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A Note on Lydgate's "The Grateful Dead"

Attributed to John Lydgate (1371–1449), the poem "The Grateful Dead" may mark the first appearance in English of the phrase. The poem represents an interesting adaptation of the folk motif described by the phrase and represents one of its earliest Christian settings.[1]

Literary and folklore scholar Arthur Beatty (1869–1943) transcribed the manuscript, a part of the Harley collection at the British Library.[2] At the time, it was credited to John Lydgate, though scholars have since questioned that attribution. In 1902, Beatty published his transcription along with a rough stanza-by-stanza transliteration:

> The Scriptures tell us that it is wholesome to remember the souls in purgatory. A holy and devout man of Paris was wont to say *De Profundis*, *Paternoster*, and *Ave* for all the Christian souls in his churchyard. This he did continually. He was pursued by his mortal enemies; and took refuge in the churchyard, and said *De Profundis*. The bodies arose from their graves, armed with swords and staves, and put his enemies to flight. He thanked God. He received his reward at last: therefore it is wholesome to have in remembrance the souls in Purgatory. (Beatty 1902, Appendix 22)

Lydgate's poem offers a fascinating adaptation of the folk tale into Christian theology. Although the Book of Tobit prefigured how the tale

type could be incorporated into a Judeo-Christian theological framework, Lydgate's "The Grateful Dead" is broadly analogous to the tale type itself, suggesting that honoring the dead is not only its own reward, but will in fact repay the person who extended that charity. Lydgate adapts the type to focus on the soul, though in keeping with one of the most common motifs in the tale type, it is the bodies of those souls who come to aid of the good man who prayed for them.

The poem connects to the scholarship on the folk motif, and indirectly to the band, in several interesting though oblique ways. Beatty's work was cited and discussed by folklorist and literary scholar Gordon Hall Gerould, who referenced it in his monograph *The Grateful Dead: The History of a Folk Story* (1908). One of Beatty's students, later a colleague of Gerould, was Stith Thompson, whose groundbreaking folklore scholarship included work on the grateful dead tale type.[3] Thompson had retired by the time Garcia's friend Neil Rosenberg matriculated at Indiana University in 1961 to pursue a master's degree in Folklore, but he was still active on campus, and his scholarship still exercised a defining influence in the department.

Garcia visited Rosenberg on his cross-country trip with Sandy Rothman in spring 1964, and spent time with Rosenberg and his fellow folklore grad students, who knew about and sometimes spoke of the grateful dead types and motifs, both seriously and otherwise.[4] Rosenberg also had a set of Thompson's books in his room when his friends visited, and speculates that it is possible that Garcia encountered the phrase then, either in conversation or thumbing through Rosenberg's books—Garcia's interests certainly make that plausible, though he never mentioned it.

Regardless, Gerould's book was an early and important work that Thompson addressed, and it also directly informed the entry that Garcia discovered in the dictionary eighteen months later. Those links, and his earlier visit with Rosenberg, add an appropriately Dead-like layer of synchronicity to the serendipity of his eventual discovery.

For scholars interested in the Dead, there are interesting parallels in the larger critical contexts surrounding Lydgate's work and the Dead's, despite the vast differences in time, place, and audience. As Maura Nolan has argued, Lydgate created "densely layered texts seeking imaginary

and symbolic resolutions to critical cultural problems and contradictions" (2005, 3); that broadly describes the Dead's music as well. So, too, were Lydgate and the Dead engaged in artistic efforts that can be seen as seeking to remake the public culture of the time, and in ways that challenged prevailing assumptions about what that was and could be. And both worked during times of enormous cultural and political upheaval that shaped and framed their art, linking it to a wide range of scholarly issues.

Those parallels connect this appearance of the phrase to the band, whose adoption of the name also represented a similar invocation of the motif, however unconsciously, in another time of cultural upheaval, and by a band whose art was also part of a wider change in public culture. For Dead studies, Lydgate's poem shows why the motif has been such a powerful expression of human belief, and how it endured and evolved over such enormous spans of geography and time.

N.G.M.

Notes

1. Folklore scholars have variously used the terms story-theme, tale type, and motive or motif to describe the tale and its components. Story-theme was an early attempt to delineate the body of tales and its components and variants, which later scholars differentiated into types, or broad categories, and motives or motifs, which are plot elements, though in practice, the distinction can be ambiguous. The grateful dead is both a type and a motif, according to this schema.

2. The manuscript number is MS Harleian 2251, fol. 77.

3. For more, see Leary (1998, 16). Thompson included the grateful dead in his compendia of folk tale types (1928) and motifs (1955–1958).

4. For more on the visit, see McNally (2002, 71–72) and Jackson (1999, 61). I am grateful to Neil Rosenberg for sharing his reminiscence of that visit with me and for reading and commenting on this essay.

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