

Necromancy, the art or practice of magically conjuring up the souls of the dead, is primarily a form of divination. More generally, necromancy is often considered synonymous with black magic, sorcery or witchcraft, perhaps because the calling up of the dead may occur for purposes other than information seeking, or because the separation of divination from its consequences is not always clear. There is also a linguistic basis for the expanded use of the word: the term *black art* for magic appears to be based on a corruption of *necromancy* (from Greek *necros*, 'dead') to *nigramancy* (from Latin *niger*, 'black'). (Jones, 6451).

What fascinates me about this term "necromancy" is the process by which it becomes a synonym for other magical practices and is then carefully differentiated from them again. The occult scholarship of the seventeenth century and onwards mentions witchcraft and necromancy in almost the same breath, anxious to differentiate the one from the other. Why? If necromancy is synonymous with witchcraft, surely use of the two terms is redundant?

The answer, I discovered, is that they were never synonymous in the first place. There is a conflation of terms at work here, but it is between necromancy - divination through discourse with the deceased - and a form of black magic, concerned with discourse and bargains made with demons, devils and other diabolical entities.

In about 1010, Burchard of Worms' *Corrector and Doctor* differentiated between "magicians", "diviners" - presumably including necromancers - witches and the "you" being addressed by the text, an ordinary person not identified as any of these particular practitioners but still perhaps enacting magic. However, Burchard does not separate these practitioners by their practices; for example, his list of divinations includes the influencing of minds and the weather. John Shinnars points out that "Burchard culled most of the sins and their penances in his collection from older penitentials, some dating back to the seventh century" (459): this distinction between practitioners and lack of similar distinction between practices appears therefore to be long-established.

This lack of distinction is even more apparent in the work of Johannes Hartlieb, who (in the early fifteenth century) defines necromancy thus:

*Nygramancia* is the first forbidden art, and is called the black art. This art is the worst of all, because it proceeds with sacrifices and services that must be rendered to the devils. One who wishes to exercise this art must give all sorts of sacrifices to the devils, and must take an oath and pact with the devils (in Kieckhefer, 33).

There is no reference to the dead whatsoever here, suggesting that necromancy and diabolical sorcery have become fully conflated by the early fifteenth century. Other texts allow the process to be tracked more clearly. Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, from the early seventh century, mentions among the forms of divination "the *necromantici* who resuscitate and interrogate the dead" (Kieckhefer, 33). This definition is preserved by Hugh of St. Victor in the *Didascalicon* of the early twelfth century, but with the addition of the diabolical element and the positioning of necromancy as first among divinations which are apparent in Hartlieb:

primam, necromantiam, quod interpretatur divinatio in mortuis, necros enim Graece, mortuus Latine, unde necromantia, divinatio, quae fit per sacrificium sanguinis humani, quem daemones sitiunt, et in eo delectantur effuso (810D).

I shan't embarrass myself and my schoolboy Latin further by attempting a complete translation, but the phrasing "first, necromancy" and its definition as divination through the dead are apparent even to me, as is the reference to a sacrifice of human blood which demons delight in. It is apparent that the definition of necromantic practice has changed since the turn of the millennium, and that Hugh is aware of the change. Von Schlettstadt's *Historiae Memorabiles* of the 1280s report the conjuring of demons by a necromancer named Walravius, while Elich's *Daemonomagia* of 1607 describes witchcraft as a disease both arising from and only curable by "strange and ridiculous ceremonies by witches and necromancers".

All of this demonstrates that the conflation has yet to occur in the seventh century, and can by no means be called complete in the tenth century, when Burchard uses the generic "diviners", nor in the eleventh, when Hugh notes the process and cites the historical definition. By the thirteenth century and Von Schlettstadt the conflated definition is used without such clarification, and by the fifteenth the linguistic shift from *necro* to *nigra* is complete.

In the early seventeenth century, meanwhile, that careful distinction between witchcraft and necromancy has been made, suggesting an effort to separate two particular forms of forbidden practice. The form called "necromancy", what exactly constitutes it, and how it is conflated with witchcraft, are all explored by Richard Kieckhefer in his commentary on the trial of Jubertus of Bavaria in 1437.

Kieckhefer determines that "[a]side from accusations more or less typical of the incipient profession for conspiratorial witchcraft (flight to nocturnal assemblies, killing of infants, etc.), Jubertus was charged with activities more often found in connection with clerical necromancy" (30). These activities included a kind of occult apprenticeship to senior conjurer and grimoire-owner Johannes Cunalis and to the succubus Luxuriousus, who Jubertus is said to have "adored as a god"; the commitment of his bodily members, after death, into the custody of his familiar demons; being forbidden by devils to take confession or interact with blessed materials; and the provision of protection from prison, theft, social adversaries and so on and so forth. It should be noted that, while there is a concern with the fate of Jubertus' body after death, there is no direct interaction with the dead present in this form of necromancy.

Quoting Kieckhefer again: "Judicial and anecdotal evidence suggests that demonic magic, called 'nigromancy' or 'necromancy', was largely the domain of priests", perhaps because "Christian ritual had from early centuries been the enactment not of oral tradition but of texts embodied in books" (4). Necromancy, or at least the demonic form assigned to Jubertus, is a system of belief existing among Christian priests. Characterised by the adoration of devils and the refusal of the sacraments, it is more truly a form of heresy, constructed in the terms of Christian orthodoxy and yet inherently opposed to it. What, then, of the traditional form? Can divination using the dead be viewed in a similar way, and does this illuminate the conflation of divination with diabolism?

Before that question can be answered, it is necessary to outline the orthodox idea of Christian death. Medieval Christianity predicated its concept of death on the idea that separation between the living and dead, while ritually enforced, was not total and that the interest of the dead in the affairs of the living and *vice versa* was desirable.

In 1025, Bishop Gerard of Cambrai addressed those heretics who denied the effectiveness of praying on behalf of the dead:

It is true, lest anyone believe that penitence is of use only to the living and not to the dead, that many of the dead have been rescued from punishment by the piety of their living [friends and relatives]... (in Le Goff, 106).

This relief from punishment was an important element of acceptable Christian interaction with the dead. Since elevation or damnation of the deceased could not occur until the Last Judgment (save in the cases of martyred saints and mortal sinners), the continued failure of the apocalypse to occur caused what Jacques le Goff calls an "eschatological interlude" (3). Christian thinkers set themselves to the fate of the soul during this time, and "conceived that certain sinners might be saved, most probably by being subjected to a trial of some sort[;] a new belief was born, a belief that gradually matured until in the twelfth century it became the belief in Purgatory" (Le Goff, 3).

From this, it can be seen that the dead have a vested interest in the affairs of the living, an interest which is also apparent in the doctrine of intercession, in which a living person might pray to a particular saint to cure a particular worldly ill. As Paul Binski says, "The doctrine of the intercession of the saints was based upon the capacity of the saints to break the ancient boundaries between the living and the dead. But the notion of intercession could be widened into a form of two-way traffic, whereby not only the saints but also the living could act, by prayers or other actions, on behalf of the dead" (24). Necromancy, meanwhile, has as its prerequisite "belief in both a form of life after death and the continued interest of the dead in the affairs of the living" (Jones 6541). Christianity possessed the former, but Purgatory provided the latter, and gave Christians a reason to interact with the deceased in what amounted to a transaction between the dead and the living, concerning the future; essentially, an act of necromancy.

Tellingly, Le Goff also identifies a period "between Gregory the Great and the twelfth century" (96) in which "little progress was made in the construction of Purgatory", in which a "typology of sins" is constructed instead. Perhaps this theological stagnation, this reluctance to affirm what occurs between the first and Last Judgments, caused an upsurge in speculations on the topic, which themselves gave rise to necromantic - in the traditional sense - practices.

The necromancy constructed by this theological silence was based in Christian theology, and upon the behaviour of the dead as reported in Christian *exempla* or, for that matter, secular stories in which the dead, concerned for their souls, are more than prepared to enact influence upon the living. An individual possessed of will and spiritual fortitude could perhaps negotiate with them and bargain with them in much the same way as the clerical diabolist did with devils. I contend that medieval Christian necromancy was so similar to clerical devil-wrangling in its heretical perception of doctrine, its technical practices, in its practitioners, and in its essentially transactive nature, that a conflation between the two was largely inevitable. Indeed, the conflation originates within necromantic rituals themselves, as practitioners used the devils as a bargaining chip in their interactions with the dead. Alas, there isn't time to discuss the wide breadth of rituals and *exempla* that I'd like to, but I hope the examples I'm about to give will illustrate the point adequately.

Shinners' collection includes two texts concerned entirely with the manifestation of the dead: 'The Young Priest Walchelin's Purgatorial Vision' (246) and the popular fifteenth-century ghost stories which follow it (252). The Purgatorial Vision is an exemplary tale, an exploration of individuals' transgressions and the resultant punishments in the after-death. Dating from about 1131, it reports the manifestation of a veritable cavalcade of the damned before the eyes of the titular cleric. Among the damned souls, who "lamented bitterly and urged each other to hurry" toward their destination, Walchelin recognises "many of his neighbours who had recently died", among them a known murderer attended by a "fearful demon" who is "mercilessly goading his back and loins with red-hot spurs while he streamed with blood" (247). Note the separation between the deceased individual and the demon - there is no hint that the manifested dead are themselves demons, "pythonic spirits" or anything but actually deceased persons of Walchelin's acquaintance.



This is a story intended to show the dead to the living, who "should constantly have these things in mind and should tremble and take heed not to incur such dire penalties for their sins" (251). It is also worth considering that this encounter does not feature the necromantic transaction - Walchelin has not conjured up the dead but stumbled across them, and he does not request service of them in return for their salvation. The spectre of William of Glos tells Walchelin his story - concerning his usury and interference with rites of inheritance while alive - and begs the priest to tell "my wife Beatrice and son Roger that they must help me by quickly restoring to the heir the pledge" William denied to its rightful owner (250). Walchelin is initially reluctant, saying "Roger of Glos... will deride me as a madman", but yields after "repeated prayers" (250). The dead who manifest themselves to Walchelin offer no temporal reward or knowledge of the future in return for their salvation.

The ghost stories of some three centuries later are rather more transactory. In the very first (253), a man is frightened by a spirit which looks like "a horse standing on its hind legs with its forelegs outstretched", which he orders "in the name of Jesus Christ not to harm him", before he "conjured it [to speak]". Only when conjured does the spirit identify itself as a deceased person and explain its damnation - and it offers to serve the living man, carrying his burden to a nearby river. The man "had the ghost absolved, and had masses sung for him". The initial manifestation, an animal doing something unnatural, has a somewhat demonic aspect, and it offers a service automatically, in return for the salvation only a living person's piety can grant it. No knowledge of the future is offered, but the transaction, beginning with the dead serving the living, is there.

In the next story, a tailor being vexed by the spirit of an excommunicated man is told to arrange masses for the spirit if he wishes to be left alone. In order to inform the ghost that this has been done, the tailor and his neighbour must wait several days before taking "inscribed amulets... to ward off the terrors of the night" (255) to a hill near an abbey. Upon arrival at the hill, they "drew a large circle on the ground, and inscribed a cross inside it. He carried on him the four Gospels and other sacred writings, and as he stood in the middle of the circle, he put four small medallions at the borders of the circle to form the shape of a cross. On each medallion were written saving words, like [']Jesus of Nazareth['] and so forth. Then he awaited the arrival of the ghost", which informs him that "on this coming Monday [it] will

enter into everlasting joy along with thirty other souls". The tailor asks the ghost about his own sins, and how he can avoid such a fate in the afterworld, and what can be done to mediate his sins - the ghost tells him, and furthermore informs him that "if you will move to such and such a place, you will be rich; and if you remain in the other place, you will be poor. You have some enemies where you are now" (256). This encounter is more complex; while the tailor does not summon the spirit in the first place, and while it can be argued that he is blackmailed into absolving the spirit (itself a difference from the earlier spirits who beg and pray for salvation), he uses ritual means to summon it, he asks it questions about the future, and he is granted information that will benefit him in his mortal life and after it.

A. E. Waite includes three overtly necromantic rituals in the appendix of his *Book of Black Magic and of Pacts*. His first example, an exorcism and interrogation from the *Grand Grimoire* of Sibley, actually involves an invocation of demons to act as a motivating force upon the deceased:

"I conjure and exercise thee... to answer my liege demands, being obedient unto these sacred ceremonies, on pain of everlasting torment and distress. ... Berald, Beroald, Balbin, Gab, Gebor, Agaba... After these forms and ceremonies, the ghost or apparition will become visible, and will answer any question put to it by the exorcist" (290).

The ritual requires access to the naked body in the place where it was buried, and operates by the "virtue of the Holy Resurrection" (291). His second is similarly interrogative, a kind of 'forensic necromancy' which requires the necromancer to stand where a body was found, before it has been removed, and bind the deceased individual's soul "by the Holy Rites of Hecate & Blood of Jesus which he shed for thy soul" (291). Again, the machinery is not wholly Christian, but it refers to resurrection, torments and the exclamation, and its concluding "So help thee God and the prayers of the Holy Church", indicate where the symbolic weight lies - with the Christian doctrine of Purgatory and forgiveness.

Each of these rituals relies on a proximity to the body similar to that of intercession - saints' relics being inserted into churches meant "that saint was fully and freely manifest as minister and witness, and ambassador, at that place. The saints could act and feel like the living, and were treated as if they were alive and incorrupt, which technically they were meant to be" (Binski 15). Each incorporates repeated reference to prayers, to the sacrifice of Jesus which allows the dead into Paradise and motivates their interest in the living. Finally, there is the equally compelling threat of Purgatory in Christian death, and of "everlasting torment and distress" if the dead do not buy their salvation by performing some service for the living. The service is information, the reward release into the proper Christian machinery of death, the means of coercion diabolical: conflation is thus inherent.

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