The Talking Dead: Exhortations of the Dead to the Living in Anglo-Saxon Literature

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In this paper, I explore one subgenre of homiletic writing in Anglo-Saxon England, that of the “exhortation of the dead to the living.” These exhortations involve the corpse (usually decayed) addressing those who have come to gawk at it, delivering a lecture on the perishable human body and permanence of one’s eternal fate. My analysis builds on two fields: first, the appearance of the exhortation motif in Anglo-Saxon writing and material culture; and second, death studies and archaeologies that explore the agency of the dead body in directing the behavior of the living. In doing so, I develop a broader picture about ways in which “the dead”—both bodies and souls—function as members of the “city of God,” acting in concert with the living to reinforce community ties. By exploring this spectacle, in which the ultimate passive object becomes an agent and speaking party, turning the gaze of assessment back on its viewers, forcing its audience to consider their own mortality and the stability of the Christian community and their citizenship within it.

Hilary Fox, English Assistant Professor

Hilary Fox is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Wayne State University, specializing in medieval literature. Her research focuses on Old and Middle English, particularly on emotional phenomenology, cognition, and identity. Most recently, she has published “Denial of God, Mental Disorder, and Exile: The Rex iniquus in Daniel and Juliana” (Journal of English and Germanic Philology 2012) and is completing the revision of her dissertation, “Mind, Body, Soul and Self in the Alfredian Translations.”

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