

Lyke Wake Dirge: Purgatory

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▼ Abstract

This is the third and last of three short papers on the *Lyke Wake Dirge*, a Yorkshire folk song. It concerns the third obstacle the soul of a newly dead person must face on the way to the Otherworld, namely Purgatory. The paper describes the Catholic nature of the doctrine of Purgatory and thus of the song. It then considers post-Reformation attitudes to Purgatory in England, and the gradual fading of anti-Catholic sentiment, as illustrated by broadside ballads.

The *Lyke Wake Dirge*: Purgatory

The *Lyke Wake Dirge* (Roud 8194) is a song that describes the journey of the soul of a recently dead person as it attempts to make its way to heaven. The lyke is the corpse, as we still see in the lychgate outside English churches, and in German Leiche. The wake is a ceremonial watching over the dead person, long abandoned in England but more familiar in Ireland. A song for the dead is a dirge, with the word 'dirge' deriving from the Latin dirige, the first words of the matins ceremony for the dead, said in the presence of the corpse (Duffy 2022: 369). It was first recorded in writing by John Aubrey in around 1686 in his collection later published as *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme* (Ed. Buchanan-Brown 1972: 176-178). Aubrey's informant said the song was sung 'about 60 yeares since at Country

vulgar Funeralls' in Yorkshire, which gives a date of 1626 or so. This is the text given by Aubrey:

This ean night, this ean night;
Every night and awle:
Fire and Fleet and candle-light
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

When thou from hence doest pass away
Every night and awle
To Whinny-moor thou comest at last
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

If ever thou gave either hosen or shun
Every night and awle
Sit thee downe and putt them on
And Christ receive thy Sawle

But if hosen nor shoon thou never gave nean
Every night, &c:
The Whinnes shall prick thee to the bare beane
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

From Whinny-moor that thou mayst pass
Every night &c:
To Brig o'Dread thou comest at last
And Christ &c:

From Brig of Dread that thou mayst pass
Every night &c:
To Purgatory fire thou com'st at last
And Christ &c:

If ever thou gave either Milke or drinke
Every night &c:
The fire shall never make thee shrink
And Christ &c:

But if milk nor drink thou never gave nean

Every night &c
The Fire shall burn thee to thy bare bane
And Christ receive thy Sawle

The Doctrine of Purgatory

This is the third of three short articles on elements of the song, and will focus on the third obstacle the soul has to pass, which is Purgatory. The existence of Purgatory is an important part of Catholic doctrine today, and before the Reformation it was central. As Duffy (2022: 8) puts it:

There is a case for saying that *the* defining doctrine of late medieval Catholicism was Purgatory. [emphasis in the original]

Marshall (2002: 7) agrees.

Le Goff traces ideas of a purgatory, or a third otherworld (other than heaven or hell), back to pre-Christian times (1981: 43-48). He also notes the importance of Augustine (pp 92-110), who prayed for the soul of his mother Monica. She must therefore have been somewhere where prayers could help her. Then Le Goff discusses Gregory (the Great) (pp 121-134). Gregory in his *Dialogues* (1911) discusses purgatory at some length, even suggesting that some people are sent back to this world to atone for their sins, often at hot springs (associated with volcanic fire) (1911: 234-235). Le Goff suggests that the idea of Purgatory as a place became established at the end of the thirteenth century. Marshall (2002:7) takes issue with such a late date, but in any case Purgatory was firmly established by the time of *Lyke Wake Dirge*. The then highly popular *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (trans. Ryan 2012), which among other things was a guide for topics for priests' sermons, discusses Purgatory at some length in connection with All Souls' Day, November 2nd (666-676). The Church gave no information on the location of Purgatory. It was generally thought to be somewhere underground, close to Hell, though Dante describes it as a mountainous area near to Heaven (see Marshall 2002: 7-10).

Scriptural authority for the existence of Purgatory is thin, to say the least. In the Hebrew Bible, 2 Maccabees 12: 38-45 describes sacrifice and prayer for the dead arranged by Judas Maccabeus (active 167-161 BCE), including,

For had he not expected the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead, (*New Jerusalem Bible*)

The more contemporary Douai-Rheims version has 'vain' rather than 'foolish'. Maccabees, however, is not a canonical text for Protestants (Marshall 2002: 54). In the Greek Bible

Matthew 12: 31-32 would seem to accept the possibility of the remission of sins after death, while I Corinthians 11-15 suggests that people's worth will be tested by fire after death. As authority for the doctrine of Purgatory, the passages in 2 Maccabees and Paul's letter are cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994: 235), as are the Dialogues of Gregory and the Councils of Florence (1439) and Trent (1563, and thus part of the Counter-Reformation) (also McBrien 1995: 1070).

So it was possible to believe that the dead were in a place that was not beyond the reach of prayer. As Reformers pointed out, the word purgatory appears nowhere in the Bible. On the other hand, as Johan Eck, opponent of Luther, pointed out, neither does the word Trinity (Marshall 2002: 53).

The purpose of Purgatory is to purge the souls of sinners who were not bad enough to be sent to Hell, but not pure enough to enter Heaven yet (Catechism: *ibid.*, McBrien 1995: 1070). Modern teaching is that it is a condition, but in the past it was regarded as a place, as Le Goff suggests. It was a highly unpleasant place, with a strong emphasis on fire, pain and suffering. Dickens (1991) puts the Anglican view and stresses how the Catholic Church terrified people with the pains of Purgatory, including quoting Sir Thomas More at some length (p 28). Yet it should be remembered that all souls in Purgatory will eventually be admitted to Paradise, so it is and was a hopeful doctrine, perhaps more hopeful than the possibility of eternal damnation in a Protestant Hell.

Before the Reformation, the Christian community included both the living and the dead. The living could help the dead through such activities as prayer, almsgiving, and paying for masses. The virtue arising from good deeds could be transferred to dead relatives. Of course, this was wide open to clerical corruption, as Luther and other reformers loudly pointed out, and the Catholic Church used such beliefs to raise huge amounts of money, including from poor people. After the Reformation, the dead were regarded (officially at least) as dead and gone and beyond any help. Thus prayers, masses and almsgiving for the dead served no purpose (Cressy 1999: 396; Thomas 1991: 721). Indeed, true Protestants denied the possibility of the existence of ghosts (Brown 1979: 19). This was a major change in thinking.

Purgatory and the English Reformation

The reign of Elizabeth I (reigned 1558-1603) firmly established Protestantism in England. Despite plots and rebellions there was never any real likelihood of the re-establishment of Catholicism. Yet, as we have seen, according to Aubrey the *Lyke Wake Dirge* was still being sung in the Cleveland area of Yorkshire in the 1620s. Blakeborough (1898: 122-125) gives a version of the song, dating to perhaps 1800 or so, with Purgatory fire replaced by the flames of Hell. But he also says (p 124):

There is another version in the North Riding [of Yorkshire] which seems to have been

written according to the tenets of Rome; at least I imagine so, as purgatory takes the place of hellish flames,

The date at which this Catholic version was last sung is unclear in Blakeborough, but we can safely assume a date well into the eighteenth century, at least. Moorman (1919: 103-106) prints a song he got from Blakeborough called *A Dree Neet* (dree means gloomy). It is similar to the *Lyke Wake Dirge*, including the journey of the soul to the Whinny Moor and the Brig o' Deead, but not Purgatory. It does however mention candle, bell, mass and priest, and extreme unction (or the last rites), all very Catholic. Atkinson (1868: 595-605), however, despite being vicar of Danby in Cleveland, where the song was recorded, from 1847 to 1900 (see Atkinson 1891), manages to discuss the song at length, including supposed pagan antecedents of Purgatory, without ever mentioning Catholicism.

The *Lyke Wake Dirge* dates back to the first quarter of the sixteenth century, at least, and may date from before the Reformation in England. We actually have very few folk songs that can be shown to be that old. It is not surprising, then, that it is the only folksong I know that mentions Purgatory as a matter of fact.

Earlier Broadside Ballads

On the other hand, there is a considerable history of broadside ballads mentioning Purgatory in a hostile way. There is an early one dating from around 1535, that is to say during the reign of Henry VIII, entitled *A Ballad of Luther, the Pope, a Cardinal, and a Husbandman*, which includes this (Rollins 1930, I: 3-7):

Pope Thou stryuest against my purgatory
 Bycause thou findest it not in scripture
 As though I by myne auctoritie
 Myght not make one for myne honoure

The ballad is anti-Pope and pro-Luther, which might not entirely have pleased Henry. There were many ballads mentioning Purgatory in the later 17th century and into the early 18th. One example is *The Jesuitical-Cheat Discover'd; or, The Popish Priest Tried and Condemned* (ESTC R233135 in the Bodleian Library). It is undated, but refers to the execution of David Lewis, SJ, in 1679. Lewis was actually executed for being a Catholic priest and for saying mass, treasonable offences at the time, but the ballad, claiming to tell a true story, tells how Lewis cheated a young woman (a Maid) out of fifteen pounds by offering to pray for her father in Purgatory. The last word of every stanza is Purgatory, as in this example:

For now quoth he, thou needst not fear,

Thy father's out of Purgatory.

A more widespread ballad, it would seem, is *The Catholick Ballad: or an Invitation to Popery, Upon considerable Grounds and Reasons*. It was written by Walter Pope, fellow of the Royal Society and successor to Sir Christopher Wren as Gresham Professor of Astronomy (*Roxburghe Ballads* I 26, 27 pp 89-93). The Bodleian has eight copies (ESTC R 235642, among others) and the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA), held at UC Santa Barbara, lists 17 copies. Most date from the 1670s and 1680s, the reign of Charles II, who was suspected (probably correctly) of having Catholic sympathies – Catholicism was still a threat. It is a sarcastic ballad, listing the many supposed benefits of Catholicism, including the Papacy, the Virgin Mary, relics, rosaries, Latin, and the lack of need to read the Bible, among other things. There are three stanzas concerning Purgatory:

But first by the way you must make a short stay
At a place called Purgatory.
Which the Learned us tell, in the buildings of Hell,
Is about the middlemost story.

Tis a monstrous hot place, and a mark of disgrace,
In the torment on't long to endure;
None are kept there but fools, and poor pitiful souls
Who can no ready money procure.

[For] a handsum round sum you may quickly be gon,
So the Church has wisely ordein'd,
And they who build crosses and pay well for masses,
Would not there be too long detein'd.

It is made clear that only the poor and fools need stay there long. Money will get you out. A similar ballad is *The Popes Great Year of Jubilee, or, The Catholicks Encouragement for the Entertainment of Popery*, perhaps from 1679 (ESTC R181958). On Purgatory, it has this to say:

We have a place cal'd purgatory,
Though fools do count it a vain story;
In which if you be purged well,
You need not fear the jaws of hell:
I must confess tis hot they say,
But money will do't, and bring you out,

Come all away, come all away.

Similarly, in *News From Londonderry*, number 192 in Rollins' edition of Samuel Pepys' collection of ballads (Ed. Rollins 1930, IV: 115):

And if your friends have been detain'd
in Purgatory long;
We'll set them free for Twenty pence,
and save them by a Song,

Of course, conflict between Catholics and Protestants was deadly at the time, 1688-1689, in Ireland. One final example of Purgatory is *The Jesuits Lamentation or, The Priests never Better Fitted*, of 1689 (EBBA 22369, also in Pepys):

Our Trading now is grown as dead as
Saints to which we pray:
Our Purgatory now is fled,
With Peter's pence away;

Our Holy Pardons now are dead
and not esteemed here;
Our Pilgrimages too are fled,
with all we held most dear

As we see, the absurdity of the doctrine of Purgatory, and the corrupt way it was used to enrich the Catholic Church, was not the only weapon used to attack Catholicism, or Popery. The Pope was the Whore of Babylon (*Saint George for England*, in Brome (Ed.) 1662, II: 127), or the great Harlot (Rollins III, pp 70-72, number 102). Catholics were blamed for poverty and the state of the economy (*A Pill against Popery*, 1678-1679, Bagford Ballads II: 585-589, Ed. Ebsworth 1878). As we have just seen, various aspects of Catholic belief were strongly rejected. Jesuits were particularly feared, and there was a Jesuit seminary at Saint Omer, then in the Spanish Netherlands (now in France) dedicated to training priests to go to England and attempt to reconvert the people (see, for example, Aveling 1966).

Catholics were French, Spanish or Romish, but this was partly English patriotism defending the Church of England. Consider the ballad *The Second Part of the Loyal Subject's Litany* (1680 and later, EBBA 32610), which includes:

From the Roman disease, and Geneva physician
[...]

Libera nos Domine

and

From the Popes hatching eggs in a Presbyter's Nest,
Libera nos Domine

The Geneva physician is, of course, Calvin. The English Civil War would still have been a raw memory at this time. A similar example is *The Loyal Letany* (1681, EBBA 36973). The use of Latin in an Anglican song has a certain dramatic irony. It should also be pointed out that many ballads encourage true religious feeling in a non-Sectarian way, with titles such as *The Young Man's Repentance; or, The Sorrowful Sinner's Lamentation* (Roxburghe II: 562, Rollins II: 37). Numerous examples may be found in Pepys' collection, the *Bagford Ballads*, and the first part of volume VIII of *The Roxburghe Ballads*.

Two prophetic ballads give an indication of differing attitudes to Catholicism. The first uses the well-known trope of the sexual incontinence of those in Catholic holy orders (*The Countryman's Prophecy*, Pepys 179, Rollins IV, 66):

When a nun with a Fryer together lives Chaste,
And thinks it a Sin for to finger her Waste,
And tho' tis not Lent, yet from flesh will abstain
Then Popery'll return into England again.

Compare that to *The Protestant's Prophecie* of 1675-1677 (Ebsworth II: 440), which includes:

when Horses shall Run without any Leggs,
when Hens shall draw Carts, and Oxon lay Eggs:
when gamesters refuse to take what they have won
then Popery out of this land will be gone.

A Cavalier (Royalist) ballad (in Mackay 1863: 233), entitled *The Claret Drinker's Song or The Good Fellow's Design*, goes further and suggests that religion is a waste of good drinking time:

What coxcombs were those that would ruin their case
And their necks for a toy, a thin wafer and mass!
For at Tyburn they never had needed to swing
An they been but true subjects to drink and their king:
A friend and a bottle is all my design,

He's no room for treason that's top full of wine.

During the seventeenth century, Catholicism was seen as a serious threat, particularly in the form of Catholic France and Spain. A Catholic king, James II, was deposed in 1688 after a short, three-year reign, and there was sectarian warfare in Ireland as a result. One way to express this fear was in mockery of the doctrine of Purgatory, as we have seen.

Later Broadside Ballads and Purgatory

Once we get into the 18th century, ballad references to Purgatory seem to disappear, at least in England. A 19th century ballad, entitled *Lines Written on a Discussion between a Protestant Boy and a Catholic Girl near Dundalk, Co. Louth*, has 53 entries in the Roud index at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (VWML) (Roud 34502 - the title actually varies slightly). The Catholic girl defeats the Protestant boy in a theological argument, overcoming his objection that:

You believe that Purgatory your sins will puge [sic] away.

This example is from Cecil Sharp's broadside collection held at the VWML. The ballad is clearly aimed at Irish Catholics, and the theological arguments on both sides leave much to be desired.

Finally, there is a ballad entitled *Dan O'Connell in Purgatory* (Roud V34589). Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) was a key figure in the Catholic Emancipation of 1829 in Britain and Ireland. The ballad is strongly against him. One example was printed in 1866 in Glasgow, the third printing of 10,000 copies since 1851, according to the heading. Every stanza of the ballad ends with the word Purgatory. For example, the Pope sends letters to Irish priests:

Commanding them to celebrate
High Mass throughout the church of late,
His soul from thence to extricate,
Out of this Purgatory.

A Threshold

Speaking more generally with regard to *Lyke Wake Dirge*, we may say that death is a transition that may take some time, both for the newly dead person and for the living people left behind, particularly, for example, a pregnant widow (van Gennep 1960: 147). Marshall describes situations where people are regarded as being somewhere between life and death: monks and nuns, supposedly dead to the world, lepers, who underwent a ceremony of

separation, and those who had been near death, had received extreme unction and then recovered. He also points out that it could be difficult to be sure that a person really was dead. So death involves an element of liminality (Marshall 2002: 13). The song certainly gives an impression of a soul on a long journey, caught somewhere between life and death.

In modern Britain people continue to believe that the living can communicate with the dead, and that the living and the dead can help each other. People also continue to believe in ghosts. Clearly there has been a difference between religious doctrine and popular belief. The dead also continue to influence the living through wills, which may contain onerous and long-lasting provisions. Shakespeare may have said that death is an undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns, but in fact people did and do see the boundary as permeable. The *Lyke Wake Dirge* is an illustration of this.

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