The Spectacle of Execution: Saintly Miracles, Secular Authority and Miraculous Criminal Resurrections.

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Death and a low life expectancy were accepted parts of medieval life, frequently met due to diseases, war, famines and corporal punishments - specifically, that of public executions. Executions were devices for public performance and spectacle; an entertainment with a dual didactic purpose to instruct the audience of the consequences of rebelling against secular rule, whilst offering an activity to appeal to the viewer's sense of morbid fascination. Two such medieval cases come from the cities of Chester - Henry Bradshaw's *The Life of St Werburgh*[1] - and the canonisation testimonies relating to the resurrection of William Cragh in Swansea[2], examples of miraculous Christian power overturning secular judgements, and saving the lives of executed men. They share many common features, not least their exploration of the underlying tensions between secular and religious authorities and the display of power; as Lorraine Attrede contends, civic 'spaces could also be shared and challenged by other corporate bodies', leading to a 'resultant clash of claims'[3]. Comparatively, it is rewarding to consider the reworking of this medieval trope by the Victorian author Andrew Lang, harking back to a romanticised past. This essay will address the usage of spectacle at these executions and, as Denis Cosgrove states, the ability of the executions to 'record and stimulate anxiety'[4] via a performative act, described by high rhetorical emotive language.

[1] Carl Horstmann, *The Life of Saint Werburge of Chester by Henry Bradshaw* (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1887), p. 163-165. All further quotations will be referenced in the text by line number.
[2] Harriet Webster, *The Miracle of the Resuscitation of the Twice Hanged William Cragh* (Unpublished, 2014)
[3] Lorraine Attreed, 'Urban Identity in Medieval English Towns: The Productivity of Urban Space in Northern Europe', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32.4 (Spring, 2002), p. 572
[4] Denis Cosgrove ed., *Mappings* (Guildford, 1999), p. 2

The most common form of execution as depicted by Bradshaw and William Cragh's execution testimonials was the short-drop method which, suggests Catrina Santing, 'would not have allowed a drop sharp enough to break the neck at once'[5]. It was a deliberately visceral display designed to be a warning to spectators of the perils of crossing the law. The prisoner slowly asphyxiates, culminating in a protracted death dance as the corpse flails at the end of the rope. The face of the victim usually becomes cyanotic with a protruding tongue, eyes full of burst blood capillaries, and severe neck bruising. William de Briouze, son of the Lord who sentenced Cragh to death, seemed to take morbid delight in relating these details in his testimony, vivid despite the passage of time:

> [Cragh] had a totally black face [...] the eyes of William himself had popped out of their place [...] filled with blood. Moreover, the mouth of [...] Cragh and [his] neck and throat and all other parts situated around about, and even [his] nostrils were full of blood [William Cragh] had a totally black face and with bloodied or blood-encrusted parts, the eyes of William himself had popped out of their place [...] filled with blood. [...] he was not able to breathe in and breathe out air through the mouth, and through his throat, and also through the neck, or the neck veins, because the tongue of the said William was hanging outside of his mouth further than if it was the length of the middle finger of a man's hand; and the said tongue was black [...] and as swollen as if an ordinary man was holding two fists together at the same time[6].

Additionally, victims suffered from spontaneous relaxation of the bowels during the final death throes, as did Cragh according to witness Henry Skinner: '[he did] emit through the

[5] Catrina Santing, Barbara Baert, & Anita Traninger, eds., *Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Massachusetts: Brill, 2013), p. 63
[6] Webster *et al*, p. 11-12

lower passages of his body the natural wastes, which [...] was a sign of death in hanged men'[7]. Lady Mary de Briouze confirms this belief, stating that 'it appeared that there were signs of death in them (which were customarily apparent in hanged men when they were dead, evident because of the natural excretion through their lower parts)'[8]. It is likely that this was the same technique implemented in Chester, although Bradshaw refrains from detailing the more morbid attributes. Bradshaw notes that after being saved by that quintessential Christian symbol, the dove, the young man shortly after drew natural breath. One can assume that he had fallen into a state unconsciousness due to partial asphyxiation, not death. The snapping of the rope thus awakened him. It would have been a sight to see for the eyes of the participating audience, not only for its religious implications of a man saved by prayer to a benevolent St Werburgh, but for its representation of the loss of power by the secular authorities. A botched execution, not even condoned by the sanctity of Heaven.

Bradshaw certainly has little respect for his city authorities. The section concerning the young man's execution begins with the strong retort that 'Almyghty god gaue in commaundement' (l. 940) that 'No innocent to slee by wrongfull iudgement / Nor causeles to punysshe by greuous oppression' (l. 942-943), setting the tone for the piece of emotive rhetoric to follow. The authorities cannot be trusted on to accurately convict the guilty, and in Bradshaw's view, cannot be relied on to perform corporal punishment correctly either. '[The man was] arrest and taken of a lyght suspicion / By the officers and rulers of the sayd towne, / Gytles accused most innocently' (l. 950-952), illustrating the perceived incompetence of the officers in criminal proceedings. Spectacle is generated by their incompetency.

[7] *Ibid*, p. 37
[8] *Ibid*, p. 2

Prior to the execution, malefactors were normally held in prison, before being led to the place of execution, often naked, cuffed and drawn to the site. Certainly this was a common enough method, as recorded by Lacroix: the 'administration became ignominious [...] the criminal was paraded about the town, stripped to the waist'[9]. Indeed, in the *Life of St Werbourgh* Henry Bradshaw makes reference to the fact that 'he [the victim] was fettred' (l. 956), and similarly Thomas Marshall, a Swansea witness, claims that Cragh 'in a shirt and breeches [...] with hands tied behind the back was dragged from the gaol'[10]. Strikingly, Cragh himself 'bore the rope with which he was to be hanged to the gallows'[11], further indicating the level of humiliation that the secular authorities were imposing on the convicted man.

As was the case in Chester, the site of execution was alongside a major thoroughfare into the city, ensuring that all visitors had to pass by the gibbet, often with the body still hanging as a decomposing reminder. The gibbets were a familiar landmark, presenting a very obvious symbol of law and order. These gibbets were called justices, 'because they represented the authority of the law' states Paul Lacroix[12]. Furthermore, by placing the site of execution outside of the of the city walls, both Chester and Swansea's secular authorities prevented their constituencies from being sullied by the taint of death, and the stigma attached to that of the convicted criminals. The cities' purity was thus maintained. Concomitantly, the exclusion of the execution site to the city limits - be it on the road or hill top crag - meant that there was an increased area for audience spectatorship; away from the narrow cramped streets, larger crowds could gather to watch.

[9] *Ibid*, p. 427
[10] *Ibid*, p. 29
[11] Robert Bartlett, *The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (New Jersey: Princeton university Press, 2004), p. 35
[12] Paul Lacroix, *Manners, Customs, and Dress during the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance Period* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), p. 422

The execution site of William Cragh was on a hilltop outside of Swansea. On such a prominent natural landmark, the gallows were clear to see for miles around. Thomas Marshall verifies this by stating that 'the gallows [were] situated on a certain mound near the aforesaid town, and the said gallows can be seen from the castle and from the town'[13]. Although the location separated the place of execution from the closer environs of the city, the execution was still accessible for anyone who so desired to watch, whether that be from a churchyard, sitting on the city walls like the young Adam of Loughor, or viewing from the castle ramparts. There is also a sense of the real spread in class and age of the spectatorship: labourers, priests, rebels, and gentry. People from all walks of life were unified in the pursuit of corporal punishment. They all came to watch the execution and view the body, with witnesses such as John of Baggeham observing 'that there was as much life in [Cragh's] person as in a stone'[14] - and they all 'believed and asserted' together, according to William de Briouze Junior, 'that the said William Cragh was resuscitated because of the miraculousness and the intention of the said Saint Thomas de Cantilupe'[15].

Bradshaw's text implies that the victim was surrounded by crowds, with 'His frendes and cosyns for hym made great mone' (l. 958). Of course, the accuracy of this one cannot establish - it may well be a narrative exaggeration by Bradshaw in concordance with the high emotive rhetoric he employs. Nonetheless, it gives a feel for the scene being a very noisy, public event, and statement of secular judgement, regardless of potential injustice or the feelings of the masses. It was, in Robert Bartlett's opinion, 'a particular refinement of William de Briouze's hatred that William Cragh was to be hanged by his own relatives [twice]'[16].

[13] Webster *et al*, p. 29
[14] *Ibid*, p. 34
[15] *Ibid*, p. 16
[16] Bartlett *et al*, p. 35

Although not unheard of, it was a particularly humiliating order, forcing his own family to participate in his execution. William Cragh himself tells the inquisitors that he:

> [...] was led by his own relatives Yry son of Veil and by Dafydd ap Gruffudd and Uthel Fachen and by many others [...] on a certain high hill positioned near the said castle a quarter mile away or around that. And at around the said hour of three the above-said Uthel hanged him with a certain rope[17].

It is agreed by most witnesses that Cragh was likely dead when his fellow criminal, Trahaearn ap Hywel, came to be executed. Trahaearn was by contrast executed by the town executioners 'according to their deputised duty'[18]. However, when the gibbet broke - either due to a weakness in its construction as John of Baggeham suggested, or due to the heaviness and struggling of Trahaearn - the two men were subjected to a second hanging. William de Briouze Junior states 'that because the said William Cragh was a very famous [...] malefactor, the father of the aforesaid witness [...] ordered that the said William Cragh be hanged again'[19]. Subsequently, 'that said William Cragh was again rehanged and he hung suspended on the said gallows from the said ninth hour until Vespers'[20]. Considering that the men were executed in the early hours of the morning, one can thus determine from de Briouze's witness statement that they were left on public display for the better part of a day as a visceral display of the power of the Lord's of Gower. John of Baggeham testifies that this was for two reasons; to further insult and shame the victim's relatives, and because of local customs, the corpses could not be removed 'from the gallows without authorisation from the lord, [and so]

[17] Webster *et al*, p. 24
[18] *Ibid*, p. 33
[19] *Ibid*, p. 11
[20] *Ibid*, p. 11

the witness himself and the other armed men hanged the said William and Trahaearn again'[21]. Both executions presented a clear message of the consequences of rebellious actions against the Norman overlords, a stamp of secular power and jurisdiction.

Bradshaw recites that the Cestrian criminal prays out to his patron saint for aid in this dire time, and she, in her benevolence, answers him.

> He called to mynd the manyfolde goodnes, / The myracles of Werburge [...] / So, whan he myght no wordes expresse, / In mynde he required her / and humblie dyd pray / From shamfull deth to saue hym that day (l. 962-967)

Subsequently, a 'white doue descended from afore them in presence / And lyght upon the gebbet' (l. 970-971). 'The byrde with his byll brake the rope' (l. 972), and shortly after the man 'reuiuynge toke naturall breth' (l. 974). The dove is a powerful religious symbol of innocent virtue, and is here implemented as a peaceful act of defiance, sending a message to the civic officers of the city about divine judgement. Furthermore, the public resurrection of the man is reminiscent of Lazarus and Christ: an implication surely not lost on the intended audience. The 'myrcales of Werbugh [...] how she saved many in great distres' (l.963-964) legitimises her status as Chester's patron saint and serves to reposition the monastery at the centre of Chester ideologically and conceptually. There is a palpable anxiety at play, a fear that ecclesiastical power in Chester is waning. Miracles such as this served to reaffirm the power of the Abbot's Court, which 1506 Great Charter had lessened greatly in favour of secular authority. Unquestionably, the episode with the dove was an extremely powerful example of religious spectacle.

[21] *Ibid*, p. 33

When the ministers were notified of this miraculous occurrence, they returned and 'Upon the sayd gebbet hanged hym agayne' (l. 978) a second and third time. However, divine justice prevailed in this instance, and 'delyuered [him] by myracle from payne', after which he was permitted to go free by the rulers of the town (l. 979). The victim praised the 'blessed Werburge in his best manere' (l. 985) and proceeded 'to the shryne [of] the virgin thankyng [her]' (l. 987) making a pilgrimage and blessings for the miracle of the holy dove. One gets a sense of a powerful festival vibe occurring, at the expense of the secular jurisdictions. It is apparent that Bradshaw was accentuating the power of religious authority in contrast to the weaker, fallible secular law, those 'tortuous turmentours' (l. 980) who were forced to accept defeat in the wake of heavenly intervention.

Similarly, the events of the Swansea deposition are just as miraculous. From the witness testimonies, it is apparent that the belief in the power of saints was omnipresent. That William Cragh was saved and resurrected by St Thomas de Cantilupe was made as explicitly clear as possible by the relevant parties. This was done by means of devotions, acts of folk piety, and the explicit testimonies of Cragh himself.

In her testimony, Lady Mary confirms that she 'asked the said Saint Thomas de Cantilupe to ask God that the said William who was hanged be returned to life'[22]. Robert Bartlett explains that 'this invocation of the saint was a crucial step in the transformation of an amazing escape from death into a miracle'[23]. Likewise, William de Briouze Junior purports that it 'had seemed to him that a certain bishop clothed in white with white apparel put back the tongue

[22] *Ibid*, p. 5
[23] Bartlett *et al*, p, 7

of William himself into the mouth of the same William'[24], a figure who by 'supporting him by the feet'[25] and preventing the rope from pulling taught, saved Cragh's life. Although de Briouze does not explicitly name this bishop as St Thomas de Cantilupe, it is clear that the saint has been appropriated by the Swansea witnesses as the protective force in question, justifying Cragh's escape from a harsh secular punishment, and an oppressive Norman rule and regime over a Welsh border town.

Undeniably, the most striking saintly elements come from William Cragh's own accounts of the visitations by divine figures. Cragh claims that prior to his execution, 'he had a vision that the blessed Mary was in the said gaol with a certain lord, and it seemed to him that she was covered in precious stones with a white head-dress'[26]. One logically assumes that Cragh is referring to St Thomas as the certain lord. On his way to the gallows, he is heard by the local chaplain William Codineston to be praying to the saint to spare him from death. Cragh himself testifies that prior to his imprisonment, 'he had made a pilgrimage to the tomb of the said St Thomas'[27]. Cragh thus presumed that his saintly rescuer was St Thomas de Cantilupe. Furthermore, Cragh claims that 'on that day he was thrust into gaol he bent a silver penny from [his] belt to honour the said St Thomas [...] in order that he might free him'[28]. This was a well-recorded practice during the Middle Ages, as the bent coin marked a vow made to a particular saint, such as promising to dedicate it to the saint's shrine in return for spiritual intercedence.

[24] Webster *et al*, p. 14
[25] *Ibid*, p. 4
[26] *Ibid*, p. 25
[27] *Ibid*, p. 26
[28] *Ibid*, p. 26

A similar act of folk piety was the act of preparing 'an appropriately sized wax candle to be offered to the saint', a common activity according to Jussi Hanska[29]. Bartlett explains that 'when the help of a saint was sought [...] cord might be taken and used to measure the length' of the body[30]. After Cragh's body had been summarily taken down from the gibbet and laid out for witnesses to examine, a maid came to measure it, and this cord was subsequently, states William de Briouze Junior, 'covered in wax almost in the manner of a candle'[31]. Soon after this occurred, Cragh was reported 'to breathe in and breathe out breath, and move a leg'[32].

Indisputably the aim of Bradshaw in writing his hagiographic narrative, was to 'advance the interests of the Benedictine abbey of which he himself was a member, and to resist the increasing power and influence of the secular civic authorities'[33], as stated by Catherine Clarke. With the authoritative rule of the ecclesiastical centre of St Werburgh on the wane in Chester, the *Life of St Werburge* served as a mission statement by Bradshaw, of the power of the church, and their importance in the life of the city by being the wardens of the shrine of Werburgh's relics. It is an argument for the crucial significance of religion over secular authority in Chester; the portrayed failings of secular law and command evident in contrast to the holy intervention and protection of the saint and her earthly devotees.

Likewise, the case of William Cragh forms part of a canonization dossier of Thomas Cantilupe, an ex-communicated bishop of Hereford. The investigation by papal

[29] Jussi Hanska, 'The Hanging of William Cragh: Anatomy of a Miracle', *Journal of Medieval History*, 27.2 (2001), p. 128
[30] Bartlett *et al*, p. 8
[31] Webster *et al*, p. 13
[32] *Ibid*, p. 13
[33] Catherine Clarke, *Henry Bradshaw, Life of St Werburge*, < http://www.medievalchester.ac.uk/texts/introbradshaw.html>, accessed 03/05/2014

commissioners in 1307, seventeen years after the miraculous execution serves as an insight into the religious machinations of a city, and their fervent desire to have their patron saint canonized. It is unquestionable that Lady Mary 'had a special devotion'[34] to St Thomas, because as Bartlett acknowledges, 'Briouze connections with Hereford were extensive'[35], having been distantly related by marriage to a second cousin of her husband. It was in the best interests of all involved to emphasise the religious marvel, thus aiding in the canonisation of St Thomas, and the associated prestige attached to his name, of which the de Briouze family and Swansea by extension, would benefit from.

Whilst the records of Chester and Swansea are extremely interesting sources, they can be assumed to be exceptional instances, breaking from an oral tradition of execution miracles. They are rare unexplainable events deemed so unusual that there was a pressing need to write them down. However, the theme of saintly involvement continued throughout the centuries to be one which artists returned to. In the late eighteen hundreds, this culminated in the Victorian engagement with the gothic revival period and a flourishing of medieval stories. Tales of miraculous executions provide a rich background from which authors could expand upon, and indeed, for the author Andrew Lang, this is precisely what he did in his appropriation of the figure of St Catherine and the executed victim.

Written in 1896 although set in medieval France, Lang's fabrication tells the miraculous story of Michael Hamilton, 'sudden in anger', a Scottish mercenary, 'reiving and pillaging' Brittany[36]. Hamilton proceeds to kidnap and torture a local burgess. Attempting to flee avenging villagers, he was 'impeded by the weight of his armour', and 'caught in a noose of

[34] Webster *et al*, p. 5
[35] Bartlett *et al*, p. 118
[36] Andrew Lang, *A Monk of Fife* (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1898), p. 139

rope thrown over him'[37]. After being captured, 'they [the villagers] had stripped him, before they hanged him'[38] emphasising his degradation by his naked state. Henry Summerson claims that medieval people were 'prepared in principle to condemn their fellow men' to a painful, humiliating death and 'to execute judgement accordingly'[39]. This story shows a breakdown of secular authority: the laws of the land no longer a protection against marauding enemies, the peasants take civil law into their own hands.

It is probable that Lang was familiar with the accounts by both Bradshaw and from Swansea, and of other small literary references such as that recounted by Etienne de Bourbon where a robber is saved from death by the Virgin Mary. When cut down after being hung, still alive, for three days, the robber explains that 'a most beautiful virgin had held him up by his feet'[40] after he had prayed to *'Ave Maria*, asking her not to permit him to die in sin'[41]. Similarly, Hamilton vows 'in his heart to make a pilgrimage to Fierbois, and to the shrine of Madame St. Catherine, if she would but aid him [in saving his life]'[42]. That night, the local curate heard a 'clear voice' exclaiming 'Go forth and cut down the Scots man-at-arms who was hanged, for he yet lives'[43]. In the morning a party of men upon inspecting the corpse, discover he is still alive, concluding that 'one so favoured of Madame St. Catherine. [...] It was plain to the curate that the man was under the protection of Heaven'[44]. It is clear that Lang is interested in a romanticised history. Thus Lang's shows that elements of a medieval tradition have entered into folkloric tropes, to add an air of authenticity to medievalist texts.

[37] *Ibid*, p. 139
[38] *Ibid*, p. 141
[39] Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell & Robin Frame eds., *Thirteenth Century England VIII: Proceedings of the Durham Conference 1999* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001), p. 130
[40] Jeanne Krochalis & Edward Peters, eds., *The World Of Piers Plowman*, p. 147
[41] *Ibid*, p. 147
[42] Lang *et al*, p. 139
[43] *Ibid*, p. 140
[44] *Ibid*, p. 141

Additional small fragmentary mentions in medieval manuscripts hint at a large and well founded belief system in the revival of the dead. The case of Walter Eghe in 1285, who was hanged for theft, suggests that survival from execution was perhaps not as rare as one might think: 'when he was cut down [...] to be buried, he was found to be alive'[45]. In this instance, divine assistance was not recorded as occurring to save his life. Rather, the noose strangled him into a state of asphyxiated coma form which he was resuscitated. Nevertheless, it is evident that the case studies of medieval Chester in the *Life of St Werburge*, and the canonisation witness statements from Swansea, were exceptional public scenes of miraculous spectacle, which needed to be recorded in their entirety for posterity and future relevance. They are also, argues Catherine Clarke, 'evidence of a clear taboo regarding multiple hanging'[46]

Vincent Gaffney argues that visualisation, the recorded demonstration of an act, is highly emotive. 'We interpret residual or even proxy evidence to produce a new reality'[47], and this is evident within all three sources. All are constructions of a visual narrative, interpolating evidence in specific ways. In the *Life of St Werburge*, a man 'Condemned and iudged to deth shamfully' (l. 953) by the city officials, and each time is saved by Werburgh. It relates to a sense of divine providence interacting with a pre-ordained natural law, superseding civic authorities. The testimonies concerning William Cragh are also indicative of a religious power overturning the ruling of an autocratic secular rule. The continued interest in medieval execution miracles as evidenced by the revisionist tales by writers such as Lang, indicates

[45] Prestwich *et al*, p. 130
[46] Catherine Clarke, *A Botched Hanging and Some Cultural Responses*, < http://www.medievalswansea.ac.uk/blog/a-botched-hanging-and-some-cultural-responses/>, accessed 10.05.2014
[47] Vincent Gaffney, 'In the Kingdom of the Blind: Visualization and E-Science in Archaeology, the Arts and Humanities', in *The Virtual Representation of the Past*, Mark Greengrass & Lorna Hughes, eds. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p. 127

that there remains an audience for sensational unexplainable accounts of death defying stunts, which is fuelled by a human fascination of the morbid and the unexplainable. They are provocative images of the past that invite discussion and scholarly debate. Lady Mary de Briouze testifies that these miracles were 'said to happen in a certain person who was hanged until dead, and was said to be resuscitated'[48]; a certain person who was sanctified in the eyes of Heaven and saved by the benevolent intervention of particular patron saints. However, these accounts also allow us to identify anxieties brought to the fore between secular civic and religious authorities wherein spectacle is concomitantly a tool to engage in these discourses, as well as providing staged entertainment for a medieval public. It both records and intensifies these tensions, and provides modern scholars with an insight into the convoluted relationship at play between the two most important political powers in medieval England other than the King himself.

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[48] Webster *et al*, p. 2

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