

# Bard

Bard College  
Bard Digital Commons

---

Senior Projects Fall 2018

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects


---

Fall 2018

## Dread and the Undead: Old Norse Zombies, Arthurian Adventures, and Horror Movies

Mikaela Torraca Kohan  
*Bard College*, [mk0712@bard.edu](mailto:mk0712@bard.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_f2018](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2018)

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Kohan, Mikaela Torraca, "Dread and the Undead: Old Norse Zombies, Arthurian Adventures, and Horror Movies" (2018). *Senior Projects Fall 2018*. 20.  
[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_f2018/20](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2018/20)

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

Bard

Dread and the Undead: Old Norse Zombies, Arthurian Adventures, and Horror Movies

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Mikaela Kohan

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
December 2018



Thanks to

my parents and sisters, for supporting me through everything; Karen, for forcing me to write about what I love and pushing me past where I thought I could go; A, K, K, and T, for helping me through day by day; and Bard College, for despite being an *unheimlich* haunt, employing the friendliest ghosts to be found in academia. I owe them more than can be said in an acknowledgements page. Finally, thanks to Katherine and Rob, my wonderful board, for helping me realize that Bard isn't entirely unholy.

Special thanks to Timand Bates, without whom I would not have survived my four-year horror story.

*Dedicated to Kana, my horror movie booty call*



## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Icelandic Uncanny.....	7
Chapter 2: Arthurian Uncertainty.....	30
Chapter 3: Modern Medieval Horror.....	71



## Introduction

When people today think of horror, their mind will likely go in two directions: Horror movies, a genre which they may or may not respect; 1980's classics that make up the horror canon, the much disparaged now-in-theaters film on any given day, frequently under fire for "all being the same," or cheesy, fun B-movies are the general sub-genres in the mind of the casual viewer. The other direction will go further back in time and take a turn to the direction of literature: *Dracula*, the works of Ann Radcliffe, classics of the Gothic genre dating around the 18th and 19th centuries. The setting will be Victorian, the image of an ominous castle in a foreign land, probably complete with a lightning strike. The literature of this period and the few Western European countries from which they originated are generally credited with the birth of the genre, and it *is* certainly when and where it was popularized-- there is no disputing that. However, horror has a medieval precedent from two sources that few would guess: Old Icelandic sagas and Arthurian romance.

Stories of Vikings and the people of Scandinavia usually call to mind mythology that has made its way into popular knowledge: Thor, the Valkyries, Odin, Ragnarok. The region does not have a strong association with folk literature of that sort the way that a country like Germany does-- one does not have to think long before coming up with *Grimms' Fairy Tales* when asked to name a scary story. The closest equivalent would be Denmark's association with Hans Christian Anderson, also known for his fairy tales, but the brothers Grimm call to mind far darker stories than Anderson's children-gearred tales. Iceland, certainly, has no author of such renown, barring Snorri Sturluson, who, as mentioned, wrote of myth, not fiction. Even the



Icelandic geography makes it difficult to imagine horror taking place there; there are no crumbling castles, no dark woods, nothing to lead the imagination to traditional ghost stories.

Even within the collection of sagas that make up Iceland's early literary history, it takes digging to find ghosts. The most famous example comes from *Grettis Saga*—the undead Glámr is a *draugr*, usually translated to *ghost* in English but far from the spectral, noncorporeal standard model of a ghost (courtesy of the representations as seen in Gothic literature that grew into the public's imagination at large); a *draugr* is much closer to the modern image of a zombie, a solid corpse risen from a grave, unable to speak and driven by instinct rather than intention-- that instinct usually being to kill anyone in sight. Grettir has been likened to a vampire-slayer, scholarly attempts to make him fit into the more standard European set of monsters and types of horror stories. However, there exist horrific medieval Icelandic beings with no equivalent in the Gothic tradition, yet containing recognizable tropes of the wider horror genre. They are found in a most unlikely manuscript: *Eyrbyggja Saga*, which, while telling the tale of settlers in a certain area, largely acts as a pedantic text on law and norms of court proceedings.

This emphasis on the law, which makes the text an important historical source about the less barbaric Viking ways of settling disputes, has resulted in other aspects of *Eyrbyggja* being under-researched, even by scholars who write on the *draugr* and other more common Scandinavian folklore, much of which overlaps with German and Irish legends (the German *doppelgänger* is similar to the Irish fetch, which has much in common with the Norse *fylgja*). The reason for this may be that the happenings in *Eyrbyggja* are so singular that no one knows what to make of them, nor has any reason to try to find out-- they're strange and appear only once, which adds nothing to the study of literary norms of Iceland, nor are they clearly derived from neighboring countries, for work on comparative studies. A few tales are mentioned in a few

books about Old Norse monsters, but no attention is ever given about their relevance or indeed any connection at all to horror beyond the geographic and temporal borders of the manuscript.

The simplest reason little attention is paid to these random episodes is that *Eyrbyggja* is not a horror story; despite the one-shot, episode nature of the appearances of the supernatural, it is not a collection of ghost stories. It wasn't meant as entertainment for the public to read. It wasn't even considered fiction-- sagas were understood to be recordings of history and real people and events. The litotes and infamous Norse understatements typical of the sagas are still in use; the events are not written particularly dramatically or with any suspense, but matter of factly, as just another problem that happened and was dealt with. The text wastes no space with speculation about how the monsters came to be or if they signify anything, pointing to some grander meaning; the Vikings are too pragmatic for that. The mystery of the events is never addressed or understood; it is simply taken care of, like any other nuisance.

While the Vikings don't concern themselves much with hidden meanings, finding symbolism and placing deeper meaning on nearly everything is par for the course of Christianity. Anxiety about what a mundane event may foreshadow, people being angels in disguise, symbolism in animals, numbers, plants-- things are rarely read as simple, mundane, meaningless. Everything can be made into a metaphor. Medieval Christian literature, especially, feature things that more often are meant to be read as symbolic than literal, or at least are made to make you *wonder* about what a deeper meaning may be. Horror is not hard to find in Christian symbolism; signs of sin, the demonic, and Hell can be found all around us. When it comes to a specific text, or a body of work, Dante may come to mind; the courtly tales of King Arthur and his knights are less unlikely.

For many, an Arthurian setting is what precisely comes to mind when they think about “medieval times.” Knights in shining armor, ladies in court, jousting, high towers, courtly romance, quests-- the Round Table, Lancelot, Guinevere, Merlin, Camelot, and Excalibur are references that the vast majority of people would instantly recognize. Thanks to *Monty Python* and *Indiana Jones*, even the Holy Grail is familiar to most non-Christians. Though the stereotypical medieval setting is Arthurian in aesthetic, and there is medieval horror mostly via Christianity, the two would rarely be conflated; however, the Vulgate cycle, which centers around Lancelot, contains horrific events and images directly connected to the Holy Grail. In this work, anonymously composed in the mid-1200s, the horror is explicitly Christian, given that the events, heretofore referred to as “adventures,” since what happens is usually but not always frightening, are centered around the Grail.

A castle is built to house the Grail, named Corbenic by God Himself, and these two facts combined would lead us to assume that it is surely be a holy place under God’s own watch. However, when people spend the night there, they are attacked and even killed for no apparent reason, and they are Christian themselves, leading them-- and us-- to question if God really *is* in the building; if He isn’t the one sending these adventures, who is? At times, it seems more likely that Corbenic is a place of demons—the knights of interest to us witness intense suffering from people enduring punishments that seem too cruel for a forgiving Christian God to sentence, and even the things that seem the most Christian seem slightly off, giving them an uncanny feeling that though it’s familiar, something is not quite right; the knights are never truly sure of what they are seeing, nor do we as readers know if what they experience is real or some kind of illusion. The knights themselves question the holiness of the place, at times believing it *must* be

the Devil inhabiting Corbenic, despite the presence of the Grail, which one would think ensures without a doubt signifies God's involvement in the adventures.

Trying to reconcile God with the seemingly anti-Christian adventures becomes the great challenge, and it is this uncertainty about something that is supposed to be clear-cut that creates fear, perhaps more than the events themselves. To resolve this uncertainty, interpretation of what they see and experience becomes vital. The symbols are vastly complicated, and some are equally likely to suggest the Devil as God. *This* is true Christian terror: Knowing there is significance in something and being unable to figure out what, and desperately trying to learn what things mean and getting no answers. A main feature of Corbenic is that it alters the knights' senses, confusing and frightening them further, and ultimately the problem is epistemological, not knowing if something is real or not, and where it comes from-- if not God, the implications are infinitely terrible.

Arthurian horror comes from Christian anxiety about God and His nature, trying to figure out whether it's possible for Him to torment people so much or if another, more malevolent being must be involved. It's the mystery, the not knowing that is the worst part. For the Norse, invasion is their primary fear, given that life was so communal, everyone together in a great hall around a great fire. The home, sanctuary, and safety as a group is the most important thing for medieval Icelanders, and when that peace is in jeopardy and threats at their doorstep, we see what frightens Vikings: expulsion from that safety, ultimately the horror of exile. The first chapter of this project is on *Eyrbyggja Saga* and the different ways the Icelanders experience fear, supplemented by Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny." The second chapter, looking at the sections of the Vulgate cycle concerning the Holy Grail, compares Sirs Gawain, Lancelot, and Bors, and what they experience in their respective visits to Corbenic. The third chapter will bring

us to the present and look at how specific aspects of medieval horror, as identified in the first two chapters, remain relevant in today's horror movies, and how much the horror genre owes to the unsung precedents set by these medieval texts.

## Chapter 1: The Icelandic Uncanny

Episodes concerning supernatural creatures and humans returning from the dead feature prominently in the Old Norse *Eyrbyggja Saga*. I am working mainly with the 1989 Penguin Classics edition of the saga, with specific words translated from the original Old Norse, courtesy of Karen Sullivan, coming from the 1935 edition edited by Einar Ol. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson. Both versions are based on the *Vatnshyrna* codex, a 14th century manuscript probably composed in the mid-13th century.<sup>1</sup> The codex was destroyed in a fire in 1728, but its contents had been copied by several scholars, so the saga remains available to us. Several leaves from other manuscripts are extant, leaving us with fragments of the saga, but the events referred to here are based on the transcriptions of *Vatnshyrna*. *Eyrbyggja Saga* is unusual in that it focuses largely on the history of a place, rather than tracing the history of a single family's lineage, as is the norm for Old Norse sagas. Much space is also devoted to detailed descriptions of legal proceedings and information about the law. Most notable, however, and the focus of this chapter, are the various episodes involving undead and spectral entities that will for lack of a better word be called ghosts. Encounters with these beings can be categorized into common horror tropes, and the level of fear that people exhibit at each type is revealing of what they found most frightening: the liminal, the uncanny, and the invasion of the home and loss of sanctuary. Definitions provided by Freud's 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche" ["The Uncanny", translated by Alix Strachey]<sup>2</sup> help explain what makes some of these events so unsettling as well as why they are so incompatible to the idea of sanctuary, *heim*, the home. One definition of *heimlich* is "belonging to the home,"<sup>3</sup> which is exactly what the living of *Eyrbyggja Saga* deal

---

<sup>1</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> First published in *Imago*, Bd. V., 1919; reprinted in *Sammlung*, Fünfte Folge. [Translated by Alix Strachey.]

<sup>3</sup> "Das Unheimliche," Sigmund Freud (1919), trans. Alix Strachey (p 2).

with (that is, things *not* belonging to the home). Another definition he provides, from Grimm's dictionary, is even more applicable to our Icelanders: "*Heimlich*, also in the sense of a place free from ghostly influences... familiar, friendly, intimate."<sup>4</sup> *Unheimlich*, naturally, is the opposite of these definitions, and describe the kinds of things that will be encountered.

Life in medieval Iceland was communal; *heim* wasn't a single nuclear family in a house the way that we know it but rather a large group in a longhouse, crowded but cozy. The center, literally and figuratively, of these largely open halls was the hearth, a warm place for people to come together and talk, make use of the light, and enjoy each other's company in a bleak landscape occupied by tough people. Offering the warmth of one's home to all was also an essential part of Icelandic life; welcoming travelers into the home to share the hearth and the *Heimlich* was an expected practice, and refusing to grant a stranger hospitality was rude at best, an offense at worse. The hall was a place for feasting, being merry and eating and drinking and talking together next to a roaring fire in the hearth. It would've been a sanctuary for all who lived there, as well as visitors receiving generous hospitality. This safe community is the way happy Icelanders would've lived when all was going well. There was safety in the close-knit communities, and exile as punishment was harsh in more ways than one may expect. Not only is it hard for loners to survive without the support of a group in such an unwelcoming physical environment, but being removed from the community of one's hall is also a psychological blow; being forced into cold isolation after being a part of what was essentially one big family, safe, familiar, and comforting could be as painful as trying to survive alone; for both protection as well as the comfort of a community, sanctuary is essential.

---

<sup>4</sup> "Das Unheimliche," Sigmund Freud (1919), trans. Alix Strachey (p 4).

In *Eyrbyggja Saga*, this safety system breaks down in various ways as the different types of ghosts and beings interact with the community. Their sanctuary is lost or compromised, inhabited by dubiously welcome ghosts as guests or attacked from the outside by a zombie-like *draugr*. Through the door, the floor, and the ceiling-- their safest place is entered from all sides, the privacy of their community violated by intruders. In some cases, the violation is so severe that the house can't quite be called theirs anymore. The idea of liminality also comes into play often, as many of the hauntings involve beings that don't seem to belong fully in one world or another, whether they're between human and animal, dead and alive, or self and other. Likewise, the house, the community, or whatever sanctuary people find in a given situation, can be in a sort of limbo as well, on the edge of being shared or invaded but not quite taken over, as is the case with the drowned men. A full-on invasion of one's sanctuary and the threat of it losing its status as a place of safety is Old Norse horror; mere violence is a part of normal life, and it takes things supernatural and invasive to strike terror into the hearts of the most hardened of Vikings.

The various instances of hauntings and other spooky things can be divided into clear categories, recognizable horror tropes found in fairy-tales, folklore, literature through the ages to modern day horror movies. However, trouble arises when trying to categorize the ghosts themselves, which has been a heated debate among scholars. Jón Árnason, one of the first scholars to collect Icelandic folktales, popularized the use of the word *draugr* to translate to English 'ghost.' As we will see here, the variety of beings, only a small handful of which are examined here, require a variety of terms, many of which are difficult to translate into English with nuance. *Draugr*, most commonly used by scholars to refer to all ghosts, is quite misleading, given that the majority of Norse 'ghosts' are solid, with literal bodies, rather than a more classic image of an incorporeal phantom that we associate with the word 'ghost,' making the Norse



undead an “exception among medieval ghosts.”<sup>5</sup> ‘Zombie’ would probably be a closer definition than ‘ghost.’ *Draugr* as a specific word is not used in this saga, but in most scholarship-- and this paper-- Thorolf is usually referred to as such, given that he fits the definition so well (solid and violent). The others, not particularly *draugr*-like, will simply be called ghosts and variations thereupon, but they will be placed under the larger umbrella of ‘supernatural things,’ given that some episodes involve non-human creatures. (Other supernatural things of note in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, not explored in this paper, include cursed bed-furnishings and a demonic bull.) The word used for ‘ghosts,’<sup>6</sup> referring to the drowned men, is *aptr gengu*, ‘those who walk again, or walk back,’ and Thorolf’s ‘haunting’<sup>7</sup> is ‘walking again’, *at ganga*, clearly refer only to dead humans returning to an animate state. ‘Again-walkers’ is probably the best literal translation, but for the sake of simplicity, as most scholars do, I will use the term ‘ghost.’

The events we will be examining are thus: Thorolf’s ghost, or *draugr*, which is the most recognizable and easily defined of all the supernatural beings in the saga, in that he fits the modern definition of a zombie as might be seen in a movie (a mindless killing machine), attacks mostly with blunt force but also has creates surprising psychological effects on his victims. Thorodd and his troupe of drowned men have no resting place, sad, pitiful ghosts that seek the comfort of their old life in vain and end up being banished from their former sanctuary. Thorgunna is a mysterious foreigner whose cursed belongings play a large role in the grander ‘horror’ scheme of the saga, but as far as their relationship to *heim* goes, are not relevant enough

---

<sup>5</sup> Jakobsson, Ármann. "Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110, no. 3 (2011): 284.

<sup>6</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 140. Definition credit to Karen Sullivan.

<sup>7</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94. Definition credit to Karen Sullivan.

to include. Rather, we will focus on her ghost, arguably the most unusual of the human variety-- not exactly friendly, but benign, rising for the sole purpose of doing something helpful and then returning to rest peacefully in her own coffin. The strangest episode involves an inexplicable creature, an uncanny seal that behaves in physically impossible ways and enters the home in the most unexpected and terrifying way that leaves people utterly defenseless. Each instance of the supernatural prompts a different reaction from the people witnessing it, and despite the wide range of paranormal activity they experience, their reactions can be grouped into three groups: fight, flight, or freeze. The same reaction can be in response to completely different occurrences, which gives some insight into what things are considered the most horrific, and why. Each strange happening can be related to the home and the idea of the ‘home invasion,’ and these *unheimlich* intruders show the anxieties of the Icelanders surrounding the security of their sanctuaries.

Surprisingly, the only event that we can define without question as a home invasion is also the most harmless. Thorgunna’s return from the grave is unique in that she seems to have done so deliberately for one specific purpose and then returned herself back to her coffin, fully aware of her actions. (Both the cognition levels and intentions of the ghosts further to come are not so obvious.) She dies in Hvamm and gives specific instructions related to her preferred place of burial. The men chosen to carry her body to her desired location are referred to only as “corpse-bearers,”<sup>8</sup> named and defined by their connection to her dead body rather than themselves as individuals; their purpose in the story, emphasized by their lack of individuality, is to get Thorgunna’s body where she wants it to be, and when they are left in discomfort, she steps in, helping those who are helping her. After a difficult first leg of the journey, the men are

---

<sup>8</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 135.

refused hospitality and resign themselves to an uncomfortable night. In what could be described as harmless revenge or an uneventful threat for the unfair treatment of her corpse-bearers, Thorgunna breaks into the farmer's home. The residents "heard loud noises coming from the larder, and some of them went to see if thieves had broken into the house. When they came to the larder, there was a tall woman, stark naked, not a stitch of clothing on her, getting a meal ready."<sup>9</sup> Of all the ghosts in the saga, she is the only one to enter a home by force: Thorolf bangs on the house but never gets in, the drowned men are welcomed through the front door, and the seal rises through the floor. Only Thorgunna commits a true home invasion.

Though her intentions are good, they are unclear to the residents, and an intruder is an intruder-- it's natural for them to feel scared and threatened. That intruder being a naked woman immediately makes the situation more unsettling, because unexpected nudity, especially of an older person, is generally received with horror (of a different kind, but still shocking) in any context. It also signals that she is clearly not a thief, so the reason for her break-in is totally unknown. The presence of a dead, naked, silent woman in their kitchen at night is baffling as well as frightening, and though they are not frozen with terror, they do keep their distance: "The people of the household were too scared when they saw her to come anywhere near."<sup>10</sup> They are not so driven by fear as to flee their own home, either, so "everyone thought it best to leave her in peace"<sup>11</sup> and watch from afar. This adds a suspense that is absent from the other encounters with ghosts: She has an audience. The response to other ghosts is attack or run away, and even in the case of the harmless, stationary drowned men, the living let them remain where they sit, opting instead to relocate themselves in their own house. Here, the living hold their ground,

---

<sup>9</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 134.

waiting and watching. This could be considered scarier than being directly attacked, because while she is occupied for the moment, they have no idea if she is aware of them, what her intentions are, if her next move will be violent or peaceful, sudden or slow; if they don't know what to anticipate, they are unable to prepare for any outcome. There is also the suspense of a timed wait-- she can't keep cooking forever. No one knows what or why she's cooking, but they'll find out when the proverbial hourglass runs out of sand, and until then they can only watch the clock.

As it turns out, her only purpose had been to help her corpse-bearers, both at that moment with dinner and ensuring future hospitality for them. "When she had finished doing what she wanted in the larder, she carried the food into the living the room, laid the table, and served the meal,"<sup>12</sup> which "did them no harm at all, even though it had been prepared by Thorgunna"<sup>13</sup>. Interestingly, the text doesn't say that she had finished cooking or specify what exact action she had been doing, only that she finished doing "what she wanted," which still keeps things ambiguous at first. It creates the sense that what she wanted to do was more than make dinner, which is, in fact the truth: Thorgunna's appearance in the kitchen and her kind behavior towards her corpse-bearers was a kind of tacit threat-- if the farmer wasn't going to give them his food, *she* was. Her tactic works, because "as soon as the farmer had made them welcome, Thorgunna walked out of the room and didn't reappear."<sup>14</sup> Saying that the food was fine "even though" Thorgunna made it makes it clear that all had been expecting something bad to come of it, thinking that Thorgunna's return was something negative, but in fact it leads only to positive

---

<sup>12</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 134.

things for her corpse-bearers. Her purpose in leaving her coffin had been to ensure they got the hospitality they had been denied, which in turn shows her gratitude to them; she is not just making sure they get to her burial spot safely, but also ensuring their comfort along the way. Always fair in life, she makes sure to repay a debt in death. The “horror” from this particular account comes not from what she does but from the suspense of waiting for her to do something, and in terms of danger to the home, Thorgunna’s actions may actually be more *heimlich* than they appear-- she’s chastising the farmer for his lack of hospitality. While breaking and entering is *unheimlich* by definition, in the case of humans entering the home, it is somewhat justified, a warning to those who are inhospitable. Thorgunna’s ghost provides us with less of a horror story than a cautionary tale.

In the case of Thorodd and his men, whose bodies are never found after they drown, the living run from the ghosts to another room but are in the long run unable to escape-- held hostage in their own home, in a sense, though the drowned men make no overt threat. Because the living make no real effort to remove the ghosts, they remain in the home until formally ordered out, but for an entire season, people resign themselves to coexisting with the ghosts, allowing them to make use of the main room while the rightful residents make do with smaller quarters, no longer really in control of their sanctuary as they reluctantly share their home. However, though the ghosts of Thorodd and his drowned men, and later Thorir Wood-Leg and his companions, *do* silently infiltrate the home, their presence can’t truly be called an invasion, given that they are initially invited inside: “On the first evening of the feast, when all the guests were seated, Thorodd and his companions came into the room drenched to the skin. Everyone welcomed Thorodd and his men, and thought this was a happy omen because in those days it was believed that drowned people have been well received by the sea-goddess, Ran, if they came to their own

funeral feast.”<sup>15</sup> Temporarily rejoining the living for their own funeral feast and enjoying one last communal event seems to be expected, but for Thorodd and his men, something seems to have gone wrong in transit, as suggested by an apparition [*fyrirburð*] seen in an unrelated episode.

The best-case scenario of the afterlife-- perhaps the one enjoyed by those who *are* well-received by Ran, which it appears Thorodd has not been-- looks like a continuation of the the best times in life, comfort and safety and celebration. This afterlife was glimpsed by the shepherd of Thorstein Cod-Biter, a minor character in an episode early in the saga. While Thorstein is out on a fishing trip, his shepherd “saw the whole north side of the mountain opened up, with great fires burning inside it and the noise of feasting and clamor over the ale-horns. As he strained to catch particular words, he was able to make out that Thorstein Cod-Biter and his crew were being welcomed into the mountain, and that Thorstein was being invited to sit in the place of honor opposite his father.”<sup>16</sup> The next day it is revealed that Thorstein had drowned. This vision of the mountain shows an image of a community much like the one the dead have just left. It’s a noisy feast, raucous and jovial, and it has the familiar, *heimlich* feel of warmth and friendship that any gathering would.

The drowned ghosts experience no such pleasures. Their afterlife, not a happy scene in a mountain but a cold reality, is the inverse of the *heimlich* image. When welcomed into the house, “they ignored the greetings people gave them and sat down at the fire. The people ran out of the living-room, but Thorodd and his men stayed on until the fire began to burn very low, then went away...”<sup>17</sup> This wet, gloomy silence is a far cry from the afterlife Thorstein seems to enjoy; there

---

<sup>15</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 137.

is no community here, no shared positive experience of eating, drinking, and talking together by the fire, either amongst each other or with the living whose home they now share. They seem to be halfway between worlds, between life and death, between land and sea. They return to the fire wet every night, suggesting that perhaps their physical bodies are in the sea, but they can return to “normal” life, the land of the living, for a little while, to enjoy a few old comforts. They return to the same safe and secure space that they’ve always known, the comforting warmth of the hearth and the former center of their community. The text specifies that they are there *only* for the hearth: “As soon as it was ablaze, Thorodd and his companions came in, all of them soaking wet”, and they stay “until the fire began to burn very low.”<sup>18</sup> They don’t speak, but they stay at the fire for as long as they can. They cause no disturbance in the house besides take up space and indeed don’t interact with the living at all.

This presents a tricky situation for the living to figure out, because the ghosts fall into the liminal space of “self” and “other;” while a ghost like Thorolf, who shows no sign of human intelligence, is clearly “other,” the reasons and qualifications need to be examined. Probably the most common indicator of an “other” is either the lack of speech or the lack of understanding between languages, rendering them unable to communicate and connect with them. Thorolf, who runs around killing people, does not need to speak for his intentions to be clear, and he is treated as an obvious “other,” feared and attacked in self-defense. The silence of the seal, too, will prove to be one of its most unnerving qualities, but its form is also so unfamiliar that there is no possibility of it qualifying as “self.” The drowned men are silent, too, and besides the initial welcome, there is nothing to suggest that the living made any attempt at conversation or asked them to leave. Thus far, there is no real difference between them and a silent human, and it’s not

---

<sup>18</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 138.

until Thorir Wood-Leg and his men, who died earlier in the saga, appear in the home that there is a suggestion of “otherness.” When they join Thorodd and his crew, “they started shaking the dirt out of their clothes and throwing mud at Thorodd and his men.”<sup>19</sup> This primitive encounter is nonverbal and violent, two strong indicators of the same kind of “otherness” as Thorolf. (The conflict, it seems, is over the seats by the fire; Thorir, too, wants to return from the dark, dirty grave to the safety of a warm home, only if for a night.) Following this clash, “The people ran out of the room, as you would expect, and that evening they had to do without light, heating-stones, and everything else the fire provided.”<sup>20</sup> The text addresses the reader directly here, telling us that the normal thing to do at the sight of ghosts is run. However, rather than attack or abandon their home, this appropriation of the space-- making people feel threatened enough not to go back into their own living-room to get materials for a fire, though that was clearly not the ghosts’ intention (they simply want to sit and, given that their peaceful, silent behavior is consistent for an entire season, this *is* their only motivation)-- is enough to finally rouse the living into *some* kind of action, though their plan fails. The text only relates one attempt of removing the ghosts, following Thorir’s arrival: “Next evening they lit a fire in another room, hoping the dead men would not come there, but things turned out otherwise.”<sup>21</sup> Appearing to theorize that it was one particular room that the ghosts were interested in visiting, they try making a fire elsewhere in the house, which changes nothing; the ghosts follow the fire, no matter where it goes. It’s a very passive and subtle attempt to remove the ghosts, more like the behavior of a host trying to politely suggest that unwelcome guests should go but being

---

<sup>19</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 139.

<sup>20</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 139.



unwilling to order them away outright. After this, the living simply deal with it and accept and accommodate their new housemates: They “light a long-fire in the living room, and another in a separate room for the household...the living sat at the smaller [fire], and so it continued throughout the Christmas season.”<sup>22</sup> While they may not be particularly happy about sharing their home, they clearly do not feel unsafe, given that they just stay in another room rather than abandon the house; their sanctuary has not been maliciously invaded but is occupied by undesired guests that they don’t know how to politely get rid of. They deem the ghosts human enough to be deserving of hospitality, though they aren’t particularly happy about it.

Given that the drowned men are more of a nuisance and inconvenience than a horror, the living finally resort to steps that would’ve been taken against a human guest who struggles to take a hint. They summon them to a door-court to formally and legally, not rudely, ban them from the house, which is revealing of the values of medieval Iceland. As with Thorgunna, it drives home the importance of hospitality, and that even dead guests who outstay their welcome should be treated with lawful respect rather than be forced out by less dignified means. Priorities of the community are also shown in that they are sued *first* for trespassing, and second for harmful ghostly activity-- the former is the more grievous offense. By expelling them through court, the text does two things: Reiterates the legal rights and thus the humanity of the dead, and the power of the law. Throughout *Eyrbyggja Saga*, the court processes are gone through repeatedly, with the legal procedures being shown to solve all kinds of disputes in a civil manner-- including, as we now see, kicking ghosts out. The fact that the ghosts accept their sentence and vacate the house shows that the law is so well respected that even the dead follow its code; the ghosts accept their sentence when they are found guilty of “trespassing on the home

---

<sup>22</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 139.

and robbing people of life and health.”<sup>23</sup> (Though Thorodd and the drowned men were harmless, Thorir was involved in more sinister business.) Once convicted, the ghosts act as cordially and ruefully as any well-behaved man would, living or dead, revealing that they could indeed speak; they just seemed to have preferred the silence for as long as they could legally get away with it, perhaps to give the impression to the living that they couldn’t speak in order to discourage communication, thus allowing them to remain in the home longer.

The ghosts’ parting remarks reveal that their trespassing on the home had been motivated by a desire for the *Heimlich*, which leads to depressing speculation on what their post-death *Unheimlich* has been like. Their parting remarks are curious and sad, and “it was clear that none of them wanted to go.”<sup>24</sup> Thorir, before his departure-- to where, we don’t know-- says, “I sat here as long as people would let me,” and other remarks include “I’ll go now, and it seems I should have gone sooner” and “I stayed as long as you let me.”<sup>25</sup> Thorodd, the last ghost to leave, makes the most poignant and haunting remark: “There’s no peace here. We’d best all be on our way.”<sup>26</sup> They had only wanted solace in a familiar place and instead received the ultimate punishment of banishment. Saying that they ‘should be on their way’ sounds almost more like a suggestion to leave in response to his own statement about there being no peace, as if it was his choice and *he* came up with a reason to leave. This gives him some sense of dignity, that they left of their own free will rather than were forced out. As the leader of the group, too, his behavior reflects on the attitude of his entire crew-- they are agreeable, respectful, and not angry

---

<sup>23</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 140.

<sup>24</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 141.

<sup>25</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 141.

about their sentence, humanizing them further. It also suggests something sad about the afterlife that the reader doesn't see, the place that they go when they're not at the fire, which might have been some kind of vacation or respite from whatever afterlife an unburied body, granted no resting place but the sea, might experience; their soul may be as adrift and lost as their body. Wherever it is, they had been reluctant to leave the house and return to it. One definition of *heimlich* that Freud provides, from a Danish derivative, is "friendly, intimate, homelike; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of peaceful pleasure and security as in one within the four walls of his house"<sup>27</sup>. This is exactly what the drowned men had sought and been denied, exiled to a 'life' outside the community that is clearly as unpleasant and lonely for them as any living outlaw. This makes their parting remarks that much sadder; they had sought peace and safety in a warm, familiar place, a friend's house, and not found it.

Most episodes recounted here have an element of the supernatural as well as a major connection to the home, but the story of Thorolf's corpse prior to him becoming a ghost is so horrifying to the people in the saga that it must be included despite its failure to meet those criteria; it is a different type of horror, and one that *we* are able to feel through the text more than episodic scenes. There is nothing to suggest there was anything unnatural or otherworldly about Thorolf's death, though it is certainly mysterious, but the extreme reaction to the sight of the corpse, a natural, dead thing, is comparable to the terror displayed when the seal rises through the floor, which is undoubtedly the most unnatural occurrence in the saga. The highest level of fear seems to exist near the two poles of the spectrum of most to least natural things, because in each case-- the corpse and the seal-- there is an element from the other side of the spectrum which prevents it from being completely familiar or completely unfamiliar. This dash of wrong-

---

<sup>27</sup> "Das Unheimliche," Sigmund Freud (1919), trans. Alix Strachey (p 3).

ness creates an especially unsettling quality which Freud dubs ‘uncanny’. The seal, obviously unnatural, has just enough familiarity and human-like qualities to prevent it from seeming like an unadulterated demon, making it cross over into the uncanny zone; Thorolf is literally a dead human, but something about his appearance suggests something unnatural, or something *alive* in a thing which is supposed to be dead, creating “the feeling of uncanniness [due] to intellectual uncertainty.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to frightening those who see him, this episode is also one that is most likely to affect the reader. His corpse is indescribably gruesome and the characters are paralyzed with horror looking at it, and our natural inclination is to want to see it, too. Like Thorgunna in the kitchen, Thorolf’s corpse has an audience, but there the reader gets a full description of the scene, as if we’re watching a movie; here, we get only a ‘reaction shot’ of the audience, leaving us to wonder what is so unspeakable about the corpse that it can’t be written. The gory details are left to our imagination, keeping it longer in our minds as we try to picture what could be so horrible; in a horror movie, we would probably get the morbid gratification of seeing the terrible body ourselves, allowing us to react as the characters did, but the image in our minds lasts only as long as the image on the screen. Being shown the strong emotional reactions of people seeing something uncanny but not being given an actual description *of* that thing is tantalizing to a reader, who then might want to pause and imagine or theorize on what the corpse could possibly look like before continuing to read.

Thorolf’s death, while not overtly paranormal, *is* inexplicable, which makes it harder to imagine what his body might look like and why it generates such paralyzing terror. After failing to manipulate his son, Arnkel, into helping him settle a feud, “Thorolf went back home in a rage, for he could see how difficult it was going to be to get what he wanted. It was evening when he

---

<sup>28</sup> “Das Unheimliche,” Sigmund Freud (1919), trans. Alix Strachey (pp 2).

reached home, and he sat down on the high-seat without uttering a word to anybody. He ate nothing all evening and stayed in his seat when the rest of the household went to bed. In the morning, when they got up, Thorolf was still sitting there, dead.”<sup>29</sup> The manner of his immobile death is mystifying; the only realistic answer, poison (whether suicide or murder), seems to be purposely ruled out by specifying that he didn’t eat anything the night before. He clearly didn’t die peacefully in his sleep. It’s as if he died of rage, having last been seen fuming about his chances of success in a state of irate despair. The phrasing of the description of his body seems to purposely suggest an unsettling idea-- it doesn’t say that ‘Thorolf’s corpse was still on the chair,’ but rather “he was still sitting there,” speaking as if he is still in control of his body, with sitting being a willful action. Adding that he’s dead feels like an afterthought.

The “reaction shot” reveals a detail that makes our vague image more vividly disturbing: “Everyone in the house was numb with terror, his death was so gruesome. As Arnkel went into the living room he crossed the hall to get behind Thorolf, warning people to take care not to pass in front of the corpse until the eyes had been closed...”<sup>30</sup> Thorolf died with his eyes open, sitting upright. Whoever found his body wouldn’t have been able to tell that he was dead from a distance; it would’ve taken a few moments, if not longer, for the realization to hit, and a certain amount of poking may have been necessary to be sure, or at least very close physical proximity in order to tell if he was warm or cold, breathing or not. It’s similar to seeing someone sleeping with their eyes open; it’s difficult to tell if they’re faking and watching you or genuinely asleep (at which point you may wake them up in order to get them to stop it). Closed eyes indicate sleep and peace; open, Thorolf probably appeared awake and as angry as he was when he was alive.

---

<sup>29</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 93.

Though he is assuredly dead, his upright position and open eyes still suggest life, placing him in a liminal state which makes his stillness unnerving-- one is half-expecting him to move, to either spring back to life or twitch, give some small but sinister motion suggesting reanimation. The latter would be creepier than an outright attack, because as with Thorgunna cooking silently, it's ominous and indicative of potentially worse things to come.

Despite the subtle horror of the corpse, Thorolf goes on to be arguably the least frightening-- or perhaps simply the most familiar-- ghost, although the differences that distinguish him from the more uncanny ghosts create a different kind of horror, including a slow wearing down of people's minds that drive them mad. His ghost also shows no human side, no retention of his former personality (unless pure rage counts), no attempt to communicate, and no reason to pity or praise him, as with Thorodd and Thorgunna, respectively. This loss of identity is horrifying in the sense that Thorolf returns from the dead in body only, not in mind. His consciousness and identity remain in the grave, which renders him a mere shell, devoid of thought and purpose except to kill. His story, at the beginning, has the classic zombie layout: "After Thorolf died, a good many people found it more and more unpleasant to stay out of doors once the sun had begun to go down. As the summer wore on, it became clear that Thorolf wasn't lying quiet, for after sunset no one out of doors was left in peace."<sup>31</sup> A mindless and malevolent revenant runs around at night attacking people, which is a fairly stereotypical setup in literature and film, making it almost boring to readers. His ghost is the only supernatural thing to appear outdoors, which does make him more interesting when put in context of the *heim* and its sanctuary. The fact that the trouble only happens 'out of doors' is stated twice, emphasizing its

---

<sup>31</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94.

importance, as is the fact that it happens at night. The danger begins in darkness, an antithesis to the essential qualities that define a home, and away from the safety of other people.

Thorolf's reign of terror happening outdoors emphasizes the centrality of home being sanctuary, because it is to the home that people run when threatened. He first targets people's livestock, their possessions, and then their property: "All the sheep in the valley were found dead, and the rest that had strayed into the mountain were never seen again."<sup>32</sup> This "grew so troublesome that no one would risk using the valley for grazing any longer."<sup>33</sup> People are fearful of using their own land now and think it safer to stay closer to town. By haunting their grazing territory, Thorolf does greater harm than simply killing livestock-- he is driving people away from the property that is rightfully theirs, now unusable and occupied by an undead army. Land they could once use safely is now off limits, and they are forced to retreat inward. Their radius of safety shrinks.

Though Thorolf remains outside and never enters the home, he is able to terrorize people in ways that the other ghosts do not. His haunting is not a one-time event but a long-term, persistent problem, the worry always on people's minds. There is nothing mysterious about him-- he comes out at night, makes noise, bangs on the house, and attacks people who are out and about. He's still a real menace, though-- just a more simple, understandable one. Though their fear is not an extreme response to an especially terrible thing, it is continual, and being in a state of constant fear can ultimately have as much of a deadly effect as a physical attack; he attacks the mind, not in a psychological way like the uncanny do where one has trouble processing or categorizing something, but as pure constant stress. As the winter wears on, "Thorolf often

---

<sup>32</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94.

appeared on the farm and afflicted the housewife most [*sótti met at húsfreyju*]<sup>34</sup> of all. A lot of people suffered badly from it, but she was almost driven out of her wits, and eventually the strain of it killed her.”<sup>35</sup> He doesn’t need to physically attack in order to do harm; his mere presence, keeping people in an exhausting state of constant fear, seems to have made the housewife literally sick with fear (*sótt* meaning ‘illness’).

A person’s home is their hub of safety, as we’ve seen in each episode, and Thorolf makes people feel insecure in the strength of the *Heimlich* in unique ways without actually invading; his roaming around outside can stress people to death, and though they remain technically safe from him, he assaults the house itself, the literal sanctuary that is protecting them from him. “At night the people at Hvamm would hear loud noises outside, and it often sounded as if there was somebody sitting astride the roof,”<sup>36</sup> and the fact that it is the *housewife* who he haunts most dreadfully shows that violence is persistently aimed at what is keeping them safe, the *heim*, rather than most people as individuals. By the winter, Thorolf was “haunting the whole valley, and most of the farms were abandoned because of it. His ghost was so malignant that it killed people and others had to run for their lives...”<sup>37</sup> Whether he is cognizant of it or not, he is expanding his territory to the point where he is forcing people from their own homes, removing the one safe place they were previously able to escape from him. On the flip side, “as the winter wore on, people grew so scared of Thorolf’s ghost, they were too frightened to travel, no matter how urgent their business.”<sup>38</sup> Thorolf can both drive people away from their safe places or force

---

<sup>34</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, ed. Einar Ol. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík: Islenzka Fornritafélag, 1935), p. 93.

<sup>35</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94. Translation modified.

<sup>36</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94.



them to stay inside, too frightened to venture from the *heim*. At that point, they are practically being held hostage in their own home; feeling unable to leave, one's home might become more of a prison than a sanctuary.

The strangest supernatural episode of the saga doesn't involve ghosts or humans of any kind, but rather a seal, the nature of which-- solid, spectral, both?-- is unclear and *unheimlich*. Its method of intrusion into the home is the most unusual and thus alarming, and there is no kind of foreshadowing, either to the reader or the characters (in the way that, say, a person dying might at least present the possibility of ghostly return), which makes it completely unexpected and bizarre for both us *and* them. Out of nowhere, "...people came into the living-room and saw a seal's head coming up through the floor. One of the servants was the first to notice this as she came in. She grabbed a club in the doorway and hit the seal on the head, which only made it rise up out of the ground a little more."<sup>39</sup> The initial reaction to this unexpected invader was to attack it-- a fight instinct, showing quick instincts, pragmatism, and steadiness in the face of the unknown and potential danger. Several people demonstrate this steadfastness, continuing their defense of the home with determination rather than fear, and it's not until the seal rises to the point of not just unnaturalness but of impossibility and true threat that real terror sets in, the same paralysis that afflicted those who saw Thorolf's corpse: "One of the farm-hands came up and started hitting the seal, but it kept rising further up with every blow, until its flippers emerged. At that the man fainted, and everyone was paralyzed with terror, except for young Kjartan, who rushed up with a sledge-hammer and struck the seal on the head."<sup>40</sup> The seal generates a

---

<sup>39</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 137.

<sup>40</sup> Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 137.

paralytic terror not seen with Thorolf's *draugr*, a haunting which is, in a way, *normal*; zombie ghosts of dead people chasing people around town is scary in its own right, but it's also very visible, identifiable, and, while certainly unnatural, recognizable and consistent. The basic rules of nature, too, apply to Thorolf and the other ghosts, in that one can fight back (if you fail, they kill you, but they aren't so powerful that you can't escape an encounter). They're also a known danger-- they exist in the darkness of the night, but they don't lurk or hide-- so their presence is not a secret or a surprise. People know the danger outside, and it is to the warm and safe home that they can return to to escape such horrors. A seal, spectral enough to glide through a solid floor but tangible enough to hit, yet impervious to attack, goes against all logic, and is all the more terrifying for it. The attempt and failure to hurt the seal and the seal's subsequent lack of reaction is scarier than if it acted aggressively. The question of "self" and "other" arises briefly again here, but in comparison to the other ghosts, there really *is* not question of its "otherness," not as a human/not human comparison but natural/unnatural. Thorolf and the drowned men acted in ways that showed whether they were a threat or not; language wasn't necessary.

Communication with a regular seal, of course, would be impossible, but this seal, when struck, is completely silent; a real animal would make some sort of sound, even a demonic one, like the bull that appears later in the saga whose defining characteristic is its bellow. A silent creature who acts so against its apparent nature is not one that can be understood in any sense.

The seal demonstrates other contradicting characteristics that make it disturbingly similar to humans while being very obviously non-human, which makes it more uncanny than the average ghost. When it pokes its head up and looks around, it's as if the floor is liquid itself and the seal can move as freely through it as it does through water. Regular seals live on the border of the sea and the shore, straddling the line between boundaries, and this seal knows no

boundaries at all-- a solid floor is the same as water, and it moves like no seal ever could. It rises gradually, with controlled motion, at each blow, apparently rising straight out of the floor, its body upright and thus human-like. When the lines of human and other become blurred, the results are far scarier than if a seal inexplicably appeared in a room. As it rises through the floor, the seal is literally half in and half out, the definition of liminality. Interestingly, it is the appearance of the flippers as it makes its gradual ascent through the floor that triggers the paralyzing fear, perhaps because it emphasizes the mind-boggling impossibility of what is happening: Seals in water are too heavy to push themselves far enough up for just their flippers to be freed without leaping out and their whole body coming out of the water, so the fact that it can rise high enough for its flippers to come out while still moving slowly up confirms that this creature does not obey any known laws of nature. There is danger in the flippers, too, because they will enable it to move freely around the room, which perhaps makes people realize that it will soon be a physical threat if it rises all the way into the room-- who knows what it would do, or what motion it could be capable of, if its full body was in the room? In addition to being the way seals move around on land, flippers are also the equivalent of the arms of a human invader in this situation; once an arm is forcing its way into a room, that's when something scary goes from a noise outside to something physical and dangerous entering your space. A gradual entrance, too, adds more suspense than if it suddenly bursts in, and when force fails to slow that entrance, paralyzing terror sets in.

Being able to do nothing but watch as something unwelcome enters makes you helpless in your own home. An unnatural force entering your home can be worse than encountering one in somewhere like a strange cabin or the woods-- though unfamiliar surroundings can make one feel more lost and defenseless, the home is supposed to be a sanctuary, entirely yours, and, like

kicking unwanted guests out when they've overstayed their welcome, you control who comes in and out. There is nowhere more familiar to you than your home, and to have something so *unheimlich* enter it before your eyes and against your will is true Old Norse horror, because it means you have failed to protect your safest space, safe no longer.

## Chapter 2: Arthurian Uncertainty

One typically wouldn't associate King Arthur with horror. Within the text of *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation* (edited by Norris J. Lacy and translated by Carol J. Chase, published in 1995)<sup>41</sup>, which focuses on Lancelot, however, there is a castle called Corbenic comparable to a haunted house, or something rather worse than a traditional haunted house-- more like the extreme haunts that are becoming ever more popular: a haunted house attraction taken to the extreme, where people pay to be practically tortured, disoriented, see horrible sights, sit alone in dread while waiting for something to happen, among other horrors.<sup>42</sup> Knights willingly subject themselves to the risks of the castle despite it being strictly forbidden; they are all the more attracted to it. Unlike modern daredevils and thrill-seekers, knights have rather more at stake: their honor may depend on attempting to spend the night, whether they want to or not. Also unlike these haunts, Corbenic was named by God and houses the Holy Grail.

The building has its own origin story: it stands on land once belonging to a leprous king, who was healed by looking at the Grail and destroying his pagan temples and idols. He then converts to Christianity, and has his kingdom do the same: "The land was converted to God in less than a week",<sup>43</sup> meaning first that the people of the kingdom were converted, but also the

---

<sup>41</sup> Lacy, Norris J. (Ed.) (April 1, 1995). *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, Volume 4 of 5. New York: Garland.

Note: Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from this text. The footnotes will specify the page of the specific section within the volume.

<sup>42</sup> Shelton, J. *16 Terrifying Details About Blackout, The Extreme Sadomasochistic Haunted House*. Retrieved from <https://www.ranker.com/list/what-is-blackout-extreme-haunted-house/jacob-shelton>

<sup>43</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 299.

land itself; the earth within that territory is now consecrated, a place of the Christian faith. Once converted, “the king had a beautiful stronghold built above rapid-running water”.<sup>44</sup> The significance of this has several possible meanings. In a Christian context, water is most directly connected with baptism. Thus, this pure water may be formally baptizing the formerly pagan land. It could also be connected with holy water, which would further strengthen the river’s relationship with God, as well as the castle above it. An ever-flowing river has no beginning or end, similar to the meaning of Jesus’ alpha and omega symbol, and, literally and perhaps metaphorically, running water keeps it from becoming stagnant and gathering impurities in the stillness.

After building it, “they found on one of the gates a miraculous inscription in Chaldean, saying THIS CASTLE SHOULD BE CALLED CORBENIC”.<sup>45</sup> A ‘miracle’ is undoubtedly done by God’s will, so it is a safe assumption that the Christian God named it Himself, and thus that this castle is God-approved. Via the inscription, God instructs only that the castle *should* be called Corbenic, not that it *must*, which would be read more like an order. Nor does He write that it *is* called Corbenic, which would be directly assigning an identity to the castle as well as claiming it more clearly as His own. He says only that it *should* be named as he wishes, with nothing said about what may happen if this wish-- not a command, remember-- is not respected, but the people assume the worst, or rather have the correct reaction they *should* have as good Christians: “When they saw the name in writing, they said it did not please Our Lord that it be called by any other name, so they called it that right away”<sup>46</sup>. Things seem to have gone well; the Grail is brought inside the castle, and “that day everyone who ate was filled with the grace of the Holy

---

<sup>44</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.

<sup>45</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.

<sup>46</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.

Vessel, so that there was no one who did not have whatever he could describe to eat”.<sup>47</sup> Thus, God seems to have be satisfied with Corbenic and the people within its walls.

However, things do not stay as simple and straightforwardly as they begin; Corbenic is a place of extreme contradictions, a place of wonders both beautiful and terrifying. The castle, named by God Himself and housing the Grail, has a dark side, a parallel dimension of sorts. One would expect God to have an especially powerful presence here, but there is ample evidence to suggest some other being rules over it, perhaps even the Devil; knights witness things that seem totally ungodlike and are attacked by beings that seem more demonic than holy, and those who are deemed unworthy are either killed or forced out in deep shame. One creature that a knight encounters refers to Corbenic as the Palace of Adventures, going directly against what God inscribed, and we see people suffering punishments so horrible that it’s hard to believe the Christian God would sentence them to it. Despite the many terrifying wonders that seem incompatible with God-- so terrifying that the most pious of knights suspect the Devil is at play—I believe the knights are actually experiencing a truer God. During this time when the knights experience the marvels, either a veil is lifted and they are able to see mysteries and aspects of Christianity normally hidden from humans, or they enter a different dimension entirely, still in the same physical location, but on a plane on top of ours. This realm belongs to otherworldly-- perhaps heavenly-- beings, and while in this dimension, knights experience impossible things. Their senses are affected due to being in a world that is not theirs, disorienting them, and things that are physically impossible within our laws of nature are accomplished without explanation, because the place is beyond human comprehension, like God Himself. The things they see may not line up with what the Christianity they expect, but if God is everything,

---

<sup>47</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.

it's no wonder that humans are able only to perceive a portion of what is under his control. The Palace of Adventures is a window into this normally inaccessible plane, and allows knights to witness more of His true nature.

The marvels (the French *merveille* is used interchangeably for 'marvel' and 'wonder') are first seen the very first night after the palace is built by Alphasan, the former leper-king who had Corbenic built: "That night King Alphasan slept in the main palace; in the middle a very beautiful sumptuous bed was made up".<sup>48</sup> This mysterious bed will be a focal point connecting everyone's experience in the dark side of Corbenic, and its first appearance leaves us with questions that cannot be answered-- who made up such a bed in the center of the castle, and was it purposely made so beautifully so as to lure him into a trap? The difference between King Alphasan and the others who later stay in Corbenic is that Alphasan had not been seeking glory or any other thing that might benefit him; he simply sought to sleep, and sleeping in the bed was a reasonable assumption rather than terribly bold and presumptuous of him, so what follows is a different situation than the other knights, who are explicitly told not to sleep in the bed. Alphasan receives no such warning, but rather accidentally spies on a series of odd and mysterious events. The castle, or God, or the beings who inhabit Corbenic become aware of this intrusion and make an example out of Alphasan.

He wakes up in the middle of the night, and "looking before him, he saw the Holy Vessel sitting on a silver table; in front of it was a man he did not know, who looked like a priest when he is saying mass".<sup>49</sup> The language is similar to an experience the knight Bors will later have with a knight of Corbenic, who is not given a physical description-- we only know that Bors does not know him. In Bors' case, though, he physically fights this knight, and great emphasis is

---

<sup>48</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.

<sup>49</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.



placed on his sensory experience during his stay in Corbenic. In this case, Alphasan could mistake the strange sight for a vision or dream, because he has no direct interaction (yet). Despite this, the mere sight is enough to tell that something is *off*. By specifying Alphasan looks *before* him and sees the table, this means that the priest-like person would have had his back to Alphasan, if it was the same as in mass. This is creepy for a number of reasons. While he is described as “a *man* he did not know,” the fact that the stranger is a human is not a hundred percent. Unlike other humanoids to be encountered, nothing is obviously wrong, which enhances the creepiness of this first encounter; there isn’t yet a reason to jump to any supernatural conclusions, because it merely looks like a strange man performing mass in front of his bed in the middle of the night, and even regular humans, in the right setting, can look uncanny. This ambiguity is hinted at by saying that “he *looks* like a priest when he is saying mass,” which means it’s not a sure bet that he *is* a priest; it only means that Alphasan thinks he is in the form of a priest, or at least resembles one (and remember that he is in a dark room and wouldn’t have a clear view of the stranger’s face), the same way that a bear standing on two legs might resemble a human, or a seal rising vertically. He acts in the manner of a priest during mass, which, once we begin to think of Corbenic as containing more sinister things than a Christian presence, would look the same as a demon or other unholy entity performing a ritual.

While the priest was purely visual, Alphasan’s next adventure is much closer to what the knights encounter in terms of focus on the senses and terrifying otherworldliness. After seeing the mass-like ritual, “around him there seemed to be more than a thousand voices, giving thanks to Our Lord. He did not see the bodies from which the voices came, and yet he heard around him the noise of feathers and beating of wings as loudly as if all the birds in the world were there”<sup>50</sup>.

---

<sup>50</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.

*Seem* is a keyword threading many of the adventures together, as it signifies uncertainty on the part of the character; he thinks that it is happening but doesn't commit to saying there *were* a thousand voices. This uncertainty often stems from seeing/hearing something that is rationally impossible and trying to reconcile it with the rational mind; there is a chance that what they hear is an illusion, a false reality intended by demons or other ungodly things to trick them. The sound of a thousand disembodied voices chanting combined with a cacophony of 'birds' would be overwhelming and all encompassing. This marvel seems to be easily identifiable: wings praising God can reasonably be assumed to be angels. However, these beings are a far cry from the beautiful human-with-wings form that we are used to seeing angels in, because in fact we don't see them at all, nor do they seem to be the gentle, benevolent beings we're used to. There's a sort of violence or panicked intensity in the description of the wings. He hears the "noise of feathers," which, while not supernatural, is nature taken to the extreme; their quietness is a key feature of feathers, so the fact that these feathers are in such a state of commotion that he can actually hear them is alarming. 'Beating,' when applied as a verb to wings, implies that they're working very hard (as opposed to the more common verb applied to flying birds, *flapping* their wings), and birds sometimes fly at their prey and beat them with their wings to momentarily stun or disorient them, infusing this description with even more action and peril. Flocks of birds are quite scary up close, especially if they're airborne and near enough for you to hear their feathers; it's disorienting, since it's difficult to follow where the bird might be, and Alphasan experiences this times a thousand, as if every bird in the world was there around him, and in the dark to boot. If these *are* angels, they're not in a familiar or immediately identifiable shape, but rather their true form-- still worshipping God, but with a layer, or rather a filter, removed. Normally angels appear to humans to deliver messages and act as intermediaries between earth and heaven, and

Alphasan is seeing them when they are ‘off duty,’ in a sense. Angels have many monstrous forms described in various books of the Bible and apocrypha, in which they have many eyes, multiple heads, some of which are animals, and other grotesque features that contradict their standard image: These forms are closer to what Alphasan is witnessing. They’re not exactly taking precautions not to scare him, and if they were all worshipping the same God, wouldn’t they want Alphasan to take part? The fact that he can’t see anything or anyone and barely understands what’s happening indicates that this is not *his* realm, but some sort of zone where humans are forbidden-- or unable, most of the time-- to go. He is trespassing on territory that belongs to beings who are not of this world, and whose rituals he cannot participate in.

This theory of a place forbidden to humans and for wondrous things only (not necessarily holy wonders only) is confirmed when “a man who seemed to be enveloped in flames came to King Alphasan and said, ‘King, no man should lie in this palace-- neither you nor anyone else-- for scarcely could any man, through a good life, be worthy of remaining in the place where the Holy Vessel was honored as you saw. You did a very foolhardy thing in coming to sleep here; Our Lord wants vengeance’”.<sup>51</sup> Given that Corbenic was named by God himself, houses the Grail as well as what we can presume to be angels, this seems very un-Christian. Alphasan hasn’t done any harm, except in *seeing* the ritual, our first real indication that this is a place where the experience of seeing, hearing, and feeling may matter more than the marvel itself. God wanting vengeance for this accidental transgression seems odd, and though everything has seemed Christian so far, there is a possibility that when the man says “Our Lord,” he could be referring to a god different from the Christian one that Alphasan knows. This would make sense in a way, because why would God consecrate Corbenic only to punish those who stay there without so

---

<sup>51</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 300.

much as a warning? A possibility is that Alphasan saw something sacred that he wasn't supposed to when he woke up to see the "priest," given that the flaming man specifically refers to not just the place where the Holy Vessel was honored, but the place where it was honored *as you saw*, emphasizing the visual aspect of the strange experience Alphasan had just been a part of, or rather a witness to. The ritual was not meant to be seen by, or apparently even take place in the same room as, an unworthy man, which is most men in general. As for the flaming man, again there is no committal phrasing--not "a man who *was* enveloped in flames," but only one who "*seemed* to be," as Alphasan tries to make sense of the impossibilities around him. He may be trying to convince himself that the man is not really covered in flames, but rather than it only looks like that thanks to some illusion or trick.

As to the flaming man's identity, what he symbolizes, or who his Lord may be, things are uncertain. He could be a representative of Alphasan's Christian God, appearing to him in an unnatural and frightening form in order demonstrate that He can perform miracles that would otherwise be deadly. It could be a saint, who experienced God's marvels in a positive way, or an angel, appearing in a more recognizable but still menacing form. Another possible explanation of the flaming man is that he represents someone in Hell, giving Alphasan a visual of what he might look like after God's wrath. The figure does not appear to be in pain, so it could just be a copy of what a punishment would look like, giving Alphasan another eyeful of terror. Equally likely, it could be an apparition conjured by either Lord to give voice to his message. If "Our Lord" is a bad one, this certainly fits the image of a demon who serves Satan-- *his* Lord, not Alphasan's. If so, this creates disturbing implications about the nature of Corbenic. Assuming that the inscription is truly miraculous and not a trick of some demon, this castle is holier and closer to God than any church, seeing as it is fit to hold the Holy Grail. One would guess, then, that

Corbenic would unequivocally be protected by God more securely than anywhere on earth (unless God just let them build it, named it for them, and then left the humans to care for the grail themselves). If it was such an important and holy place, yet a demon-like creature and other frightening things can appear inside, this doesn't exactly suggest that Corbenic has tight security. If potentially evil forces are able to get inside and terrorize those who try to stay there, is it still a place of God? Or are these horrifying happenings, in fact, part of the way God *wanted* Corbenic to function? God is mysterious and incomprehensible, and like all ineffable things, that mystery can be frightening to those who cannot understand it. After all, the Grail *was* being honored, from what Alphasan saw and heard, which was the purpose of the castle, and God and his intermediaries do not necessarily come in beautiful forms; like the angels' true forms, perhaps we shouldn't assume that because something is scary, it does not come from God.

The biggest piece of evidence that these things are *not* God's doing is that, when the flaming man attacks Alphasan, he refers to the castle as "the Palace of Adventures," which directly clashes with the main evidence of the Christian God being involved in the building of the castle-- that is, naming it Himself. When Alphasan reports what happened, he says that "the palace has a nobler name than any I have ever seen",<sup>52</sup> referring to the moniker 'Palace of Adventures,' "because greater adventures and marvels would happen there than anywhere in the world.' Thus the king taught the name of the palace to those who did not know it before. And henceforth it was always called this".<sup>53</sup> I think it strange that, going off the word of a disturbed man relaying a message from a flame-creature, everyone now disregards the miracle name bestowed by God on the gate. This contradiction aside, there's still no way of knowing who or what power governs the castle.

---

<sup>52</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 301.

<sup>53</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 301.

Before Alphasan returns to ‘real life,’ the fiery figure declares, “Now may others refrain from staying in the Palace of Adventures, for they can be sure that anyone who stays here will die or leave in shame, unless he is definitely a very good knight”.<sup>54</sup> He is stabbed through both thighs by a lance, so deep “that the lance appeared on the other side”.<sup>55</sup> Alphasan had to endure a hazing of sorts before being given any sort of information-- it’s only once the king is nearly passed out from pain that the flaming man declares the name of the castle and delivers a warning/explanation of why this has been done to him. However, the demon gives no definition of what a man needs to have to be “definitely a very good knight,” and this will lead many a knight to stay there in order to test themselves and see if they live up to this vague description. The threat of death is equal to the prospect of leaving in shame, showing the values and priorities of the class of knights as a whole; their honor is as important to them as life itself, and shame is as unappealing as death.

These threats backfire, however, as they only encourage knights to visit the castle. Like many young men eager to prove themselves or impress others, knights are even more driven to attempt something once they have been forbidden to do so; it gives them that much more glory to have bested a threat so great. Gawain, traveling upon a path, reaches a crossroads and comes across a sign stating that the road to the right held no danger, but giving a dire warning against the left path: “IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE, BE SURE NOT TO TAKE THE PATH ON THE LEFT: UNDERSTAND THAT YOU WILL NEVER LEAVE THERE WITHOUT SHAME”.<sup>56</sup> After reading this, he immediately declares, “I will take this road to the left, since the writing forbids me to” (LG IV, 375). The warning, far from being a deterrent, is practically an invitation.

---

<sup>54</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 301.

<sup>55</sup> The History of the Holy Grail, page 301.

<sup>56</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 375.

The knights Gawain, Lancelot, and Bors each end up at Corbenic for one reason or another, and each has a very different experience. Bors and Gawain spend a night in the Palace of Adventures with very different results; pious Bors fares much better, as he enters with humility and purity, and experiences many of the same adventures that Gawain did earlier, but deals with them differently. Gawain, having offended God by not respecting the Grail sufficiently, is unwillingly forced to endure the trials of the marvels, though not all are bad. Lancelot does not actually enter the Palace of Adventures-- his role in stopping the adventures end up being quite different. His visit to Corbenic, and specifically his conversation with the king there, is what is of interest to our theory of the two dimensions and the unknowable God.

Gawain sets out looking for glory and fame, as any good knight is expected to do. Upon arriving near Corbenic, Gawain encounters a woman in a bath tub begging for help to get out. Feeling the water of tub, he “found the water so hot he thought he had lost his hand forever”,<sup>57</sup> possibly foreshadowing the loss of his senses inside Corbenic. Gawain attempts to help her, “but, try as he might, he could not move her. He tried two or three times, and when she saw that he could not move her, she said, “Alas, knight, you have failed. Now you can say with assurance than you’ll never depart from this castle without shame”.<sup>58</sup> She uses the exact phrasing that the fire demon did regarding what will happen when he fails, and apparently this test of lifting her from the tub is already an indicator of the knight’s chances of success before even entering Corbenic. She could almost be considered a gatekeeper of sorts, whose job is to pre-test the knights who wish to face the adventures; however, her warnings upon their failures clearly go unheeded, given that foolhardy knights continue repeating the mistakes of their predecessors.

---

<sup>57</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 376.

<sup>58</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 376.

The lady says, “If I could have died by suffering, by God, I would have already died. But that is not God’s pleasure, for He has not yet avenged Himself of a great sin I committed, which is why I suffer this agony and torment... [but] you’ve failed and won’t learn anything more about my condition”.<sup>59</sup> The word choice of God’s ‘pleasure’ sounds almost sadistic, and either way, this is a horrible punishment for whatever she could’ve done-- it suggests a much more vengeful God than might be expected. Since Gawain wasn’t good enough, he doesn’t get to learn the story of how she came to be there; asking questions and receiving answers, we will see, is quite rare indeed.

Gawain is welcomed to feast at Corbenic, which is both when we see the Grail for the first time and when Gawain goes wrong. At dinner they see a bird, and “as soon as the bird had entered, the hall was filled with all the sweet odors that a mortal heart could imagine or a mortal tongue describe. At that moment, everyone was so dumbstruck that not a soul uttered a word”.<sup>60</sup> Their senses are so overwhelmed by the wonder of the Grail that their power of speech is not supernaturally taken away, as the knights’ will be at night, but gone simply because of awe. Here we have a detailed description of the Grail: “the most splendid vessel that had ever been seen by earthly man, which was made in the semblance of a chalice”.<sup>61</sup> It may be that this vessel has been seen by *unearthly* men, and saying that it was ‘in the semblance of a chalice’ is odd-- it’s in the shape of one, but not really a chalice? Upon examination, “He was unable to learn what it was made of, for it was composed neither of wood nor any kind of metal, nor of stone, nor was it of horn or bone, which amazed him”.<sup>62</sup> Its unearthliness is not even able to remain completely

---

<sup>59</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 376.

<sup>60</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 377.

<sup>61</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 377.

<sup>62</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 377.



masked in the human realm; the Grail is too holy to mimic a common material, or indeed any material found on earth.

He is amazed by the grail, but not for long, because he reveals his impurity by “marveling more at [the grail maiden’s] beauty than at the vessel... he gazed at her so intently that he thought of nothing else”<sup>63</sup>. Specifying that he was looking at her beauty more than the Grail’s makes it explicit that this was his crime, not merely ogling a girl. No food appears before him, at which point “he realized he had done something wrong”<sup>64</sup>, but it was too late. Having neglected to bow and pay proper homage to the Grail, before he can get any information out of anyone, he discovers that he has been locked in the room. Thus, he is forced into facing the adventures, and while he had wanted to prove himself, this wasn’t quite what he had in mind. A dwarf appears and repeats to him that he cannot leave without great shame. He sees “the most splendid bed in the world”,<sup>65</sup> which, if we’re trying to figure out the layout of the castle confuses things greatly, because he had not left the hall, so the bed seems to have just appeared there. As he begins to sit, a mysterious woman’s voice calls to him, but he sees no one: “He heard a young lady crying out to him, ‘Alas, knight, you’ll die now if you sleep here without your armor, for this is the Adventurous Bed”<sup>66</sup>. The identity of this woman and why she would help him are questions left unsolved. Even the armor seems to appear out of nowhere; she recommends putting armor on and seems to be the one providing it, saying, “Here is a suit of armor. Take it and be seated there, if you wish,”<sup>67</sup> and then he “ran to where he saw the armor,”<sup>68</sup> which this lady has mysteriously

---

<sup>63</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 377

<sup>64</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 377

<sup>65</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 378

<sup>66</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 378

<sup>67</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 378

<sup>68</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 378

provided. This is the only time a knight is helped so directly, at least until the king straight up tells Bors to avoid the bed.

Following her advice, he sits, “but as soon as he was seated, he heard the ugliest and most hideous cry he had ever heard: he really believed it was the devil.”<sup>69</sup> The verb indicates how strong Gawain’s conviction was, even more sure than when Bors wonders if what he sees is from God or the devil; Gawain believes it *is* the devil, strong proof that either there *are* ungodly forces in Corbenic, or that God takes dishonor against the grail very, very seriously-- seriously enough that His rage sounds demonic. After hearing this cry, he is stabbed through the shoulder with the flaming lance, the same that Bors will encounter; it is an indicator of purity or internal strength that it pierces all the way through Gawain, but only half through Bors. Gawain lies there, senseless, “until the night grew so dark that one could have seen only dimly within the room had it not been for the moonlight that streamed in through more than forty open windows. So Sir Gawain peered into a room-- the one that was closest to him-- and saw the hugest and most monstrous serpent that he had ever seen.”<sup>70</sup> He sees this snake fight a leopard, and “as they were fighting there, such an adventure befell Sir Gawain that he could no longer see a thing, although the moon was shining brightly. But after a time his eyesight returned.”<sup>71</sup> The knights often lose track of one sense or another in Corbenic, but this is the only time that such a loss has officially been called an adventure that can be blamed on God or whoever else.

Once his eyes have returned, “he saw emerge from the room twelve young women who were sounding the most doleful lamentations in the world.”<sup>72</sup> Given how often the things the knights see and hear are qualified with a “seems” or other indication that they’re not sure, the

---

<sup>69</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 378

<sup>70</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 378

<sup>71</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 378

<sup>72</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 379

text here leaves no doubt that these women are, in fact, the saddest in the world. “Sir Gawain listened and heard the greatest cries and lamentations on earth; they seemed to be voiced by women.”<sup>73</sup> There’s more doubt about the cries being from women than there is about the fact that their cries are, in fact, the greatest on earth. Like Bors, Gawain then encounters a strange knight, but it is either not the same knight that Bors fights, or the location being different means that the knight can’t go into the Grail room to recharge, as he will during his fight with Bors, so he’s more like an ordinary knight, though still fighting for Corbenic. No details are given about where he came from except “a room,” but he is quite willing to let Gawain go; all he says is “Get up from here, sir knight, and go to one of these rooms to sleep, for you cannot remain here long<sup>74</sup>-- whether he is talking about a specific length of time that he can stay without a fight or just that no one can remain there long is uncertain, but the offer for him to go and sleep in one of “these rooms” is odd and more specific than other ways it could’ve been phrased, but it sounds like he could choose anywhere to sleep, which makes sense if the Grail is not being housed in any adjacent rooms. The fight he has with the knight proves this-- they fight until they are both so exhausted that they collapse, and the knight is not seen again. Perhaps the same thing would’ve happened to Bors, if the Grail room had not been there to grant the knight additional strength.

The windows rattle again as it seems to storm, and “It was the most inclement weather in the world, except that it did not rain. Sir Gawain was terrified... his brain was so addled by the sound of thunder that he did not know if he was alive or dead; he lay there like a dead man. Next, there arose such a sweet and soft wind that it was a marvel. Finally, a chorus of voices-- perhaps as many as two hundred-- came down into the great hall singing so sweetly that nothing in the

---

<sup>73</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 379

<sup>74</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 379

world could compare to the sound.”<sup>75</sup> Again, we have a total loss of senses, more than mere disorientation, to the point where Gawain can’t tell if he’s alive; such is the effect being in an otherworldly realm can have on a human. At the end of his adventures, he hears beautiful song, almost like a formal conclusion to it all. He doesn’t fully grasp what he hears, though: “Sir Gawain could scarcely understand what the voices said except that he heard them all at once singing glory, praise, and honor be to the King of Heaven. A little before the voices were heard, all the good odors of the earth were spread about... he heard voices so sweet and melodious that he felt they were celestial rather than earthly sounds, as indeed they were. He opened his eyes, but he saw nothing around him, and then he believed that these were not earthly sounds that he had heard, for he could not see their source. He would gladly have risen, if he had been able to, but he could not, for he has lost the power of all his limbs and the strength of his body” (LG IV 380). There’s a lot to unpack here. First, he’s barely able to understand what the voices say, hint of otherworldliness number one, and our suspicion is confirmed, or at least shared, with Gawain, who recognizes that the voices were not natural because of how sweet, rather than the terrifying wings Alphasan experienced, it sounds. He can’t see a source, but that may or may not add to his case-- he’s lost his strength and ability to move, and his vision went out before, so it’s not impossible that he could not see their source for reasons other than them not existing in an earthly, visible form.

Finally, he sees the maiden from before bring the Grail, and she seems to be able to take part in the unearthly ritual, perhaps because she is so pure; everyone who served the Grail “had to be virginal and pure” (133), so someone who had previously been allowed to carry the grail is no longer permitted once they have lost their virginity. It’s still surprising, given that she appears

---

<sup>75</sup> Lancelot, Part IV, page 380

to be a regular human—though, as we will mention later, the maiden and the dove’s conflated entrances into the hall may suggest she is less human than she seems. She sets it up with incense and candles in the middle of the hall and “then all the voices began to sing together more sweetly than a mortal heart could imagine or than an earthly tongue could describe, and everyone chanted in unison, ‘Blessed be the Father of Heaven’” (LG IV 380). This would seem to prove without a doubt that Corbenic is ruled by the Christian God, and that He *is* responsible for the wonders so terrible that Gawain mistook its source as literally coming from the devil. Once she removes the Grail, “all the voices departed and went back where they came from” (LG IV 380), which is an interesting way to say that they left, hinting that rather than appearing and disappearing, they have a physical source that they went back to. Also odd to tell us that the *voices* departed, because we wouldn’t be able to *see* them anyway. Then the windows close and Gawain loses his sight again, but his body is healed of all wounds, likely because of his proximity to the Grail, which may have healed him as it healed the knight. He “went off to find the knight who had fought against him, but he could not find him” (LG IV 380). The knight may have been an illusion who appeared only to fight him, though he did seem to have an earthly body that grew tired, so again, we are left with no clear answers.

His adventures finally end, focusing again on the senses that he has remaining: “Then he listened and heard a great crowd of people approach. He felt someone take him by the shoulders, feet, and head, and carry him out of the room, and they tied him firmly to a cart that was in the middle of the courtyard” (LG IV 380). One would think some kind of little demons or minions would be responsible for trying him up, but the fact that he is carried outside makes it more iffy; it’s unlikely that whatever wonders appear inside would be able to have a physical presence outside. It may just have been the villagers, who perhaps had been watching his struggle; this has

much more of a spectacle feeling, because as he is carted off, the townspeople throw mud and shoes, among other things, at him, making it a fun community event to humiliate him.

He runs into a hermit, who elucidates some of what happened: “You saw it but did not recognize it... it was the Holy Grail, where the blood of Our Lord was shed and gathered. Because you were not humble and simple, it is right that His bread should be refused to you, as it was; this you saw clearly, when everyone was served and you were forgotten” (LG IV 381). He had been blinded in more ways than one inside the castle, then, and only saw the result of his pride, not the cause. As always, the knight tries to learn more about the wonders he saw. In her presidential address entitled “Wonder,” (Caroline Walker Bynum; *Wonder, The American Historical Review*, Volume 102, Issue 1, 1 February 1997, Pages 1–26) Caroline Walker Bynum discusses what wonder meant for medieval people, and she explains that a ‘marvel’ had to be something you could not understand, but knew to be significant, which is the symbolism that Christians are always trying to figure out. She summarizes the viewpoint of William of Newburgh: “There must be a ‘reason’ for the strange occurrence-by which he means not a cause but a significance or moral use... we call things marvels not so much because of their rarity as because they have a secret reason... things are not signs or portents because of their natures or their causes but because they indicate or point... It was a strange that mattered, that pointed beyond itself to meaning” (Bynum 23). The hermit refuses to give up much information, but he does explain what the serpent had represented. In a long, detailed response, he explains what every little motion of the snake meant as a metaphor for King Arthur and his army. It’s underwhelming to hear this exact prophecy; it had been more fun to theorize what the snake meant. As Bynum tells us, “human beings cannot wonder at what is not there; but neither can we wonder at that which we fully understand” (Bynum 3). We want answers, but when they’re

plainly given, it ruins the fun and the mystery, and now makes the snake seem silly rather than frightening and confusing.

We now turn to Lancelot, who is constantly being called the best knight ever: He “possesses all the virtues one should praise in a good man, and no one has as many as he, for he’s the handsomest knight in the world and has in him more valor than any mortal man. No other could equal his bravery” (LG V 92). In what seems to be the sign of a good knight, the most upsetting thing to him upon being imprisoned in an earlier episode was that he wanted to be wandering and “going about the world fulfilling dangerous adventurous that others dared not face-- that he alone could do” (LG V 88). Anything that anyone is told not to do, Lancelot will do it; anything to prove his superiority over all other knights.

Looking at his time in Corbenic, the woman who leads him there is told the same warning that Gawain received, that Lancelot will not escape without shame and injury. However, when he comes to the maiden, who “Sir Gawain had tried in vain to free from the basin” (LG V 99), he is able to pull her easily from the tub, seeming to signify that he is worthier than Gawain, at least. He lifts a tombstone that again proves his prowess, and a crowd gathers to watch him fight a dragon that had been living beneath it: “The townspeople all turned and fled to the upper windows to see what would happen” (LG V 100). They want to see a fight, but from a safe distance, another instance of the enjoyment of a violent spectacle. We are not told what, if anything, the dragon stands for.

When the Grail is brought into the hall in the same manner as it was for Gawain, Lancelot does not have a reaction to the initial entrance of the dove and censer, but is observant enough to notice what everyone else is doing and follow along: “He did like the others and sat beside the king; he noticed that they were all praying, so he did likewise” (LG V 101). He is explicitly

compared to Gawain at several points, drawing our attention to what the less savvy knight had done wrong. When the maiden comes in “whom Gawain had stared at for so long” (LG V 101), Lancelot notes her beauty, but has the correct, and genuine, response to seeing the Grail: “He looked at the vessel the maiden was holding in her hands, which was to his mind the most precious that mortal man had ever seen, and was in the shape of a chalice; he thought, and truly believed, that it was a holy and worthy thing. He...began to bow humbly before it” (LG V 101), and food appears for him as with everyone else in the hall.

Interestingly, we do hear what King Pelles thinks of Gawain’s mishaps as he says, “‘I was very fearful that Our Lord’s grace might fail this time as it did the other day, when Sir Gawain was here.’ ‘Good sir,’ said Lancelot, ‘Our Lord, who is so gentle, could not remain forever angry with the sinners’” (LG V 102). This shows strange interpretations of Gawain’s adventures. Pelles thinks that God’s grace had ‘failed,’ which is a difficult thing to interpret; it’s not clear if he’s suggesting that God or Gawain was in the wrong. Even more mystifying is Lancelot’s response, frankly, because it goes against all evidence that we actually see in *Corbenic*; God has been anything *but* gentle, and seems to remain angry with sinners for a very long time, given how the sufferers we see talk about how long they have been tortured. The Lancelot part of the narrative as a whole speaks about God in a way completely contrary to the direct evidence we have *seen* about this God; perhaps fitting, given how our senses are constantly twisted and confused. He is shown here as incredibly forgiving, not even viewing the illegitimate begetting of Galahad as a sin, because “the Lord, who is the font of every mercy and who does not judge sinners by their deeds” (LG V 104). This does not line up in any way with the events we have seen in the Palace of Adventures, perhaps pointing to the fact that, though it *is* the same God, the power and will of the God that we see in *Corbenic* is truer than the watered



down and palatable version of himself that the rest of the world experiences. Inside the realm within the Palace of Adventures we see the unfiltered, raw, brutal truth of God, a darker and more vengeful side.

Bors' arrival at Corbenic was unlike Gawain or Lancelot's, as he was already on a legitimate quest to help a lady get her land back and appeal to King Pellens (130), whose court happens to be in Corbenic. He prays for God "to protect him that day from shame and misfortune and give him the strength and power to win the woman's quarrel and rightfully defend her just cause" (131), which shows a slight shift from the knights we're used to, who have prayed for glory in their adventures, which usually serve no other purpose than to put themselves in danger for its own sake to see how brave they are and win honor from heroic feats that they happened to stumble upon. The diction focuses on the moral goodness of his task, specifying that he wants this strength and power in order to *rightfully* defend a *just* fight; he's not going in willy nilly for himself, but to help someone. Already, he enters Corbenic with purer intentions than either of the previous knights. His honesty and piety distinguish him from the previous knights, first demonstrated in his reaction to seeing the grail compared to Gawain and Lancelot's, which were less than satisfactory in the eyes of the those who inhabit-- human and otherwise-- Corbenic. "When Bors saw the holy vessel, he adored it profoundly, bowing in front of it with weeping and tears, for he was certain that it was the Holy Grail of which he had heard so often" (133). Interestingly, it not until the Grail has passed everyone-- perhaps blessing them-- that good miracles came of it: "As soon as the maiden had gone once around the palace, the tables were suddenly filled with every good food in the world, and those who had before been sorrowful and sad began to take heart" (132). The Grail is also able to affect the mind, it seems, and improve

the mental state of those who accept its holiness, healing not just bodily wounds like the knight but also mental ones.

Bors' piety is mentioned frequently, and it proves to be vital in his survival-- and ultimately success-- in Corbenic. This piety is shown when a hermit is telling him about Lancelot, and Bors wants to know "what honor God did give [Lancelot] here to cause [good fortune]" (133). He doesn't credit Lancelot himself, or fate, but rather implies that whatever Lancelot did, it was thanks to God. When Bors wins a battle, too, he does not accept the glory nor the physical prize, but rather orders that "in remembrance of the honor God has accorded me in this place, I want a chapel to here be erected where our Lord will be served and honored forever" (134). This repetition serves as yet another reminder of Bors' complete humility and devotion to God, almost to the point of being annoying. After Bors helps save a pair of siblings, they want him to stay with them longer "because it was through his prowess that God had delivered them" (296). The credit for their rescue is being given to God, with Bors' role either being diminished-- *he* was the one who literally saved them by virtue of his own training and skill-- or rightfully humbled. Bors is merely a vessel through which God's will is done, a distinction which has not been awarded to Lancelot or Gawain. Given how often God and Bors' piety is mentioned, the idea that God might have a more intimate relationship with him isn't terribly surprising. This will prove all the more interesting during his adventures, when it is unclear whether God or something else is causing the wonders.

Another change from the way other knights have experienced Corbenic is the welcome Bors receives. At bedtime, "the king commanded that Bors' bed be set up in a lower room, because he did not want him to sleep there in the main hall on account of the many adventures that happened in the palace" (132). Bors is being actively protected, and he accepts the

protection; he has no desire to experience these adventures the way the others have, and indeed actively sought despite warnings. This could be read as cowardice on Bors' part-- surely, as a knight, he should be trying to win glory with all these adventures so near at hand. Instead, he accepts refuge without so much as a word of manly protest. However, he *did* come here with a specific and practical purpose, so are we supposed to blame him? The townspeople certainly do; a woman he comes across harshly chastises his failure to face the adventures, believing it a cowardly dodge of responsibility: "Did you not sleep two straight nights at the home of the Fisher King and never dare stay in the Palace of Adventures for fear of its trials? Wretch, ventureless man, coward-- wouldn't it have been more honorable to die, if die you must, than return without adventure" (135)? The dominant view of knights and what their honorable duties entail is so strong that a random person would berate him for failing to fulfill them. Again he is accused of sleeping elsewhere out of fear of the adventures, when in reality it had been the king who told him where to sleep. She continues, "Wretch, blackguard, you are well aware that the trials are to be accomplished by some worthy knight of the Round Table. Many people consider you a worthy knight and have been rudely deceived. You could not be a greater failure than you are: since some knight is destined to put an end to the adventures, you should have tried to see if it was you and done everything in your power to stop them" (135). She compares him unfavorably to Lancelot, seeming to prove that the bravery of knights is valued above morality or mercy-- the lady says that "everyone knows that [Lancelot] is the bravest knight in the world, and you're the most cowardly of the rest. However, many of Lancelot's so-called "brave" deeds were against people who had no chance of fighting even a regular knight, or *anyone* for that matter, such as flying into a rage against a man whose tent *he* had broken into, and then chasing the naked man through the night and killing him. By contrast, Bors seems to live by a more

honorable code, which one would think is more highly valued than the ability to kill; at the beginning of a fight, he hits a man only with the side of his sword to knock him over, because “he did not want to hit him with the edge since the man was unarmed” (136), a mercy that is difficult to imagine Lancelot granting.

Bors then returns to Corbenic, determined to stay in the Palace of Adventures, though his motivations are not quite clear. He did not purposely set out to find trouble to experience and defeat as a knight, nor did he come with the knowledge and thus the intention of breaking the curse on the castle. Now that he has been chastised by the stranger for not trying to stay the night, he may be driven by shame, or plain curiosity. It’s ambiguous because he says, “I’ll never leave until I’ve stayed the night and seen the wonders Sir Gawain described, when he was here” (301), which makes it sound a bit like his motivation is mainly to be able to say that he saw the same things Gawain did simply so that he’s not left out-- not necessarily to fight or defeat them. What really bothers him, it seems, is his lack of understanding surrounding the Palace of Adventures and his need for knowledge about it; his primary goal then is to learn, which, in addition to his piety, sets him aside from the knights seeking adventure. “When I came here before,” Bors says, “I learned nothing... I’ll never leave here unless I’m dead, until I’ve learned more than I have so far” (302). He’s not looking for praise or glory and is in fact actively doing what others don’t want him to; Bors is the only knight who the king doesn’t want to enter the castle, or at least the only one he warns of the danger [of course, that makes sense, given that Bors was unaware of the palace’s existence]. “For God’s sake, don’t say that [you will stay the night]!... I am certain you would never leave without shame or loss; I wouldn’t want shame to come to you” (301), the king says, not only wanting to protect him from danger but from shame

as well, which is a far cry from how the other knights were received; perhaps he is learning his lesson about what happens when he lets knights go upstairs at night.

The question of what otherworldly presence causes the adventures in Corbenic has remained unsolved-- the castle houses the Grail and was inscribed by God, but many of the events that take place inside the Palace of Adventures are quite horrifying and seem very incongruous with the image of a benevolent Christian God. In giving Bors advice, the king's words do imply that he believes, at least, that the miracles are caused by God; he recommends that Bors goes to confession so that he "will be clean and purified... before you go before the Holy Grail. I believe it will not go so badly for you, as it would if you came before it vile and filthy" (302). This confirms that a person must have a certain level or purity-- like the virgins who carry it-- in order to safely view the Grail. This precaution, however, was unnecessary for Bors, who seems to practically be holy-- the chaplain "found Bors so moral and religious that he was quite amazed" (302). Bors' own state of mind reflects this almost saint-like quality, because after he "had made his confession, with his heart as well as his lips... he was not at all confident about the adventures of the palace and did not know whether he would escape or die there. He left the church happy and joyful" (302) despite the fact that everyone has been telling him he would likely die, and the reason he's happy isn't because he thinks otherwise, or is cocky enough to think he has a good fighting chance-- on the contrary, he is "not at all confident." This humility is yet another way he diverges from Gawain and Lancelot: he expects not to win. His joy upon leaving the church, then, is just from being a pure, good Christian who feels happy to be cleansed of his sins.

Upon his return to King Pelles, "a dove entered, carrying a golden censer in its beak, and flew into a nearby room. The palace was immediately filled with all the good smells in the

world” (301). Everyone gathers for dinner-- without anyone being called-- and “shortly after they were all seated, a maiden emerged from the room carrying the Holy Grail” (301). The dove could be read in a number of ways; it can’t be a regular bird, given that it carries a censer, so it could be some sort of angel in disguise, or the Holy Spirit (given the traditional symbolism of the dove). Purity is certainly associated with white doves, as purity is a necessary trait of virgins, who bear the Grail. The dove, linked to Noah’s Ark, is also a messenger of sorts, delivering good news, just as maidens make the delivery of the Holy Grail to the table, which brings forth good food and feelings. Given that a clearly abnormal dove carrying an item used during religious ceremonies flies into a room and a few moments later a maiden carrying the grail walks out, it seems very possible that there’s some sort of transformation or transfiguration going on between the dove and maiden.

The town around Corbenic seems to love a good fight, and audiences frequently gather to watch one on one attacks: “At that point knights, ladies, and maidens began to come forth from the town to see the battle” (297). Even maidens, who are supposed to be pure in every way, seem to want to see bloodshed; in fact, “When those who had come to watch saw that the battle was over, they went back to town” (298). Spectatorship is common, which makes their response when Bors puts his armor on notable: “The others all withdrew and, filled with fear, left him” (302), before night had even fallen. Despite the many instances we’ve seen of bystanders being eager to watch fights, whether for their own amusement or a morbid hope to see bloodshed, no amount of fun that may come from witnessing what Bors will go through is worth staying-- the potential danger is too great. They recognize the seriousness-- and the scariness- of what’s to come.

Once it gets dark, Bors moves to sit on the Bed of Wonder, but “as soon as he was seated, the loudest din in the world began, and a great wind arose, so wondrous that it began to make all the windows shake at once” (302). The wind is so intense that it is referred to as a wonder, a word often used interchangeably with marvel, meaning that it is of a supernatural, or perhaps divine, origin. The great noise, which seems to have been triggered by his sitting on the bed, is the first of many assaults on his senses. The origin of the din is left completely unexplained, except that it may serve as a warning that it was the knight’s last chance to leave. The way that Bors interprets the sound is that “it seemed... that the palace was about to crumble from the great noise the windows were making” (302). This could also be a scare tactic utilized by the palace, the bed, the Grail, God, or demons-- any of the numerous possibilities as to what or who causes these terrifying adventures-- in order to manipulate the knight’s senses into making him believe the worst is happening. Perhaps seeing that Bors was not easily frightened away by attacking his senses and deafening him, Corbenic ups its game with a physical attack: “From a room there came a large, long lance, its iron tip flaming like a lighted candle... it penetrated half a foot into his left shoulder” (302). Gawain encounters this same lance, but it punctures him all the way through; the fact that it doesn’t make it through Bors’ entire body may indicate his superior moral and spiritual status, which makes him a bit more impermeable to Corbenic’s attacks.

The focus on Bors’ senses, and his loss of them, becomes more prevalent as the adventures continue. “When he *felt* himself wounded in this way, he was totally dismayed, for *he could not see* who was holding the lance-- and yet he *felt* it being pulled out of him, but *he did not know who was doing it*” (303, italicized emphasis mine). Totally unable to see or hear his attacker, his senses seem to be limited to physical sensations like pain, again an effective tactic in terrifying a warrior who is used to facing an opponent head-on in broad daylight. Just as we are

made aware of when Bors loses his senses, the text also specifies when he gets them back: “Shortly thereafter, he *saw* a fully armed knight come forth from another room” (303). This begins adding confusion, at least for the reader trying to picture the scene, as to the layout of the room and where all these rooms and doors are in relation to the bed. The mysterious knight, “*seeing* Bors”-- as if he had not been aware that Bors was there-- “said, ‘Sir knight, get up from that bed and go lie in another’” (303). The mystery of the bed, and why it must not be slept in, is never made clear, but it is evidently one of the biggest, if not the only, reasons why knights who try to sleep in it are attacked, the most weighty evidence being that the adventures do not begin when the knights enter the hall, but rather when they sit on the bed. The more wonders appear once Bors sits on the bed, the more we are forced to speculate what the outcome might be if the knights didn’t attempt to sit, but simply stood in the room all night. Would the adventures still appear due to the proximity to the Grail, or is the bed a key component?

In response to the knight’s warning, Bors says he will not leave the bed, and the knight says, “If you make me fight you, you will gain nothing thereby, whether I kill you or you kill me, and you’ll have to fight me if you don’t get up” (303). Once again, this warning is specifically related to the bed, and not necessarily to the Palace of Adventures itself nor the Grail. His phrasing in this challenge is interesting in that, first of all, he places the blame on Bors if things do come to a fight. More importantly, he wants Bors to know that this fight is pointless, whoever the winner is, and that Bors will “gain nothing thereby,” meaning that even if he wins against this knight, it won’t make any difference to his true success or failure to survive in Corbenic. These adventures don’t need to happen, the knight seems to say. Again, it is Bors’ senses that are relayed to the reader rather than another vocabulary choice; “When Bors *heard* he would have to



fight, he stood up” (303), though it could just as easily have been understood if ‘heard’ was replaced by ‘realized,’ ‘understood,’ ‘was told,’ etc.

When they begin fighting, Bors, though wounded, puts up a good fight, because, like every good knight, “he thought it better to die with honor, if it came to that, than to escape in shame” (303). The knight of Corbenic “defended himself wondrously” (303), and that word choice is not coincidental-- adventure and wonder are words used interchangeably with regard to the strange and unnatural happenings of Corbenic, and the adverb ‘wondrously’ reminds us that this knight is of supernatural origin and has inhuman strength. Bors seems to be beating the Corbenic knight, to the point where he needs to apparently ‘recharge.’ “[The knight] retreated to the room from which Bors had seen the Holy Grail come forth” (303), further confusing our sense of the room’s blueprint-- where is the Grail room in relation to the room where the lance came from?-- “But as soon as the knight was inside, his strength and stamina were marvelously restored” (303). The Grail room, or rather being in the presence of the Grail, restores the strength of those who are either worthy enough to reap its benefits, like the king and his people at dinner receiving food.

Most importantly about this encounter is the comment Bors makes upon seeing the knight’s renewed strength: “Upon my word, I don’t know where he got it, from God or from the devil!” (303). Gawain had been sure he heard the devil, and for Bors, pious as he is, to pose such a question indicates just how confusing it is. Corbenic is contradictory in every way: It houses the Grail, the holiest of the holy, and its name was engraved miraculously by God, so it’s a fair assumption to make that the entire castle of Corbenic is a Christian location protected by or in some way more directly connected to the Christian God than other places. Only maidens are allowed to carry the grail, as well, which lines up with Christian ideals of virginity and purity

being holier or more worthy than ‘dirtier’ people, by virtue of such maidens being likened to Mary. However, many aspects of Corbenic are confounding if you’re trying to make it fit into a Christian theological box; some of the punishments we see, such as the woman in boiling water and the man being constantly bitten by snakes, are so cruel that it’s hard to imagine a benevolent, forgiving, Christian God/Jesus sentencing people to such horrible punishments. These may be explained as being a form of purgatory, with their previous sins being forgiven once they are saved by a worthy knight from their suffering. Some adventures witnessed by the knights have Christian elements but are slightly off, enough to be disturbing in an uncertain and uncanny way; Gawain sees a ritual being performed by a man who looked like a priest, or sees a vessel in the shape of a grail, and other ostensibly Christian elements that are phrased in such a way that makes us not quite sure if who he sees *is* a priest, or is some other unidentified thing or being who is masquerading as one, or a bastardization of one. Alphasan hears wings all around him, which we can reasonably assume to be angels, but not in the human-with-wings form that we recognize, but rather a terrifying and deafening beating of wings and feathers in the dark. Other things seem to have no rational reason for us to think they come from God; the man on fire who Gawain sees seems more like a demon than anything else calls the room the Palace of Adventures. The different name doesn’t make sense given that God himself named the castle Corbenic. Upon seeing this knight somehow regain strength-- even more confusingly, by going into the Grail room, which one would think confirms him as coming from the Christian God-- Bors finally voices the doubts that we have had from the beginning.

Earlier in the text, we noted how often it was mentioned, either by the narrator or the characters, how each of Bors’ victories were attributed more to God using Bors as a vessel through which His will is done than Bors as a man. When fighting the knight in Corbenic,

however, Bors began to win “thanks to his strength and agility” (303); God is not mentioned. This absence is conspicuous given how frequent it had been mentioned before that all of Bors’ gifts were acknowledged by everyone, even Bors himself, as coming from God; Bors himself never really got credit. In Corbenic, however, he seems to truly be on his own, fighting with only his own skill with no help from God. This presents a number of implications: The mysterious knight, who returns to the Grail room for renewed strength, is a representative of the Christian God, who, despite His previous favor to Bors, is unwilling to let him near the Grail. This would prove that Corbenic is indeed protected by the God that we all know, and that the protection of the Grail trumps any relationship with a human, like Bors, no matter how often God helped him in the past. Another possibility is that this *is* a Godless place, and the knight *does* get his power from the devil, as Bors wondered a few lines earlier. This would be confusing considering the knight *does* keep retreating to the Grail room, and the Holy Grail is without a doubt a Christian object. However, it’s still a possibility, or perhaps God isn’t allowed or able to intervene on behalf of the knights who try to defeat the adventures, which would lead to the land returning to its full glorious state, with the people who inhabit it undoubtedly Christian. It may be cheating, in a sense, to help someone who is serving God against people who, by fighting the knight, are indirectly attacking the Christian God.

When the knight “tried to go back into the room where he had been before” (303); i.e., the Grail room, Bors invokes his God and promises, “By the Holy Cross, sir knight, you won’t set foot in there again today!” (303). Right after this exclamation, he is able to overpower the other knight. Is it a coincidence that he is able to do so only after swearing by the cross and perhaps receiving a boost from God, or was it only because the knight was tired and needed to recharge? Bors removes the Corbenic’s knight’s helmet, and upon being beaten, the only thing

Bors says in regards to his appearance is, “I don’t know who you are, for I’m positive I’ve never seen you before” (304). Since nothing unusual is noted, it seems that this knight is just a regular, human knight, rather than a demon or something strange that could be interpreted as unnatural, unless he’s a demon who can assume a completely average human form, without being on fire or “seeming” like a knight the way we’ve seen many strange priests. Is he an ordinary man, then, who serves God/the devil/whoever compels him to guard the bed, or is there *any* supernatural element going on? He seems to be normal, because upon acknowledging his surrender, “he picked up his helmet and shield and went back where he had come from” (304). No indication of where this is, exactly, is given. Did he just return to the Grail room? If he had, couldn’t he just regain his strength and attack again? More detailed description of the room and the doors connecting adjacent rooms would again be helpful, as this lack of information leads to yet more confusion.

Light and vision return as themes during the next phase of his adventures; as Bors defeats the knight, “There was plenty of light, for all the windows were open and the moon shone in through more than a hundred places. The knight, *seeing* himself in mortal danger...” (304). The knight may not have known that he was beaten for sure until the moonlight allowed him to properly see again, as apparently they had been fighting in near-darkness. This also reminds us of the strange architecture of the Palace of Adventures: Unless the hall is so long that all the light is coming from one direction, the phrasing (“more than a hundred *places*,” not more than a hundred *windows*) suggests that the moonlight is streaming into the hall from multiple directions, which is impossible; it should only be visible from one. The strange way that light and physics and space act in Corbenic adds to the disorientation and unnaturalness and thus the horror of the place. Additionally, this flood of light is mentioned only after the knight is defeated, suggesting

that perhaps a (heavenly?) light appears when a marvel is conquered-- which may point to God's presence after all.

The strange physical space of Corbenic makes itself known again when "Bors went to sit on the bed, but as soon as he had sat down, quarrels and arrows began to rain down from every window, striking him... in more than a hundred places" (304). This too shows the strange and improbable position of the room itself; to be shot at from all directions means the castle must be entirely surrounded and high enough to shoot through the windows, which, while possible depending on the actual architecture, may also suggest the flight or hovering of creatures outside attacking him, or the arrows acting on their own accord, being strung and loosed by some power that doesn't need to touch them-- perhaps God, perhaps the devil. Showing extraordinary internal strength, Bors remains unmoving despite the attack, and eventually, that particular wonder ceases, as if Bors had passed a courage or pain tolerance test of some sort, since he hadn't given up in Corbenic even after being directly shot a hundred times. As he bore the pain, he was "waiting for the adventures of that place, for he was sure he would *see* plenty more" (304). He seems not to count these arrows as a wonder, or they are too ordinary for him to marvel at, despite the improbability of the attack; he wants to "*see the* adventures" (305), first of all noting the specific sense, second of all giving the adventures a definite article of *the*, implying that he believes there are specific adventures to encounter, or that he didn't count what had already happened as adventures. Things calm down, and "when the quarrels had stopped coming, the windows all closed again, making a great din, as if the palace were about to crumble. Then it was quite dark, for the moonlight could no longer pass except through a few glass windows that were open" (304). The amount of light that the knights have to see by is almost always specified, lending the text a specificity and verisimilitude rarely seen in these kinds of romantic works, as I

propose, because of the importance of the Palace of Adventures in connection with the senses, including how well one can see. The disorienting din fades, leaving Bors in silence and dim light, and “when the palace was quiet again, a huge and wondrous lion emerged from one of the rooms” (304). He kills this lion-- “wondrous” perhaps only because of its unexpected presence in this setting rather than because of any supernatural quality, given that Bors defeats it quite easily.

The next time he sits, he sees the same dragon that Gawain had encountered, the text always seemingly wanting to remind us of Gawain’s or another knight’s failures that Bors now won. Though it’s specified that it is the same dragon Gawain saw, the text earlier had described a snake. There are certainly similarities, in that they have every color, are playful, and spout ‘children’ and are killed by them, and snakes and dragons are close enough. “It came forth from the room” (304), but we are not told which room-- the Grail room, like the knight, or elsewhere? Though this dragon is “so huge and terrible that anyone who *saw* it would have been afraid” (304), it seems relatively harmless, and we understand why as the passage goes on. This rainbow colored dragon (“every color could be seen upon it” [304]) is playful and spews a bit of fire but is not a menace to Bors. The symbolism of light again is vital; the dragon’s “eyes were red and glowing like two burning coals,” and “It had letters written on its forehead, and Bors could see them clearly by the light from its eyes: the inscription said, THIS IS THE SYMBOL OF KING ARTHUR” (304). The eyes had been singled out as a most frightening and certainly unnatural feature of the dragon, and in this dim light, their brightness would’ve seemed all the more terrible and fierce. The writing on the dragon’s head, however, identifies it as a friend and ally to Bors-- it belongs to King Arthur, his liege, and by extension is on the side of the Christian God, given that Arthur himself is a Christian; an omen from Arthur emerging from this place may be even more intimate and God-affirming for Bors than perhaps a message from God Himself. It is

by the light coming from these burning eyes rather than external light that Bors is able to read by, reassuring us that despite the negative fires we've seen-- the flaming lance, Gawain's man on fire-- fire is not inherently negative and has the power to comfort, not just injure or frighten, as well as provide helpful light in dark places.

While the dragon emerges as a fairly friendly figure, a leopard appears apparently out of nowhere, notable because every other wonder has specifically come through one door or another. Upon seeing the leopard, though, Bors "did not know where it could have come from" (304). The beasts fight, and we see him for the first time become one of the spectators that we so often note: "Bors observed this battle for a long time, deeply puzzled as to what it might mean, for he had never seen such cruelty in two beasts, and he was sure this must signify something" (304). Again a chief goal of his is to learn rather than pointlessly watch fighting in the hope of seeing bloodshed, as it seems to be for the usual spectators. The fact that he recognizes these events as symbols in addition to literal creatures lines up perfectly with Bynum's definition of what marvels are. At the end of the fight, "the dragon departed, and the leopard disappeared so that Bors never knew what had become of it" (305). Like their appearances, Bors sees the dragon leave, but the leopard seems to vanish into thin air, more of a phantom apparition than a real animal or like any of the other marvels that had emerged from around the rooms. Though which room the dragon had entered from was not specified (and it would make a difference-- if it came from the Grail room, our interpretation of the dragon's symbolism would be much different), when it "reached the entrance of the room, it began to roll around and contort itself, just like an animal in great pain when it is about to give birth" (305). It is surely significant that these spasms begin as soon as it begins to enter "the room," whichever room it might be; perhaps it is not allowed inside and there is some force preventing its entry, or its attempted entry triggers this

labor. What Bors sees here with the dragon is similar, though not identical, to the snakes in Gawain's stay in the Palace of Adventures. After this heavy labor the dragon goes through, "it began to spout little dragons from its mouth, as many as a hundred of them; and then began the battle of the little dragons, which were intent on killing the dragon from which they had sprung, but it was so strong that they could do it little harm. Yet, the fighting went on until the little dragons and the big one were all dead" (305). The strange attempted matricide that results in the deaths of the children and parent both is a mystery that is not explained to Bors, unlike the helpful hermit who interprets the sign to Gawain. Given the similarities in events, could it be presumed that it refers to the same prophecy about Arthur? "Bors was more mystified by this than by anything else he had ever seen, for he was certain this must signify something, but he could not *see* what" (305)-- again note the word choice using senses over more cerebral words (he did not know/understand what, etc). This sight has struck him so much not because of how marvelous or unusual it is, but because he believes it to be an omen of some kind.

Once the dragons were dead and the leopard vanished like it was never there, "he *saw* a thin man come out of that room, so discolored that he *looked* more dead than alive; around his neck he had two snakes that *seemed* intertwined with each other, and they kept biting him in back and front, on his neck and face. He bitterly complained and lamented, saying, 'Oh, God, why did I ever do wrong, so that I am now in such pain?'" (LG VI 305), showing the classic medieval attitude of penitence only in response of fear of pain and Hell. To see a man, ostensibly an actual human, in such torment that he looks nearly a corpse, in Corbenic in the midst of all these adventures seems to mean that this punishment is too terrible to exist outside this unearthly realm; if he were to enter the real world, he would probably just die, but in Corbenic, his suffering can be endless. He explains it to Bors, saying "I am forced to bear [this pain], for in this



way God takes vengeance for the acts of great arrogance I committed in the past. And if I could be acquitted for this earthly suffering, without being eternally damned, I'd consider myself fortunate, for I've committed so many wrongs in my life that I could scarcely be reconciled with God by means of any punishment I might suffer in this world. Believe me truly, I have certainly deserved to suffer this punishment" (LG VI 305). This may be a form of purgatory on earth, then, though hidden from most, only visible by mortals who travels through the wormhole to this realm of Christianity that is less familiar, and more cruel, and more vengeful than the one who know above this veil, the forgiving God that Lancelot speaks of-- not having actually experienced anything in the Palace of Adventures, the only punishment he saw was the woman in the tub, and given how easily he pulled her out, he surely can't imagine the kind of suffering or the length of her punishment.

Like wonder, not knowing the exact nature of their crime that God finds so repellent makes us *want* to know that much more badly. For a medieval Christian reader, too, this would put them less at ease, as they don't know what sins may seem small to us but are deserving of such punishment in the eyes of God; if we were to hear exactly what they did, we would just think that as long as we don't do that thing, we're fine. This keeps the reader in perpetual suspense and fear for their own body and soul.

After giving Bors this surprising amount of information, compared to most, who say that they won't tell the knights anything, "The man left without another word. Bors wanted to ask him many things, but the man could stay no longer and went back to the room from which he had come" (LG VI 305). The fact that the man couldn't stay, rather than shouldn't, or wouldn't, implies a lack of agency, or at least a level of subservience, as if he was able to be outside of 'the

room' for an allotted amount of time, or give Bors a certain amount of information, before he *had* to return, or else face some consequence.

Hereafter, Bors experiences far greater privileges than had been amounted to Alphasan or Gawain. He sees children who he deems must not be human, but 'spiritual,' which, even more than 'celestial,' implies a true lack of body, as if they are pure souls that have been converted into human form for Bors' convenience, so that he can see them. Their coming as very young children is another indication of this-- the closest earthly form that a pure spirit can choose is an innocent child. He sees another man who seems to be a priest, but with an unearthliness about him, as well as a lack of a vital vestment. "Next four very young children came out of the room, so beautiful that Bors, as he observed them, he thought they could not be earthly beings, but rather spiritual ones. They carried four lighted candles in four candlesticks; a censer went before them, and after them came an ancient white-haired man dressed like a priest but without any chasuble, carrying a lance before him...drops of blood issued from the iron lancehead, running down the wooden shaft one after another, but [Bors] did not know what became of them. Then Bors, thinking this must be a holy and worthy thing, rose and bowed before it" (LG VI 306). He again makes the correct judgement that it is holy. While watching the children carry the candles and the procession of the old man after them, Bors assumes the role of spectator. As for the "ancient" man, this may be a literal description of his age, not merely his appearance, and the strange physics of the lance reminds us once again that we are not in our world; it's as if the blood vanishes before hitting the ground, not as blood as the substance we know, but a more holy kind—the kind of blood that the Grail might contain.

The trials he endured and the purity through which he protected himself prove to have some payoff, as the man brings the lance to Bors and says, "Sir knight, you are the purest and

worthiest man who ever came here from the household of King Arthur... you have seen the avenging lance; yet you do not what this is, and you will not, until the Perilous Seat of the Round Table has found its master: through him who is to sit there, you will know the truth of this lance and who brought it to this land and where it came from” (LG VI 306). Though he has not learned the details, he at least hears prophecies about the coming of Galahad, who will be the one to save Corbenic from its adventures, as well as seen the lance, which are more hints than Gawain had gotten. His perseverance in his journey for knowledge ended well, as not all such quests do, as will be explored next chapter.

Still unsatisfied with his exploration and lack of understanding that has come from it, however, Bors is tempted to ask twelve mourning women-- a clear parallel to Jesus’ twelve disciples-- for more information. As he watches, “they stopped, knelt down, and engaged in bitter mourning, giving Bors to understand that they were saying prayers” (LG VI 306), meaning that it wasn’t immediately clear to him what they were doing; thus, their ‘prayers’ must have been in some form or language different from the Christian prayers Bors is used to. He wonders whether to talk to them or not, because “he did not know the meaning of anything he had seen, yet he would have been glad to learn it, and he would certainly have asked those who were beside him, had he not feared that some harm would come to him or to another because of it. Yet he resolved that they could not leave without his learning something, if he could” (LG VI 306). He asks the women for details about themselves, to which one responds, “For God’s sake, be still and let us do what we must, for you’ll learn nothing about us at this time” (LG VI 306). The fact that they *must* weep, mourn, and pray, implies that they, too, are being punished for unspecified sins, and they specifically use the word *learn* to refer what Bors is trying to do, rather than him

asking simply for curiosity's sake. At the same time, their final statement is not a hopeless one, but rather implies that Bors *will* understand these things eventually.

Though he doesn't learn as many facts as he wanted to, he experiences much more than Gawain or any other knight has up to that point, getting farther ahead and closer to God than anyone before. He goes before the grail room and "*saw* a great brightness, as if the sun had made its home therein, and the brightness was constantly increasing" (LG VI 307). Despite his proximity to this sun-like brightness, there is no description of how he feels as he stands there; there does not seem to be any heat coming from the room, curiously, which indicates that this is a divine light rather than any kind of light from sun or candle. "When he tried to go in, he *saw* a sharp, shining sword ready to strike him if he went any farther. At this adventure he turned back, convinced that this must be caused by God rather than anything else" (LG VI 307). This is definitive proof that even so far into Corbenic, Bors still wasn't sure if God was in the building. This doesn't necessarily prove the actual existence of God-- only Bors' belief in it.

He sees the Holy Grail inside the room and saw "a kneeling man, dressed like a bishop" (LG VI 307), which is consistent with the rest of the language we have seen in Corbenic regarding religious figures, always with a qualifier such as 'seemed like' to show the possibility that it may not be as simple as what it looks like. In this case, however, we get a confirmation that this may in fact be a real Christian, as he is referred to as "the holy man" (LG VI 307); the text for once explicitly identifies a figure in Corbenic to be as he seems. Mysteriously, though, after this man withdraws, Bors is blinded by light, and "he *heard* a voice that said, 'Bors, do not come any closer, for you are unworthy of *seeing* more than you already have of the secret things of this place'" (LG VI 307). No other figure in Corbenic has addressed a knight by name, and given the bright light and the knowledge that the man in the Grail room *is* holy, it is not

unreasonable to speculate that Bors here heard the voice of God, who had allowed him to come this far because of his purity. He had reached the limit of what he was allowed to see, though, and Bors is blinded for the rest of the night. Come morning, he is glad beyond words to have experienced Corbenic's adventures.

There is, of course, no definitive answer to what Corbenic is or what really happens there, or if anything really happens at all; barring the physical injuries, the more fantastic sights may very well have been hallucinations or conjured images to interact with the knights for whatever purpose. However, God and violence are by no means incompatible, so everything that happens there may simply be Him. In fact, much about the mere concept of God is quite horrifying: he is unknowable but all-knowing, invisible but all-seeing, always judging, with the power to damn one to eternal suffering. Even living your life in service of Him is no sure guarantee of winning His favor, because who knows what He really wants? If He is capable of anything and everything, it's rather surprising, really, that He isn't more widely regarded as horrifying. As with the angels in their true form, there's a fine line between holy and horrifying; unearthliness to a certain point is held in reverence, but when something crosses too far over that line, it becomes repulsive, to be feared, and going against the holy. While we are unlikely to get a horror story featuring God as the monster, when you consider one all-powerful, all-knowing being watching you, as well as everyone else in the world, at the same time, it's hard to imagine something scarier.

### Chapter 3: Modern Medieval Horror

Defining what counts as a horror movie and what doesn't is a most polarizing issue among fans of the genre. The most clear cut would seem to be anything involving ghosts, the most popular image of which is the spectral human form that took root in popular culture when the "first" horror stories were published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Almost this exact form, however, was around long before. Picture a scene: a ghost appears to his lover in the middle of the night, who thinks the sight of his lost love is a dream; the ghost reiterates his love but begs to be properly put to rest so that his spirit doesn't have to wander, and he says he looks forward to being reunited in the afterlife. The anguished lover tries to hug him, but the image dissipates, a shadow that is unable to be touched.

Countless movies proceed along similarly tragic lines. The specific scene described above, however, is an episode from Book 23 of "The Iliad." Achilles, unable to let Patroclus' body go, is visited in the night by the ghost of Patroclus, who is suffering in between worlds and needs to be buried. Sound familiar? While there are many variations of ghost stories and types of ghosts, that Ancient Greek depiction is identical to so many portrayals in modern movies that it's a little spooky. After thousands of years, the exact same type of scene continues to resonate with viewers. A ghost is a key ingredient in a horror movie, most would agree, and the noncorporeal Patroclus type is a classic (literally). Having unfinished business with a loved one (or an enemy) is a good reason for a ghost to stick around, but equally common is something preventing the ghost from reaching the other side or being properly put to rest. This scene, however, hardly counts as horrifying; horrifyingly sad, maybe. In the 2017 movie *A Ghost Story*, directed by David Lowery, the titular ghost is the dead husband, wearing a sheet with cut out eyes in the stereotypical image of a ghost, who watches his widow from afar as she rebuilds her life without

him, never approaching her or causing any mischief whatsoever; thus, despite its title and the fact that there *is* a ghost, the story is much sadder than it is scary, as with Patroclus. Thus, the presence of a ghost is not enough to make something a horror movie—there must be a scare factor.

Scariness, of course, varies hugely from person to person, but looking at the trends and popular subjects of new horror movies in recent years, as well as monsters and tropes that have stood the test of time, it's easy to see that certain things remain fundamentally scary to the majority, and some of these can be found in the medieval texts we just explored. The *draugr* is very close to the average person's image of a zombie: Violent without cause, unthinking and speechless, raised from the grave as solid forms. They serve as precedents for the most famous zombie movie of all time, and the one to which we owe the near-universal image of the monster: George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*, which spawned countless sequels, spinoffs, ripoffs, and secured the zombie's spot in the horror movie canon of creatures. Details were added to the "lore" over time, notably that zombies were created from a sickness or plague, and even these details are contained in *Eyrbyggja Saga*. The *draugr* has never stopped being scary, and with highly acclaimed shows like AMC's *The Walking Dead* being nine seasons strong and having another ten planned, it isn't likely that zombies will be lumbering away from mainstream horror any time soon.

The home invasions that the Icelanders so feared remain to be an extremely popular subject of film, and indeed one of the scariest even among horror fans. The idea of being kidnapped and tortured in some old building is unappealing, certainly, but what makes the home invasion genre so scary, and the reason so many people avoid these types, is that the monster comes to you, without you having done anything foolish or wrong, and the rationale that 'this

could actually happen.’ The most violent of horror movies can be shrugged off-- most are in specific situations that few would naturally find themselves in, but breaking and entering, stalking, and burglary can happen to any house, and these types of movies are the ones most likely to have you on edge afterwards, hear every creak of the house, every noise outside, turn on all the lights, and double check all the locks in the house.

The quieter the attack, the scarier it is, because having the feeling that someone is in your house but not being sure about it is about dread rather than an immediate fear for your life that you may feel if someone is actively breaking down the door. Even among horror fans, *The Strangers* (2008, Bryan Bertino) is one film that many either refuse to watch based on reputation, or see once and swear that they were traumatized by it, not because it’s graphically violent, but because it’s *not*: There is no major plot to the movie, just a couple at home one night who become increasingly suspicious that they are not alone (a group of masked strangers has broken in, but made no move to attack, simply hiding, watching, and waiting). The dread and suspense of waiting for the villains to reveal themselves or the protagonists to discover them is where the real horror of the film lies; by the time the slashing and gore starts, the worst of the tension is over.

The most terrifying part, it is widely agreed, isn’t even one that involves the characters being scared; the female protagonist stands with her front to the camera, and behind her, one of the masked figures walks slowly past the doorway, stops to look at the woman, who is oblivious, and then continues walking out of sight. The stillness of the camera and the woman is deceiving-- we’re supposed to be looking at her, and she remains in focus the whole time, so many viewers don’t even notice the figure behind her, and those who do have a stronger fear reaction than to



any other part of the movie (and many movies, in fact; seasoned horror fans have cited this moment as among one of the few that ever ‘really got them.’)

The idea of invasion isn’t limited to the home. It’s a forced entry, or at least a serious trespassing; the Icelandic village doesn’t need homes to be broken into for it to be considered invaded and under threat. It’s intruding on a safe space that belongs just to you, your community, a place of safety and sanctuary, but at the heart of fear is lack of control over those spaces that are yours; property, and the threat of losing it, is the motivator of nearly every major problem in history that has been resolved or prevented by force, invasion, and violence. A stranger breaking into your house solely to steal, while not directly harming anyone or even occupying the space once invaded, is enough to ensure that the owner of the home never feels completely safe and secure in what used to be a safe spot; even if the active threat has passed, the memory of the invasion will linger until that person is effectively haunted by the constant reminder that though they’re safe and nothing is trying to break down the door, it happened once and can happen again. The illusion of safety and impenetrability is shattered, never to regain that cozy feeling of absolute safety and comfort in the place they live.

Possession is invasion taken to the most extreme, personal level. No matter what horrible situation you’re in, the one thing you always have control of is your body; you can still fight back, or at least try to. For one’s body to be taken over and that autonomy lost is the ultimate violation, the very last safe place, or at least the one place that will always be yours, no matter what property is taken. Complete loss of control of what you do and say is perhaps the most horrifying thing that can happen, which makes the act of exorcism take on a special weight, given what is at stake. Exorcism movies are abundant today, but Christianity is very rarely actually relevant to the plot; a priest may be involved, but faith and God are usually not even

mentioned, and secular mediums often fill the role of the priest. Most “religious” themed horror movies are more aesthetically anti-religious than actually having anything to do with theology; upside down crosses and demonic nuns are in vogue, but they don’t touch the heart of Christian horror.

While we usually think of invasion as something that happens to the protagonist, whether it’s their town, house, or body, there are several notable instances in which they are the ones intruding on property that is not theirs. This could be the case in all haunted house movies, really--- the place is already inhabited by ghosts or other beings when an innocent family moves in and is forced to deal with the malevolent previous owners, who perhaps should still be considered the owners. How often do we hear of a haunting in a completely neutral location, where a ghost from somewhere else decides to enter a dwelling to which they had no earthly connection? Does this mean, then, that the dead have property? In cases where the answer is yes, it’s usually based around an object that is connected to its original owner, or is not meant for them, for whatever reason. A cursed ring, an ancient relic-- these things, we would usually know better than to touch. The ancient are especially dangerous; things taken from mummy tombs or pyramids being broken into or disturbed, by robbers and researchers alike, are usually a no brainer for audiences; when stealing from the ancient dead, we already assume it has a supernatural attachment. Why, then, does that not apply to the more recently deceased? Why do we fear approaching a coffin containing a body that has been there for thousands of years so much more than one with a fresher corpse?

The answer, perhaps, has to do with the very time elapsed between death and discovery of the deceased in question. The longer they have been dead, the more time they’ve have to accumulate power in the strength of their rage about their murder, for example. The longevity of

a monster also proves its invulnerableness-- if it's been around for so long, clearly it knows how to evade and neutralize any threats it may encounter, and it will be that much more difficult to defeat. In *IT* (Andy Muschietti, 2017), a Lovecraftian being that usually takes the form of a clown has been present in the town of Derry, Maine, since it was first founded-- or at least, it's been there as far back as records go. Pennywise attacks and feeds on human life every 27 years-- was he present in the wild territory before man settled it, living off something else, or was it the very arrival of humans that drew him to the town in the first place? Pennywise attacks only in Derry, nowhere else. Who, then, does the town belong to? Were the humans trespassing on Pennywise's territory, or the other way around? Given that his power is limited to this specific town, it may be more of a mutual relationship, with each party, more or less, coexisting; Derry has peace for 27 years, then sacrifices human lives to appease Pennywise to ensure another 27 years of existence? It's a chicken and egg problem; Derry and Pennywise feed off each other, and perhaps there couldn't be one without the other.

In other examples, there is a definite answer of who was there first, if that is the factor that defines ownership. *Pet Sematary* (1989, Mary Lambert) and *Poltergeist* (1982, Tobe Hooper) are textbook examples of the "Indian burial ground" that is disrespectfully occupied by humans hundreds of years later-- humans who pay for their trespassing. In these cases, it's clear that the dead still have the metaphorical deed to this property. In the case of *Poltergeist*, it's more than graves that are being tread upon-- it's the entrance to another dimension, inhabited by lost souls, unable to 'cross over.' In the end, the house above this portal implodes and sinks, claimed once and for all by the inhabitants of the other realm. In *Corbenic*, if the bed is the entrance of sorts to the Godly realm, the building itself does exhibit a sort of physical response to

the intrusion in the form of the windows rattling in the intense weather that befalls the castle, and like Corbenic and the bed, the house has a single entry point in the closet.

Strange sights and events arouse a natural curiosity and a desire to understand and place meaning to what seems incomprehensible, and if horror isn't going to come from monsters breaking down the door or people breaking and entering, it will likely come from a mystery that was better left unsolved. Many tropes seen in all the above examples are contained within the movie *Sinister*, 2012, directed by Scott Derrickson. It tells the story of Ellison, a true crime writer who enjoyed enormous success ten years ago with one of his books and has been desperately trying to attain his former status. He moves his family-- his wife and two children-- to a new house in the town where an unexplained murder took place so that he can write about it; unbeknownst to them, he selected the very house where the murders took place. Despite cold welcomes and warnings about it, he begins his research about the murders, in which a family was hung from a tree in the backyard; one child went missing. In the attic, he discovers a series of tapes which have the murder, among several others of entire families, on video. With the help of a town deputy, he connects the murders by identifying a strange symbol and creepy face in each video, and he learns that there was a missing child in each set of murders. A professor he gets in touch with explains the lore of the fictional Babylonian demon Bughuul, who preys on children, and after a series of disturbing, scary events in the house, Ellison determines that they are being haunted by Bughuul and moves his family to another house, far away. Thinking they have safely escaped Bughuul, Ellison ignores calls from the deputy. The professor gets in touch with him again and tells him more information surrounding Bughuul, sending scans of ancient and medieval images depicting the demon and explaining that it was believed that Bughuul lived in the images themselves, which were gateways to his otherworld. According to legend, he could

take possession of people and make them do horrible things, or even abduct them into his realm; children were especially vulnerable. Panicking, Ellison destroys all copies of the scans and tapes and finally answers the deputy's call; he explains that while compiling his research, he discovered the pattern linking the murders: Each family moved into the house where the previous family was killed, and by *leaving* the house where the family had been hung, Ellison had continued the line, which would allow Bughuul to kill again. In the end, his young daughter, possessed by Bughuul, films herself murdering Ellison and the rest of her family, and Bughuul carries her into the picture projected on the screen. In the attic, the tapes are seen perfectly intact, with a new one added.

Ellison and the house are much like the knights and Corbenic. The knights enter the Palace of Adventures precisely because they are told not to in the hopes of attaining glory; likewise, Ellison ignores the warnings and threats of the police, the deputy, and his wife and continues working in the house, convinced that it holds the key to writing his book and regaining his fame, respect, and riches. In the same vein, after he moves, he ignores the frequent calls of the deputy, who had been trying to warn him of the danger of leaving the house, sure that he knew how to handle the situation himself having been given basic information by the professor and taking action based on limited knowledge and his own assumptions about the nature of Bughuul's hauntings. This premature action shows the danger of incomplete knowledge while trying to fight the supernatural. Ellison's hasty decision to move was based more on his own fear and a small bit of information that the professor admitted he didn't know much about. Bughuul, like Corbenic, tries to scare people into leaving the premises, in one case for evil purposes, the other, less clear-- probably for protection for the grail. The bed is the locus of activity in Corbenic, and the goal of its inhabitants seems mostly to be to drive knights off and away from

it. In *Sinister*, the attic is where Ellison is lured, and where the scariest goings-on originate from; it is there that he first finds the box of tapes that would prove to be his downfall.

Like in certain moments in *Corbenic*, his senses don't fully operate in the house: He hears things that aren't there and is blind to things that are. Visions of children run at him in slow motion; others, he appears not to see. Whether they are solid or spectral is not clear, and it's likely that *he* is the one who perceives things to be slower than they are, or rather that he processes what he sees more slowly. While walking in his dreamlike state, he sees flashes of the ladder to the attic, the image moving closer until we see it at full length, standing still and covered in eerie shadows that cover it half in darkness as it leads up to the dark attic. Earlier in the film, he had heard strange thumping noises in the attic, and fallen through the floor when he was scared by a snake; now, he finds footage of himself being projected, the ghostly children watching a film of his own house. They are spectators, watching Ellison move through a space that is supposed to be his. In the Vulgate Cycle, people liked to watch fights and seemed almost eager for bloodshed, and though Ellison derives no pleasure from it, he gives into his own curiosity about the tapes and watches murders unfold on screen, a spectator of grisly action. In the footage of himself, the tables have been turned-- *he* is now the spectacle, being watched and filmed without his knowledge. Ellison is seen from behind as he approaches, so we see what he does, not his reactions as a person but rather the action done to him as an object, all from a safe, impersonal distance. We as the audience are obviously spectators at all times to every film, and especially as we view horror movies, enjoying watching people turned to blood and guts, there is little difference between us and the villagers who hurry to catch sight of a battle and disperse, seemingly disappointed, when there is no bloodshed, or things aren't scary enough to satisfy us.

Convinced that the house is haunted, Ellison immediately moves his family out. His hasty departure from the house without waiting for more information to surface from the research of both the deputy and the professor, while understandable, proves the danger of incomplete knowledge, and acting while only half-understanding something. It's when the professor explains how images are what house Bughuul and are gateways into his otherworld that Ellison realizes his mistake of obsessing with the morbid tapes. Other connections are formed, though not explained, which preserves the mystery and realism of the fictional mythology surrounding Bughuul; the woodcuts and engravings depicting Bughuul and medieval murders include images of snakes, scorpions, and a black dog, which Ellison had also encountered in his backyard. Their association with Bughuul is not mentioned but merely shown, leaving us to speculate on our own about their symbolism—just as with the sights in Corbenic that the knights must try to decipher the obscure meaning of. This artwork lends a detailed realism to the film and the sense that Bughuul truly is an ancient being; the end credits even show pages of occult medieval texts mentioning him. To us, this makes him more frightening (until we go home and google him, and learn to our relief that there is no such demon as Bughuul and that he was made up for the film, which makes the filmmakers' efforts and attention to detail in building the in-universe lore that much more impressive).

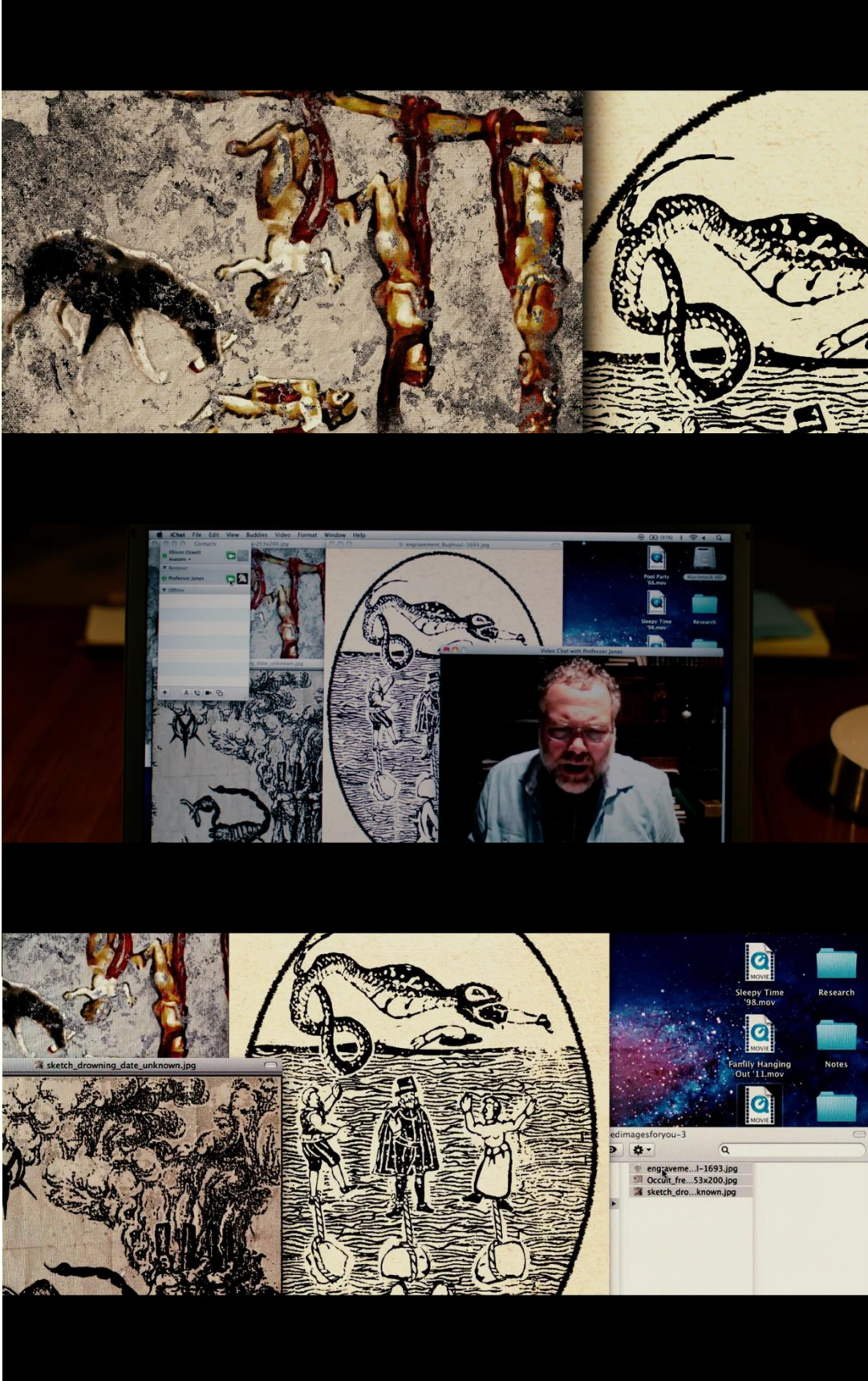


Fig. 1. Screenshots from the film. Derrickson, Scott, et al. *Sinister*. Summit Entertainment, 2012.



No such realism is found in Arthurian literature, but the similarities continue. After his time in Corbenic, Gawain asks a hermit to explain the significance of what he saw. The hermit obliges and then is not seen again. The professor in the film fills this role of a knowledgeable wise man whose only purpose in the story is to provide specific information, barely to be considered a character; he's even more removed from us than the hermit, given that he is only ever seen Skyping with Ellison, adding another layer of distance between us. The difference in lore is interesting and, though Bughuul is fictional, the contrast of pagan and Christian ideas of safety are striking. In Corbenic, pure, clean souls have a better chance of making it deeper into the palace and being rewarded with knowledge, as Bors is, in contrast with someone like Alphasan, who, unprepared for the adventures, dies from the wounds inflicted upon him. The pureness of children in *Sinister*, however, makes them more likely to be susceptible to Bughuul's possession than adults. The notions of different realms also connects the film and the text-- Bughuul's otherworld can be entered through images of him, but we don't get to see into this world; however, it's possible that in the moments when the children appear to Ellison and time seems to slow down, he has been transported through the image of Bughuul on the tapes into his realm, which is just below ours, in a sense; like a veil taken off, everything is physically the same, but Ellison's senses are confused, just like in Corbenic. The bed, which ostensibly serves as the portal to the heavenly realm in Corbenic, leads the knights into much the same world-- the same castle and setting, but from a different dimension on top of the human realm, which makes them see and experience what should be familiar as frightening and confusing.

Just as a horror movie is hard to define, so too is it difficult to classify what counts as a haunted house, but it's obvious that *Sinister* doesn't fit the standard mold of one. As the deputy explains, his existence is not limited to one place, but he is bound to one house until its owners move to a new one:

“The problem is that you moved... I was compiling all the data that you've had me collecting and once I started putting it together into a nice readable package, I saw the connection. It was obvious... the dates, the addresses, each family that you had me look up had previously lived in the house where one of the earlier murders took place. And when you put them in chronological order, you can actually draw a line from murder to murder to murder. [explains how each family lived in the previous house.] Pattern goes back to 1966 Oregon drownings. You just moved out of the last house in line. If this guy is still out there, you not only just sped up his timeline, you put yourself in it.”<sup>76</sup>

Bughuul is dependent on the humans occupying the house and can't actually do that much damage to the humans, so his strategy is to indirectly terrorize them until they leave, thinking themselves safe by distancing themselves from that particular house-- which, as we learned, proves deadly. The beings of *Corbenic* function somewhat similarly, leading us to consider whether *Corbenic* might be able to be called a haunted house. The difficulty is defining what is haunting it; in *Sinister*, the fact that Bughuul can move between houses makes it more difficult to confidently identify them as haunted. If we do identify them as such, we know that Ellison, through his mistakes, created a new one.

Ellison's mistake was not learning enough, but knowing too much can prove just as dangerous in the fight against the supernatural. In some cases, merely becoming aware of a monster is enough for it to take hold in your mind. The titular monsters in *Slenderman* (Sylvain

---

<sup>76</sup> Derrickson, Scott, et al. *Sinister*. Summit Entertainment, 2012.

---

White, 2018) and *The Bye Bye Man* (Stacy Title, 2017) function by using knowledge against those who learn of them. In Slenderman's case, the idea is that the more you learn and think about him, the easier it is for him to find you and bring you into his otherworld. This is a particularly terrifying concept because once you know something, you can't un-know it, and chances are, if you're scared of something, the more you're going to think about it. The Bye Bye man works in a similar way; once you read or hear his (unfortunately ridiculous) name, your mantra of defense becomes "Don't think it, don't say it." He operates by causing changes in perception, as subtle as making one forget that time is passing so as to make him hours late, and as overt as creating a completely false scene. In this way, he rarely needs to step in and make the kill himself, but rather have his victims involuntarily kill themselves or each other. He makes one girl have a vision of a wrecked car on train tracks, and as she goes to help, she is oblivious to the warnings that a train is approaching; there was no car on the tracks. The most effective reality distortions are the most simple and realistic: Rather than making them have grand visions of totally unreal events, he makes small tweaks that get the job done and turn everyone against each other. In one scene, the best friend is innocently helping his friend's girlfriend get into bed; the boyfriend walks in and sees the best friend making a sexual advance. In the end, after getting into a fight due to these small misunderstandings because by the Bye Bye Man, the protagonist stabs his best friend; a moment later, the illusion fades and he realizes he actually just killed his girlfriend. His tactic is confusing people into questioning who or what is real, making the visions more intense until they're forced to take action.

Corbenic also distorts one's' senses, though there's no way of knowing or identifying one being responsible for it; perhaps God or another supernatural being is altering humans' perceptions on purpose to disorient them, or it could simply be the nature of the realm itself, that

dimension not being one meant for humans and thus being more than their senses can take. The things the knights see may be real, but it's just as likely that they're apparitions, conjured for the purpose of frightening them, *or* that they are real, but are being supernaturally cloaked to appear as something else to them, something more terrifying than what they really are.

Horror is rooted in fear, and fear is rooted in uncertainty: Uncertainty about whether someone can be counted as self or other, familiar or foreign, and if they are identified as other, identifying what characteristics make them so. In some cases this difference is clear—a man with an ax breaking down the door is not uncanny. Those cases, however, are often the least genuinely frightening; it is the times where there is doubt about the nature of something that create true and lasting horror. Horror stories exist across all cultures, whether in folklore as cautionary tales or terrors that are considered true; today, the genre survives in books and especially films, regarded by many as unoriginal and repeating the same stories over and over, considering them less legitimate than other genres. As a staunch defender of the value of today's horror movies and the new contributions they bring to film as a medium and ways to tell stories, over the course of this project I came to realize that there *is* endless repetition of certain themes and tropes in horror-- not because they are unoriginal ideas, but because they could be considered *the* original horror stories, which never lost their punch. The quality of movies will always vary, and the effectiveness of the scare, just as with comedy and the funniness of the jokes, but horror in particular is always judged more harshly than other genres (or at least taken less seriously—few new horror movies win big awards or recognition). However, there is something scary out there for everyone, and constant innovations and improvements of the genre, but sometimes, you don't need to reinvent the wheel to get at the heart of horror: Just look back a few hundred years, see what scared Vikings and knights, and dig until you understand

why. Our fears haven't changed that much; acknowledge that you are not as tough as a Viking, and stop judging individual horror movies by whether *you* were scared by it. Watch it with an eye for what it *means* to be scared by it.

---

Bibliography

Bynum, Caroline Walker; "Wonder," *The American Historical Review*, Volume 102, Issue 1, 1 February 1997, Pages 1–26.

Derrickson, Scott, et al. *Sinister*. Summit Entertainment, 2012.

Freud, Sigmund. "Das Unheimliche," trans. Alix Strachey. (Imago, Bd. V., 1919).

Jakobsson, Ármann. "Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110, no. 3 (2011): 284.

Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1989).

Eyrbyggja Saga, ed. Einar Ol. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík: Islenzka Fornritafélag, 1935).

Lacy, Norris J. (Ed.) (April 1, 1995). *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, Volume 4 of 5. New York: Garland.

Shelton, J. *16 Terrifying Details About Blackout, The Extreme Sadomasochistic Haunted House*. Retrieved from <https://www.ranker.com/list/what-is-blackout-extreme-haunted-house/jacob-shelton>

---