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Source: *Pacific Journal* 16 (2021): 81-91.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/1355>

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Royal Vampires: Necropolitics and the Burial of the Dead in Nineteenth-Century England

DANIEL LARSON

The first burial of Charles I was without spectacle. Found guilty of high treason after a very public trial, he and his severed head were unceremoniously tucked away in an unknown location. The Protectorate found it politically expedient to minimize the fanfare of the King's burial, heading off the possibility of a shrine to Charles the Martyr. Still, the body deserved proper burial: after all the man had been a Christian, and—at one time—the Lord's Anointed King over England. When the King's reign was restored a decade later, the second Charles chose not to re-inter his headless father; instead, another body was exhumed: Oliver Cromwell, dead 28 months, was unearthed, tried, found guilty, hanged, and beheaded; Cromwell's body cast aside, his head was passed from collector to collector, not returning to the earth until 1960. But the curiosity of Cromwell's head was nothing compared to the sensation caused by the re-emergence of the headless Charles in 1813. When workers expanding the Royal Vault at Windsor accidentally damaged the cohabited tomb of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour, they discovered an unexpected interloper in the marriage deathbed: a black lead casket with the name "Charles I" stamped conspicuously on its lid. Not one for subtlety, Prince Regent George authorized the exhumation of the body for purposes of identification (Henry's too—though not Jane's, as "mere curiosity" had suddenly become insufficient reason to disturb the dead). The casket yielded a decapitated body beside a shrouded head; when the death mask was removed, the striking features of the Martyr Charles were easily recognized. In fact, it was said the body had not decomposed at all. One un-deteriorated eye remained open, staring blankly at the Prince Regent and his fellow coimetromaniacs.

The spectacle of Charles I's freshly risen body quickly became fodder for the English imagination, appearing in numerous poems, engravings, satirical cartoons, and other media. One of the strangest to consider the spectacle of the king's exhumation was Lord Byron's satiric poem "Windsor Poetics." Though unpublished until 1818, "Windsor Poetics" had been circulated widely by Byron's friends since its composition in April of 1813: Byron

sent the poem to number of people, encouraging them to forward it along to “anybody you like or dislike.”¹ On its surface, the poem takes the occasion of the Prince Regent’s presence in the Royal Vault as a metaphor for the failure George’s rule. In whole, it reads,

Famed for contemptuous breach of sacred ties,
By headless Charles see heartless Henry lies;
Between them stands another sceptered thing—
It moves, it reigns—in all but name, a king;

Charles to his people, Henry to his wife,
—In him the double tyrant starts to life:
Justice and Death have mixed their dust in vain,
Each royal Vampire wakes to life again.

Ah, what can tombs avail!—since these disgorge
The blood and dust of both—to mould a George.²

Byron’s two-edged attack on the Prince Regent—at once “double tyrant” yet still limited “in all but name, a king”—found a receptive audience in Princess Caroline, the far more popular wife of that “sceptered thing,” the “moulded” George. Caroline gladly passed the poem along to her lady-in-waiting, adding glibly, “As you like sometimes high treason, I send you a copy of the verses written by Lord Byron.”³ However, Byron’s irreverence carries more than the facetious charge of “high treason;” it is also involves a subtle—though significant—critique of the Church of England and its political theology. The “contemptuous breach of sacred ties” of the poem’s opening line invokes both “heartless Henry’s” notorious penchant for discarding his wives and the famous schism between the crown and Catholic Church the King’s divorce produced, the event that precipitated the establishment of the Church of England under the King’s sovereignty. To stand against this political theology, Byron’s poem raises the image of the Vampire—a parody of the traditional Christian doctrine of the physical resurrection of the dead. This parody, I argue, constitutes an attack on state sovereignty by producing an image of physical bodies raised to life again, now outside the jurisdiction of state-sanctioned and theologically neutralized burial rites. But the link between risen bodies and the condemnation of the state is complicated, and requires some background.

§ 1. Death, Resurrection, and the Deathless Sovereign

In Christian orthodoxy, death and dying are read as prelude to bodily resurrection. Traditionally, the doctrine of the resurrection rested on two related hopes: one affirmed a temporary disembodied rest in heaven, while the other anticipated a final reunion of spirits in renewed bodies at the end of time (what theologian N.T. Wright has called “*life after life-after-death*”).⁴ This return to the physical body grounded the resurrection of the dead as a hope for earth beyond hope for heaven: it is *this* body that rises again, and *this* earth it rises to, the fruits of the Christian God’s promise to redeem the world in new creation, a final just judgment. For the first Christians, resurrection was no abstract optimism—they believed in the resurrection of the physical body because they had seen it for themselves in Jesus Christ, showing that the “last hope” was for more than a future promise, it was for the here and now. Because of the doctrine’s inherent “this-worldness,” belief in bodily resurrection also became the ground from which believers could resist the power of the secular state. Jesus’s physical resurrection vindicated his claims as King over all creation: if the one who defeated death reigns alive, what threat could any mere mortal—king or otherwise—pose? They may kill this body, I will have it back again. The allegiance of Christians to Christ the King was validated through his physical resurrection; the promise by which they too would one day rise again. However, the revolutionary potential of resurrection would become problematic when the church and state were allied in power, as became the case in England after the Reformation. When Henry VIII cut ties with Rome, English sovereignty established itself as a secular power; when he declared himself master the of English church, secular power took on priestly garments.

Notwithstanding, the status of a state-authorized Christianity produced tension between the King and the Church of England. The nagging fear that the Crown would show too much sympathy to the Catholics, for example, or show too little dedication to the Church of England generated intense scrutiny on the king’s own religious opinions. The inadequacy of English kings after the Reformation was often measured in terms of the crown’s attempts to dictate the church’s theological content. On the other hand, the State Church’s role as a bulwark of social unity required continual professed allegiance to the Crown. Oaths of allegiance included in *The*

Book of Common Prayer, occasional addendums to the liturgy in the “Prayers by His Majesty’s Special Command,” the *39 Articles of Religion*, and *Constitutions and Canons of the English Church* all testify not only to the crown’s sovereignty over the church, but also to the Church’s need to regularly remind its people to whom their allegiance belonged. In a sense, then, a king was measured by his allegiance to the Church of England; but at the same time, the Church of England was subject to the Crown. This striking cognitive dissonance was navigated in part by the distinction between the king as an individual person and the Crown as a position of authority, the basic structure of English sovereignty.

English sovereignty was authorized by two intersecting beliefs. First, the sovereignty of the King on earth was granted by his relationship to the King of Heaven: George was to be the representative of Jesus, and the state’s authority was an extension of Jesus’s authority. Second, the authority of the English crown extended to the *position* of the King, more than simply the *person* of the king. Hence, Ernst Kantorowicz characterized English sovereignty through the “fiction” of the two bodies of the king: the figure of the king stands in for the political body of the state, while the natural body of the king (the man himself) may change. Kantorowicz located the genesis of this double vision of sovereignty in Christian theology in particular: he writes, “Notwithstanding … some similarities with disconnected pagan concepts, the King’s Two Bodies is an offshoot of Christian theological thought and consequently stands as a landmark of Christian political theology.”⁵ According to Kantorowicz, the King embodies this power as an actor embodies a theatrical role, becoming “a personification in its own right which was not only above its members, but also divorced from them…which bore all the features and attributes of an ‘angel’ or other supernatural being.”⁶

While the “fiction” of the King’s two bodies ameliorated the friction resulting from the secular state’s priestly role, the king’s “supernatural” status resulted in the need for the Crown to be free from the possibility of death. Drawing from Kantorowicz, Georges Bataille concluded that the king, insofar as the king plays the role of King, is not subject to death. Even if *a king dies, sovereignty itself persists*. Bataille writes, “The sovereign is he who *is*, as if death were not. Indeed, he is the one who does not die, for he dies only to be reborn. He is the same as the one he replaces.... He has

no more regard for the limits of identity than he does for the limits of death, ... he is the transgression of all such limits.”⁷ Building from Bataille, Achille Mbembe recently applied the deathlessness of sovereignty to biopolitics, showing how state power uses death to manipulate and control its subjects. Mbembe writes, “ultimately [sovereignty] is the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have the subject respect.”⁸ This assertion of power over death Mbembe terms “necropolitics,” where the sovereign’s rule over death “profoundly reconfigure[s] the relations among resistance, sacrifice and terror.”⁹ Mbembe’s important addition to the ongoing theorization of political sovereignty is to contrast the eternal “life” of the king with the death of his subjects: not only is the sovereign immune from death, he maintains the right to manage the deaths of anyone else.

The deathlessness of the King resulted from the structure of English sovereignty, and English sovereignty was so constructed as to facilitate the king’s relationship over the Church. However, this relationship created significant restrictions for theological expression—particularly regarding the burial of the dead. The theological language surrounding death and burial—and the associated rites that pointed toward physical resurrection—came to be interpreted through “an increasingly rational, medical, secular and bureaucratic approach [to burial] which tends to depersonalize and hide death.”¹⁰ As numerous studies have shown, between the Reformation and the nineteenth century, the rituals surrounding death had become increasingly secularized and commodified.¹¹ For example, as Clare Gittings has shown, memorials and other accouterments of burial were increasingly dictated by class and wealth: the more wealthy, the more likely one would be to have a memorial.¹² In addition, funeral etiquette dictated a good deal of fanfare—honorariums for a funeral sermon, furnishings for the wake, food and drink for attendees—that would further put the trappings of memorialization out of reach for all but the upper class.¹³

Simultaneously, the period saw an increasing anxiety regarding the enclosure and containment of dead bodies. As the 18th century progressed, burial in wooden coffins became ubiquitous, as did grave markings. Ralph Houlbrooke writes “The provision of more durable gravestones in the churchyard, and grave slabs in the church, seems to have become much more common from the seventeenth century onwards.”¹⁴ The increased visibility

of burial plots and containment of the dead in coffins was precipitated by the quickly ebbing real estate available for the deceased in the British Isles: as the English population grew, the demographic of the dead quickly outpaced the designated spaces allotted in churchyards. Still, in spite of the fading theological significance surrounding burial, the English State Church itself retained what Julie Rugg has called a “near monopoly” on burial ground.¹⁵ Before the eighteenth century, it was not uncommon for a single plot to contain a number of bodies. In one particularly grisly account, George Alfred Walker’s *Gatherings from Graveyards* records the upper limit of English patience with such overcrowding, and shows the depth of the grave real estate crisis: “In making a grave, a body, partly decomposed, was dug up, and placed on the surface, at the side, slightly covered with earth; a mourner stepped on it,—the loosened skin peeled off, he slipped forward, and had nearly fallen into the grave.”¹⁶ Similarly, Houlbrooke argues, “Deep burial was a further precaution to which some people resorted. The solicitude which was one powerful motive for it emerges clearly from the way in Rev. Henry Newcome recorded the interment of his well-loved father-in-law: ‘I caused him to be aid deeper thnt ordinary in the chancel there, that I believe his body will scarcely be disturbed if others that come after make use of the grave.’”¹⁷ Clearly marked graves, deeper burial, and bodies contained in coffins all ensured there would be no accidental exhumation in increasingly overcrowded churchyards. The trend in the 18th century was to ensure the dead stayed buried.

Whiles these complimentary practices in English burial gained traction, religious rites would become consider mere social norms, better understood as “fashion” than doctrine. As such, tje State Church’s control over burial had less and less to do with theology as practices surrounding care for the dead in England became divorced from their Christian origins.¹⁸ The transformation was so cplete that by the early 20th century, Bertram S. Pickle could easily conclude “the very customs to which we cling so unreasonably, are for the most part unworthy remnants of superstitious rites, and not anything dictated by any form of Christian religion to which we may subscribe.”¹⁹ Therefore, as Clare Gittings has shown, “From the Reformation onwards, the funeral ritual...simply served to dispose of the corpse, with no direct theological significance attached.”²⁰ The developing ideas surrounding

death and burial in the early-nineteenth century progressed *away* from the theological implications of death and *toward* emphasis on keeping the dead marked, contained, and distanced. In the hands of the state-authorized church, burial became one more element of control—indeed the *final* element of control—of English sovereignty over its subjects.

This transformation would of course have significant implications for the orthodox doctrine resurrection of the physical body, the doctrine once so intimately connected with the sovereign rule of Christ and vindication of his power over the kings of the earth. When death itself became subject to the rule of earthly sovereignty, the King's inability to die nullified the resurrection of the dead. Only the King's body could live forever; and only the king could dictate life and death. It is not simply that the system of sovereignty found it more expedient to ignore resurrection, it *must* ignore resurrection—it could not function in a world in which bodily resurrection happens. If Jesus had been resurrected, then there is a legitimate challenge to the power wielded by the “deathless” English Crown; if all are resurrected, the Crown no longer has the sole power to deal out death: bodily resurrection posits a power higher than the Crown's, and the doctrine of physical resurrection is therefore a challenge to state sovereignty, as it is to all earthly authority. If George was King of England, then the risen Christ could not be; but Christ *had to be* king, according to the essential claims of the Christian faith. The simplest solution was to make Christ king of someplace else: in heaven, instead of earth. Simultaneously, sequestering Jesus's domain to the heavenly hereafter resulted in a reshaping of the doctrine of the resurrection, shifting the weight of the Christian hope squarely to the disembodied afterlife while recreating a vision of heaven itself molded on the hierarchy of earthly sovereignty: and the kingdom became in heaven as it had been on earth.

§ 2. Poetic Vampires and the Revision of Resurrection

The doctrine of bodily resurrection, then, was revised to fit within the structure of English sovereignty, authorizing one aspect of the Christian hope—heavenly afterlife—while obscuring the other—physical resurrection. With this theological revision of burial and the anxiety surrounding dead bodies in view, the images of Byron's “Windsor Poetics” are perhaps easier to account for. Byron, of course, was not the only author in the period to

draw upon raised physical bodies as images of political resistance. As one well-known example, in S.T. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the dead bodies of the speaker's shipmates are reanimated by heavenly spirits to help the condemned man pilot his ship.²¹ At the opposite end of the religious spectrum, P.B. Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" employs an image of physical resurrection in the allegorical figure of Hope who comes to free the overworked masses from their death-in-life factory conditions.²² Perhaps stranger still is the way the risen dead appear in the Gothic. Gothic writing employs resurrection (and parodies of resurrection) in a variety of ways: the creature of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the immortal villain of Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the poetic repurposing of the biblical Cain from a host of Romantic authors, or John Polidori's own representations of the vampire, for example, all imagine the resurrection of the body in ways that correlate to Christian doctrine, but also deviate significantly from it as well.

Amid the shifting theological understandings of burial and resurrection and the wider literary response of authors in the period, Byron's "high treason" in "Windsor Poetics" gains a sharper edge. Beyond somewhat puerile name-calling, the satire conjures the forgotten potential of bodily resurrection as a challenge to state authority. However, because the theological language of "resurrection" was occupied by bodiless spirits, Byron instead makes use of the image of a vampire—a parody of bodily resurrection without the appropriated and neutralized overt theological baggage. Rather than the great vindication of Christ's Kingship or the final restored order of the here and now that arises with the justified dead, resurrection in "Windsor Poetics" involves vampire corpse kings coming to reclaim their crown. Byron's parody of resurrection therefore serves as a negative example, exposing the injurious implications a truncated view of the Christian hope could have when forced into the constraints of the State Church. Further, the poem demonstrates through a sensationalist metaphor the horrifying implications of resurrection as the exclusive right of sovereignty. Ironically, the poem gives its own revised vision of the resurrection of the dead to critique the State Church's revised vision of the resurrection of the dead.

The satire presents readers with the question "what if the sovereign really *were* deathless?" In doing so, the poem calls out the accepted absurdity of

“the Kings two bodies” by reminding readers of past kings who were known failures. The belief that the English King was Christ’s representative on earth is more difficult to maintain in the presence of Henry VIII or Charles I—kings that are still remembered as two of England’s worst. At the same time, the “royal vampires” at the Windsor Vault invert the idea of judgment and justice contained in the doctrine of the resurrection. Where bodily resurrection in Christian theology originally signaled the final reconciliation of the fallen world, in “Windsor Poetics” resurrection points to the fleeting justice rendered through the death of tyrannical kings. When resurrection raises unjust kings, “Justice and Death have mixed their dust in vain.” It would be far better were there no resurrection at all. The death of a tyrant king is not the end of tyranny if the Crown itself—the sovereign role the king embodies—is tyrannical. Hope for final justice is therefore “in vain,” as death—even death of the king—is no reprieve from the deathlessness of sovereignty. As the poem concludes, “what can tombs avail” when death is incapable of ending a tyrannical system.

Likewise, the poem’s revision of bodily resurrection develops the specific critique of the “double tyrant” Prince George into a larger critique of kingly sovereignty altogether. George stands between “headless Charles” and “heartless Henry,” himself an amalgamation of both. Yet, the Prince Regent is *not* the king, but is instead “another sceptered thing.” Prince George—though granted sovereign power—is a mere stand-in for the role of king, an “understudy” for the crown. And yet, it is because of the inevitable transfer of power that will happen when George dies and George becomes king that gives the resurrection parody its critical potential: even if a new man sits on the throne, the sovereign is the same as those who came before him. The tyrants of the past would unavoidably rise to vicious new life in the fledgling Regent. George will inherit the crown, but it is a crown that is at once tyrannical, heartless, and headless. There is, then, a double meaning to the final line, “The blood and dust of both—to mould a George.” George is both “molded,” cast after the fashion of Henry and Charles, and “molded,” decayed and contaminated by the past kings. The indefinite article—“a George” in the place of the equally metric “Prince George” or “King George” or even “*the* George”—speaks to the interchangeability of kings playing the role of sovereign: the “double tyrant” at the vault at Windsor might just as

well have been George III as George IV. The poem's critique then does not simply deride one particular monarch, but challenges the system of kingly sovereignty altogether. As long as the crown is deathless in its rule, then all kings will stand amongst the tyrants of the past, molded by the "blood and dust" of "royal Vampires."

Byron recognized the power of his resurrection metaphor, and certainly anticipated the backlash the satire could generate. Responding to Thomas Moore's request to publish something from the poet, Byron commented, "The Vault reflection is downright actionable, and to print it would be peril to the publisher."²³ On its surface the simple satire seems hardly worth such concern. Yet, given the revised understanding of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection in the period, the threat of raising the dead comes into sharp relief. Ultimately, the poem taps into a rich tradition of risen bodies called from the grave to stand against tyrannical powers, a tradition that runs through Christian theology, but had disappeared in the authorized State Church. While the collision of State sovereignty and Church doctrine could wash away the raised bodies of Christ and his followers from the Church of England, the radical potential embedded in resurrection could also migrate to sites outside the State Church, rising to new life in unruly and unholy forms, bursting from black iron caskets, unrestrained, uncorrupted, like Vampires waking to life again.

NOTES

¹ Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, Vol III., ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1994), 38.

² Byron, "Windsor Poetics [Lines Composed on the Occasion of His Royal Highness the Prince Regent Being Seen Standing Between the Coffins of Henry VIII and Charles I in the Royal Vault at Windsor]," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, Vol 1, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 86.

³ Charlotte Bury, *The Diary of a Lady in Waiting*, Vol II, ed. A. Francis Steuart (London, 1908), 389.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 148-152.

⁵ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The Two Bodies of the King: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (New Haven, CT: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 506.

⁶ Ibid., 382.

⁷ Georges Bataille, "The Schema of Sovereignty," in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 319.

⁸ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *Foucault in an Age of Terror: Essays on Biopolitics and the Defence of Society*, eds Stephen Morton and Stephen Bygrave (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 155-156.

- ⁹ Mbembe, 176.
- ¹⁰ Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London: Rutledge, 1994) 5
- ¹¹ See e.g., Julian Litten *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450* (London: Robert Hale, 1991), Margaret Cox, *Grace Convens: Death and Burial in England 1700-1850*, CBA Research Report 113 (York: Council for British Archeology, 1998); Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement* (London: Routledge, 1989); Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Jupp and Gittings, *Death in England*,
- ¹² Clare Gittings, “Sacred and Secular: 1588-1660” in *Death in England: an Illustrated History*, eds. Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000), 167.
- ¹³ Certainly, the burial trade that originated at the interregnum facilitated this transformation. For a thorough discussion of the privatization of burial into the Victorian period, see Pat Jalland, “Victorian death and its decline: 1850-1918” in *Death in England: an illustrated history*, 230-255.
- ¹⁴ Ralph Haulbrooke, “Death, Church, and Family in England between the Late Fifteenth and the Early Eighteenth Centuries” in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, ed. Houlbrooke (London: Routledge, 1989) 39.
- ¹⁵ Julie Rugg, “The Origins and Progress of Cemetery Establishment in Britain,” in *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, eds. Glennys Howarth and Peter C. Jupp (New York: St. Martins, 1997), 110.
- ¹⁶ George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards; Particularly those of London, with a concise history of the modes of interment among different nations, form the earliest periods* (London: Messrs. Longman and Company, 1839) 202; qtd in Julie Rugg, “From reason to regulation: 1760-1850” in *Death in England: An Illustrated History*, 220.
- ¹⁷ Houlbrooke, “Death, Church, and Family” in *Death Ritual and Bereavemen*, 39.
- ¹⁸ Houlbrooke notes “church reforms reduced the prominence and authority of the clergy” in their direct control over burial, as “[s]impler, shorter rites and less widespread reliance on sacramental help restricted the scope for clerical influence over the dying.” “Death, Church, and Family,” 40.
- ¹⁹ Bertram S. Pickle, *Funeral Customs, Their Origins and Development*, (London: T. Werner Laurie LTD, 1926), 32
- ²⁰ Gittings, *Death Burial and the Individual*, 40.
- ²¹ S.T. Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 331-335
- ²² P.B. Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 275-279.
- ²³ Byron, *Letters and Journals*, Vol IV, 80.

