545, Henry considered closing the chantries as well. We can only speculate as to the reasons behind Henry’s distaste for purgatory. Perhaps, control-freak that he was, he disliked the idea that people might sin in this life and postpone their payment for it to the next.

Death finally caught up with Henry in January 1547. It is not clear whether he received the full range of ceremonies constituting the Catholic ‘good death’. A later account by the Protestant writer John Foxe has him simply placing his trust in Christ and grasping the hand of his faithful Protestant archbishop, Cranmer. Perhaps. But Foxe would have found it hard to explain away Henry’s will, which directed that 1000 marks be given in alms

to the poor, with instruction to pray for his soul, and that four solemn obits (annual commemorations) were to be maintained at St George's Chapel Windsor, where also 'an altar shall be furnished for the saying of daily masses while the world shall endure'. Henry was taking no chances with his own soul, and requiem masses were celebrated for him across the land in February 1547. Yet, in the longer term, the undermining of belief in purgatory, which Henry's reign initiated, can be seen as one of the most important turning points of social and cultural history. The relationship between the living and the dead was completely redefined, and without purgatory, 'memory', and attitudes to the past more generally, began to acquire a much more secular character. Yet, as all visitors to Hampton Court will recognise - whether there are ghosts or no - the past and the people who inhabited it retains the ability to haunt the imagination of the present.