

Jeremy Kalfus

Dr. NAME

Death and Dying

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### Laqueur Essay

Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead* records a drastic change in burial practice in the Western world, one that travelled from the traditional churchyard system to the modern cemetery. Such a change, occurring slowly but surely in the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries, was far more complex –both in aetiology and symptomology–than initially meets the eye. Specifically, the change reflected a drastic transformation in cultural standards, legal frameworks, and the underlying notional landscape of death (and life after). As a result of such a change, the churchyard and the cemetery are irreparably different: while the old regime of the churchyard was fundamentally based on medieval Christian eschatology and ideas of community, the new regime of the cemetery embodied Enlightenment theories, secular governance, and romantic ideals.

The churchyard-based system of interment, that of the old regime, had its historical origins in early medieval Christendom and was sustained by deeply rooted cultural values. Starting in the seventh and eighth centuries (about), Christian authorities would begin the practice of burying the dead in and around churches. In England specifically, this began under an Archbishop “Cuthbert” in an effort to imitate a style in which bodies were buried among holy relics (belongings of or items associated with Saints; 114-115). In such a system, burial in consecrated ground and among such relics was a continuation of religious piety even after death. Additionally, the parish churchyard reflected Christian eschatology: though the exact details of

such are unclear (as with all religion, alas), bodily resurrection in Christianity is to occur with the return of the Messiah, Christ, who would originate from the west (perhaps along a setting sun). As a result of this, churchyard graves were aligned east-west, so as to be oriented towards a returning Christ (113). Furthermore, in a communal sense, every member of the parish was guaranteed *a* spot in their own churchyard, regardless of their financial status or social ties (116). In such a sense, the religious spoils of the afterlife awaited all equally, so long as one was pious. However, there was still a hierarchy of sorts, as one's ranking within the church and social standing promised a burial plot (or in many cases, membership in a burial pile) closer to the church's own spiritual center—the *most* religious part—which was usually an altar or proximal to a relic in some way (122-124). Finally, the churchyard system reinforced a kind of community among both the dead and the living. Churches were regular places of attendance for the vast majority of Europeans at the time, often centered within towns. This meant that the dead themselves became part of such a community, being frequently passed by people moving throughout town and acknowledged by those attending church (120). The dead were oft buried with their families, strengthening lasting familial and communal bonds that—in a pre-globalized era—could stretch back a millennium.

By the eighteenth century, however, the “old regime” of the churchyard faced both a spiritual and moral crisis. For one, the “economics of churchyard burial,” as Laqueur frequently puts it, failed to continually sustain growing urban populations: churchyards reused graves, stacked coffins and bodies, and exhumed bones to make space for the dead (155). In Paris' Cimetière des Innocents, centuries of accumulated biomass produced such density that neighboring buildings began to collapse under the foundational pressure of decomposing bodies (255-256). The economic reality of the churchyard became grim. In addition to economic

impossibility, the hygienic aspect of the churchyard would become its downfall. Novel (though mostly inaccurate) scientific advances in miasmatic theory—the idea that smells and vapors can cause disease—were taking Western Europe by storm. The dank, rancid smell of decaying corpses, then, finally became something Europeans did not want in the center of their towns. The dead, once spiritually beneficent, were now imagined as physically dangerous, a concern of public health: “[miasmatists believed] it was injurious to health to bury [dead bodies] in towns close to concentrated populations of the living,” Laqueur summarizes (216). As miasmatic theory permeated, public distaste for churchyards grew. Alongside this, Enlightenment thought began to undermine the theological justification for the churchyard itself. Voltaire and Hume’s burials were evidence of this. In Voltaire’s case, his corpse had to be “secreted” to a distant abbey just to see a chance at burial, due to his odds with the Church at the time, whom of which would only agree to (nothing short of) a deathbed rejection of his life’s work (190, 196). Hume’s burial, however, conversely demonstrated to the public that the Church’s sanction was no longer required for a “proper” interment—he was quietly laid to rest at Calton Hill, free of the Church’s word (192). Both of these figures’ deaths harmed the old regime, vindicating the church and providing novel options. By the 1780s, the closure of Cimetière des Innocents and the relocation of its bones to the Catacombs symbolized the collapse of the Church’s authority upon the dead (218). Death was expelled from the city’s heart and moved in accordance with civic order, hygiene, and reason.

The cemetery was born as the Enlightenment’s solution (and antithesis) to the churchyard, undoubtedly representing a new geography of the dead throughout science, aesthetics, and secularity. In 1804, Napoleon’s establishment of the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise became a hallmark of the new regime (260). Located outside Paris, open to all faiths, and

designed as an Elysian garden, it could not have been more divergent from the old, cramped, decaying churchyard. The English soon followed in 1833 with Kensal Green and the “Magnificent Seven,” championed by joint-stock companies as a public service and yet nonetheless a profitable venture (277). The appeal of these cemeteries extended beyond their superior sanitation relative to the churchyard: beautiful, modeled after romantic ideals of Arcadian fields, they were a place where the living could forget their mournful troubles amid nature. They were, as Laqueur edges the reader in chapter 4, “spacious, open to anyone who could pay, landscaped, gardenlike [...] and oriented toward a calm, melancholy, but sweet eternal repose” (113). The cemetery was beautiful, but it was also symbolic of change: legally, it marked the transfer of power from the Church to the state and market. Burial rights became a commodity, not a measure of spiritual achievement but of financial (288). Religiously speaking, the cemetery embodied pluralism and religious tolerance; Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and rejects like Voltaire could all be buried along the same ground (294). The cemetery thus stood for a modern, secular, capitalized version of death, translating spiritual equality and community into civic inclusiveness. The cemetery’s ordered avenues and greenery expressed secularization and progress, a direct result of Enlightenment rationality and Romanticism, making it an icon of 19th-century historical changes.

To conclude, the churchyard had once bound the living and the dead together in a shared ritual of faith and communion, while the cemetery (brought on by Romanticism, Enlightenment theory, and scientific progress) was born from the churchyard’s ashes; a secular, democratic, and capitalistic reflection of the ideals of the modern era.